

Tamales of All Flavors: Mexican Election Polls

By *Ulises Beltrán Ugarte*

As never before in the country's electoral history, Mexico has seen mushroom the ranks of independent pollsters seeking to untangle voter preferences. Mexicans will choose a new president, along with a host of other officials, on August 21. Over the course of the election campaign, eleven different survey firms have flooded Mexican newspapers and magazines with survey reports on the contest.

Consensus: The May 12 Debate Mattered

The polls agree that the presidential candidate debate televised on May 12 radically shifted the preferences of Mexican voters. Prior to the debate, the PRI candidate was in first place, followed by the PRD candidate and then the PAN candidate. After the debate, the PAN had moved up strongly to second place, as potential voters left both the PRI and the PRD.

Analysts have explained this development in several ways. The debate clearly brought Diego Fernández de Cevallos into the limelight. Voters had been familiar with the other two principal contenders, but they had not been nearly as aware of him. At the same time, many voters favoring opposition parties do not seem to have an ideological attachment to any particular one. They're looking for a likely winner—someone who can beat the PRI. Because of Diego Fernández's debate performance, many of these voters came to see him as the strongest opponent to Ernesto Zedilla.

Dissensus: Who's Ahead, by How Much?

In part, I believe, because of differences in their sampling, the various election surveys have differed in the pictures they present of the progression of the presi-

dential contest. For example, the survey firm GEOP reported on May 21 that the PRI was ahead—based on a sample in 17 cities. But on May 28, using a different 19-city sample, CEO reported that the PAN candidate led by 5 percentage points.

MORI polls have been widely followed—having a prominent place in the magazine *Este País*. Before the debate, they had the PRI holding the support of 35

probability samples. Both Covarrubias and the newspaper *Reforma* poll—in surveys done between mid-May and early June—put the PRI in first place, with about 45% support, followed by the PAN in second place at roughly 28%, and the PRD well back in third, at around 10%.

The Covarrubias (for *Voz y Voto*) and *Reforma* polls, I want to stress, include both urban and rural areas of the country and are

based on probability sampling. Mexican polls should be national, as opposed to cities-only, because roughly a third of the populace is still rural, and these rural voters behave differently than do their urban brethren. The PRI has always had its strongest base in the countryside. Polls taken only in cities underestimate its backing. *Voz y Voto* has reported, based on its latest Covarrubias survey, that the PRI had

45% support in urban areas but 61% backing in the rural areas.

A friendly reminder to the survey community: There is, at this point, considerable methodological variety in Mexican polling. It's worrisome that the Mexican media treat all polls as though they were basically the same. They are not basically the same. The intelligent consumer needs to ask about sample size, method of sampling, and whether the survey is truly national.

Ulises Beltrán Ugarte is technical advisor to the president of Mexico, in charge of public opinion issues

THE PLAYERS		
THE PARTIES AND THEIR CANDIDATES		
Main Contending Parties	Description	Presidential Candidate
PRI-- <i>Partido Revolucionario Institucional</i>	Governing party, in power since 1929	Ernesto Zedilla Ponce de Leon
PAN-- <i>Partido Accion Nacional</i>	Fifty-five year old opposition party, standing for free-market economy	Diego Fernández de Cevallos
PRD-- <i>Partido de la Revolucion Democratica</i>	Founded in 1988, represents traditional leftist political movements	Cuahtemoc Cárdenas Solorzano
POLLING FIRMS REFERRED TO IN THIS ARTICLE		
CEO-- <i>Centro de Estudios de Opinión</i>		
COVARRUBIAS-- <i>Covarrubias y Asociados</i>		
GEOP-- <i>Gabinete de Estudios de Opinión Pública</i>		
MORI-Mexico-- <i>Market Opinion Research International</i>		
REFORMA-- <i>Newspaper sponsoring and conducting polls</i>		

to 40% of the electorate. They also showed a large but declining number of undecided voters. The decline in the undecideds was paralleled, according to MORI, by a general increase in the strength of the PRD. Thus, from January until the debate, the PRI remained the first electoral force, followed by an increasingly powerful PRD, and a PAN which was a fairly close third. But MORI found everything changed by the debate. In particular, the contest, according to their polls—each based on just 320 interviews in 5 large cities—appeared to be enormously fluid. After falling for a time, the number of undecideds rose again. The race was seen as a fluctuating two-way competition of the PRI and the PAN.

The most reliable vote intent estimates should be—and probably are—the relatively few which are based on national