

“POLL WARS” AND POLL DEBACLE IN NICARAGUA

by I. A. Lewis

On February 25, 1990, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, widow of anti-Somoza martyr Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, publisher of the anti-Sandinista newspaper La Prensa and candidate of the 14-party Nicaraguan Opposition Union (UNO), was elected president of Nicaragua. She defeated President Daniel Ortega, whose Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) had governed since the 1979 revolution. The vote was decisive—and decidedly not what Americans had been led to expect.

Chamorro, Union Nacional Opositora (UNO)	777,552	54.7%
Ortega, Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN)	579,886	40.8%
All Others	63,106	4.5%

Before the election, there had been a welter of pre-election polls predicting every variety of outcome in the presidential election -- which came to be known as the “Poll Wars.” The differences were not randomly distributed. Most of the polls indicating a Chamorro victory had been sponsored by organizations linked to UNO—and they were typically discounted in the US press. Polls sponsored by US organizations showed Ortega comfortably ahead.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

There have been many explanations of the problems with the US polls—some involving their timing, some methodological matters, and some social/political factors. Let’s review each briefly.

Timing. Several pollsters¹ have speculated that a substantial shift in voter preference occurred after the polls had been completed. It’s suggested that many FSLN supporters had expected the government to end army conscription before election day. When it didn’t, according to this theory, large numbers of FSLN leaners switched to UNO. Against this logic is the fact that most of the polling organi-

Table 1²

Selected Nicaragua Pre-election Poll Results

Date	Client/Pollster	Population	Ortega	Chamorro	Others	Undec	N
Oct.	Univision/Bendixen-Schroth/Consultoria Viente-uno/Logos	23 Munic.	40	39	5	16.	1,129
Oct.	UCA/Itztani	Nat’l Urban	26	21	2	50	1,157
Oct.	CID-Gallup	28 Munic.	32	36	—	32	1,226
Nov.	UCA/ECO	Nat’l Urban	41	13	2	44	3,681
Dec.	Greenberg-Lake/Itztani	National	44	27	5	23	971
Jan.	Greenberg-Lake/Itztani	National	51	24	8	17	901
Jan.	UCA/ECO	National	41	13	2	44	4,545
Jan.	?/DOXA	Unknown	33	41	10	15	1,080
Jan.	NED/Via Civica	Mun.Capitals	26	51	9	14	2,825
Jan.	IPCE NDI La Prensa/Borge	Unknown	30	37	3	30	1,200
Jan.	Univision/Bendixen-Schroth/Logos	Mainly Urban	53	35	4	8	1,000
Feb.	?/Mora y Araujo	National	33	48	8	11	1,118
Feb.	UNO NDI La Prensa/Borge	Unknown	33	46	15	7	7,800
Feb.	UCA/ECO	National	55	23	3	19	2,357
Feb.	Washington Post & ABC News/Belden-Russonello/Itztani	National	48	32	4	16	925
Feb. 25	Los Angeles Times/Belden-Russonello/Itztani	100-junta projection (11 PM CST)	40	56	4	—	18,950

zations displayed fairly consistent patterns of support throughout the campaign. Surveys by stateside pollsters (Bendixen-Schroth, Belden & Russonello, Greenberg-Lake) showed the FSLN doing well, while polls sponsored by La Prensa showed Chamorro ahead from the beginning. If a change of vote preference was precipitated by discontent over the government's failure to end conscription, it seems unlikely it could have accounted for the 30 point gap between the last Belden-Russonello poll and the actual vote.

Methodology. A number of specialists have remarked on the prevalence of polling irregularities in Nicaragua. In December, William Bollinger³ summarized one report as indicating that "political bias, poor sample design, and inadequate training and supervision of interviewers are the most likely causes of error in Nicaraguan polls. Methodological difficulties abound." Interestingly enough, though, commentary published in the US before the election put methodological difficulties, including question wording problems, largely on the doorstep of the UNO polls.

It was clearly not an easy thing to poll in Nicaragua in early 1990. There was no reliable population information on which to base an adequate sampling frame: the last census was hopelessly out of date and, quite possibly, inaccurate. Voting information from the 1984 election was collected from jurisdictions which had different boundaries than those in use this year. The only usable data base consisted of registration figures which had been thrown together in preparation for the February election.

Most interviewing in Nicaragua appears to have involved experienced interviewers. However, opponents claim that Via Civica used poorly trained supporters for its field work, and DOXA of Venezuela appears to have hired inexperienced interviewers *on purpose*. It is testimony to the conspiratorial atmosphere surrounding the "Poll Wars" that DOXA hired 80 raw recruits to conduct field work, apparently hoping to avoid experienced interviewers with opposition sympathies who might be "planted" on its staff. Only in some of the polls, though, was an effort made to reproduce the election experience by using "ballot boxes" into which respondents could deposit secret ballots.

On the whole, methodology for most studies conducted in Nicaragua in 1989 and 1990 seems to have been as good or better than that for most other Latin American studies of a similar nature. Although local conditions posed substantial problems, it seems unlikely that they can be blamed for anything more than a very small portion of the gulf that separated the US pre-election poll findings and the final vote. In the past, similar procedures have produced reliable estimates elsewhere in Central America and in Nicaragua itself.

Social and political factors. Considerable social distance between interviewers and respondents may have been present in some of the polls which produced inaccurate estimates. They point to disparities of class, age, education and locality between interviewer and respondent: Most of the field workers were middle class college students sent out from Managua. It is suggested that most Nicaraguans were aware that educated young people from the big cities were heavily pro-Sandinista.

Another likely explanation for differing polling results involves problems associated with interviewing under intimidating circumstances. Nicaragua in early 1990 was an authoritarian society still on a wartime footing. The government suspended a cease fire arrangement after 19 soldiers were reported killed on their way to register to vote. Witness for Peace, a liberal church organization, reported that some contras warned people in the countryside not to register. UNO complained of anonymous phone calls, threatening notes under doors, vandalism, death threats and threats of economic sanctions. It's fair to say that many citizens had learned to be careful in both speech and actions.

Along with other Nicaraguan intellectuals, Marvin Saballos, director of LOGOS, S.A., a Managua polling firm, believes that psychological forces can explain some, if not all, of the discrepancies in Nicaraguan pre-election polls. He says "distrust towards the dominant power appears to be profoundly rooted in the collective memory of the Nicaraguan people, who try to diminish that power by making good use of methods of satire and irony."⁴ Saballos illustrates his contention by referring to a scene in "El Gueguense," an early indigenous play, in which a representative of the people, the Gueguense (Whey-WHEN-say), makes fun of the Alguacil, the Sheriff, using puns and indirection in such a way that the colonial authority never really understands the true feelings of the people. Saballos suggests that sectors of the population distrusted the sponsorship of some polls, identifying them with the authorities, and thus responded in a manner to mislead the pollsters (and guarantee that respondent's personal security).

An interesting experiment was conducted in early February by Howard Schuman.⁵ Two hundred ninety-eight identical interviews were taken in and around Managua, with only one procedure varied: one third of the interviewers recorded responses using pens in the blue and white opposition colors, with "UNO" printed on them; another third were recorded using pens in neutral colors with no printing; and a final third used pens in the red and black Sandinista colors, with "DANIEL PRESIDENTE" printed on them. The results were:

	UNO Pens	NEUTRAL Pens	PRE- SIDENTE Pens
Chamorro	28% [56%]	18% [38%]	21% [37%]
Ortega	21% [44%]	30% [62%]	35% [63%]
Other parties	5%	2%	3%
"My Vote is a secret"	24%	23%	19%
DK, No response	22%	27%	22%

Repercentaging for only Chamorro and Ortega preferences produces results for the UNO pens very close to the actual vote. On the other hand, the DANIEL PRE-SIDENTE pens predict a clear Sandinista victory. If one assumes that respondents told interviewers what they wanted to hear, then the results for the neutral pens are perhaps even more suggestive: in the absence of clues indicating interviewer sympathies (which was the case with pollsters who used standard US techniques), respondents apparently assumed interviewers were FSLN supporters. The 49% refusal rate is also noteworthy, however, as is the fact that non-response was about evenly divided among the three different groups. The latter suggests that, despite its attractive implications, the Schuman experiment must be taken as less than conclusive.

TOWARD GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF THE POLL PROBLEM AND SOME REMEDIES

Schuman says that the Nicaraguan pre-election polls "were far off in their predictions of the final vote, dealing one of the worst blows to pollsters since the 1948 Truman-Dewey election."⁶ But there are even more serious implications. Most of the persuasive explanations for what happened in Nicaraguan imply some basic lack of candor on the part of respondents. And if respondents won't say what they really believe, and especially if their misstatements can make such a large difference in the findings — isn't survey research undermined? And lest anyone suspect that this is some specialized condition of third-world populations, one only has to recall the polling difficulties encountered in white-black contests in the US, including the 1982 gubernatorial race in California (when most pollsters predicted a victory for Democrat Tom Bradley) or the 1989 contests in New York City and Virginia (when wide disparities were recorded between what respondents told interviewers and how they behaved in the polling booth.)

It's imperative that survey researchers devise experiments to test whether and under what conditions respondents will level with them, and devise strategies to handle cases where they won't. It's been suggested that, in the US, the tendency of respondents to lie is the product of tensions

caused by the desire to say what is socially acceptable in conflict with the inherent moral and psychological predisposition to tell the truth.⁷ In authoritarian settings such as Nicaragua, other factors obviously must be added to the equation. Survey research needs to experiment with polling questions which can lead to a better understanding of these pressures. One would expect that the more threatened the respondent feels, the less likely he is to be forthcoming with interviewers. Perhaps there is a sequence of equivocation, ranging from (1) professing a lack of awareness, (2) saying one isn't sure, (3) refusing to respond, to (4) lying outright.

Certainly the presence or absence of intimidation will influence the candor of respondents. Where political, economic and social pressures are suspected, special survey approaches need to be developed. Can one devise measures in which there are response possibilities that (a) capture actual vote predisposition without (b) at the same time invoking a sense of threat? In circumstances where respondents are likely to feel intimidated, we need also to know what they assume to be the motives or sponsorship of the polls. Relatedly, we need to take special care that interviewee sense of threat is not exacerbated by suspicion that the interviewers are of the other (threatening) group.

ENDNOTES

1. Stanley Greenberg of Greenberg-Lake and Nancy Belden of Belden & Russonello.
2. I am indebted to William Bollinger and the Commission on Nicaragua Pre-election Polls for most of these data.
3. Director of the Interamerican Research Center and Executive Secretary of the Central American Public Opinion Program (PROCADOP), a consortium of research institutes
4. *Social Psychology of Nicaraguans and Public Opinion Polls*, Centro de Consultoria y Capacitacion de la Comunicacion, March 1, 1990 (translation by Emily Yozell)
5. Director of the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. See "...3 Different Pens Help Tell the Story," New York Times, March 7, 1990, Section A, p 25.
6. "Pens and Polls in the Nicaraguan Election," Original text submitted for New York Times Op-Ed Article, March 5, 1990.
7. Lewis, I.A. and W. Schneider, "Is the Public Lying to the Pollsters?" Public Opinion Magazine, April/May 1982, p. 42.

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