

## The 1994 Mexican Elections:

# Electoral Credibility Was the Issue

*By Warren J. Mitofsky*

The Mexican election in August was not so much about who would be the next president, as it was about the credibility of the country's electoral process. Almost all the polls showed Ernesto Zedillo, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) candidate headed for victory. But wherever you went, whatever you read or heard, the long history of electoral fraud by the Mexican government's ruling party—and the argument that nothing had changed in 1994—was the chief topic. Well, maybe things had changed a little, people said, but not enough to make a difference to the 65 years of one-party rule.

To people in the government who had labored for six years to change that image, that attitude was disappointing, especially given the resources the country had devoted to reforming the electoral process. The credibility of the 1988 Presidential election had been badly damaged when the election commission computer "mysteriously" shut down during the early stages of the vote count, with Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, the PRD candidate, ahead, and Carlos Salinas de Gortari (PRI) declared the victor by 20 percentage points when the complete count was announced three days later.

### **Real Electoral Reform**

This year things were different. The election commission (IFE) was run by independent citizens and not the government party. IFE issued a tamper-proof registration card to voters that should be the envy of every democracy. The card carries the voter's picture, signature, thumb print and identification number. The latter two items are encoded into a magnetic strip. A massive effort to register voters was undertaken by IFE, and the final registration rolls were given a clean bill of health after an audit by AC Nielsen and others.

With reform, over 30,000 polling-place-observers were accredited by the election commission, including an experienced

United Nations election team. Never before had foreigners been welcome in Mexico for this purpose. The nine political parties that fielded presidential candidates also were entitled to their own poll watchers at polling places, and at the election commission throughout the counting of the votes.

Another significant revision to the election laws for 1994 was the addition of exit polls and "quick counts" (tallies by election officials at selected polling places) on election night. This revision to the Mexican election law was intended to make the official election count more believable. In 1988, the government strongly discour-

---

*In the United States we rely on projections of the winners from exit polls and quick counts until the votes are counted hours later. If projections and vote counts differ we assume the projections are in error. That was not true in Mexico. The projections were expected to have more credibility than the election commission's vote count.*

---

aged the Gallup Organization from conducting an exit poll.

### **Exit polls as a Reform Measure**

This year, just the opposite was true. During the debate over NAFTA, when President Salinas publicly defended the integrity of this year's election, he mentioned the country's new registration procedure and exit polls. He said that exit polls would offer an independent verification of the vote count. A few years earlier, in Chile, a citizens' group conducted a quick count to

verify the results of a plebiscite on the future of the Pinochet government.

Just as in the United States, exit polls consisted of interviews with samples of voters; quick counts relied on actual tallies by election officials of the vote cast at sample polling places. Exit polls produce estimates that are completely independent of the officials counting the vote. The quick counts do not. There were several quick counts for the Mexican election, including mine. Until the day after the election, I thought I had done the only nationwide exit poll, but there was another done by Gabinete de Estudios de Opinión. There also was an exit poll conducted by Opinión Profesional for the PRI.

In the United States we rely on projections of the winners from exit polls and quick counts until the votes are counted hours later. If projections and vote counts differ we assume the projections are in error. That was not true in Mexico. The projections were expected to have more credibility than the election commission's vote count.

The broadcast industry of Mexico (CIRT) retained two Mexican firms, Buré de Investigación de Mercados (BIMSA) and Indemerc-Louis Harris, and my company, Mitofsky International, to produce projections and analysis of the election. The independence and reputation of all three firms had made the effort widely accepted. Our exit poll and quick count had almost as much publicity in Mexico as the candidates during the closing days of the campaign.

There was a deliberate effort to discredit any poll that showed the PRI candidate in the lead by a sizable margin. My exit poll was attacked as not being credible. The suspicion of fraud was so great that an article by Miguel Basanez in a local magazine, *Este Pais*, suggested that the election commission would make its count agree

with my projections. The same article also suggested that my exit poll was being conducted as part of an effort to again deprive Cardenas of victory.

### US Media Were Implicated in the Polling Controversy

Throughout the Mexican presidential campaign, Basanez (MORI-Mexico) was the only pollster in Mexico to report that a close election was likely. All the other pre-election polls showed that the race was never close, except for a brief period following the one presidential debate. Basanez conducted his polls on street corners in five large cities, all relative strongholds of voters opposed to the PRI. Many of the other published polls used in-home interviews, and their samples were distributed throughout the urban and rural areas of Mexico. Unfortunately, for much of the campaign, only Basanez's poll results were reported by such reputable newspapers as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Both ran full stories giving credence to Basanez's claim that a very close race was in progress and that Mexican voters were lying to other pollsters.

It was not until late in the campaign, when I and other Mexican pollsters attacked his unrepresentative polling methods, that newspapers started mentioning results from other polls showing wide margins along with Basanez's continuing claim of a close race.

In an effort to defend his MORI affiliate in Mexico, Robert Worcester, the head of MORI in London, wrote in the *New York Times* on August 16th that "the results (of the Mexican Presidential election) will be much closer than the raw voting-intention figures showing a Government lead of 20 or more points." He was wrong. The winning vote margin was 23 points. Worcester's comments went on to justify Basanez's polling methods.

Basanez told everyone who would listen that Mexicans would not give honest answers to pollsters if they were interviewed at home. He also said they would lie to exit pollsters when they were interviewed at the polling place. Basanez and Worcester claimed the only way to inter-

view Mexicans was to approach respondents on street corners away from their homes. They were wrong! The pre-election polls in Mexico that used more traditional techniques were accurate. Even Basanez changed his story and his methods for one late poll.

### A Good Poll: Reliable Results

The exit poll I did for Mexican broadcasters and US news organizations was extremely accurate. Mexicans gave honest answers to pollsters. They didn't lie as a device for misleading pollsters. They did

---

*Mexicans gave honest answers to pollsters. They didn't lie as a device for misleading pollsters. They did what respondents everywhere do when they do not want to participate: they refused to answer. However, exit poll refusal rates were very low in Mexico compared to my US experiences. Less than 15% refused to be interviewed.*

---

what respondents everywhere do when they do not want to participate: they refused to answer. However, exit poll refusal rates were very low in Mexico compared to my US experiences. Less than 15% refused to be interviewed.

There also were attempts by groups suspicious of fraud and/or sympathetic to the PRD to prevent my exit poll from being released. Civic Alliance, a citizens' good government group and supposedly sympathetic to the PRD, and others petitioned President Carlos Salinas and IFE to block it. I was told that the President refused to interfere.

Unfortunately, IFE was not nearly as courageous or unsympathetic. It was rumored that the PRD had threatened to pull out of the election if the release of the exit poll was not prohibited. I am not sure the rumor was true, though I cannot imagine

what other leverage there was that persuaded IFE to delay the release of the exit poll until the results could be confirmed by a quick count! IFE did not reach a decision until the afternoon of election day. The decision had been delayed that long, I was told, in an attempt to pacify the PRD and keep them from withdrawing. There was no legal basis for the decision. The law was clear—exit poll results could be released after all the voting places were closed. IFE, by ruling that exit polls could not be released until after there was a confirming quick count, successfully delayed the reporting by several hours. CIRT decided that they would go on the air with my projection and analysis of the election at 10pm in Mexico City, three hours after the last polling stations had closed.

IFE's ruling was unfortunate. In 1988 the government had been accused of fraud—for delaying the release of the election commission count. Now the reconstituted election commission was delaying the public release of information about the outcome of the election by suppressing my exit poll results for several hours, knowing the PRI had its own exit poll. Delaying the release of information to the public—but not to political elites—gives the opportunity for manipulation. That is exactly the impression almost everyone wanted to avoid.

I believe the election was conducted fairly even though there were irregularities reported by observer groups. Any attempt at massive fraud, given all the various checks, would have been very foolish. It would easily have been detected. Nonetheless, respect for the election results depends on the *public acceptance of the outcome as essentially fraud free by the candidates who did not win*. This happened only in part. The second place PAN candidate, Diego Fernandez de Cevallos, quickly made a statement accepting Zedillo's victory. Cardenas did not. Widespread belief in the success of the electoral reforms probably will not come about until the PRI loses a presidential election.

---

*Warren J. Mitofsky is president,  
Mitofsky International*

## The German Elections:

# Kohl Won—But the Playing Field Changed

*By Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann*

A year before this October's German federal election, drawing parallels between the German contest and the 1992 US presidential race became fashionable. In both, a candidate from the younger generation challenged an older incumbent—Bill Clinton vs. George Bush in the US, Rudolf Scharping vs. Helmut Kohl in Germany. Furthermore, jobs and the economy generally were the top concern in both America and Germany. The end electoral results, however, were very different.

The October 16 Federal balloting capped a super election year in Germany—with a total of 20 elections on the municipal, state, federal and European levels between December 1993 and October 1994. It was precisely this staggering number that made the big concluding contest one of the most exciting Germany has experienced in past decades. Never before has such an extreme and far-reaching change in mood been measured in such a brief period of time. And never before did Germany have a situation in which, for six weeks straight, the Allensbach Institute and other polling organizations such as Emnid, the Mannheimer Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, Infas, etc., measured a difference of only about one percent between the two main political camps, with one alternately taking the lead and then falling behind. On Election Sunday, the German newspaper *Welt am Sonntag*—most German dailies don't have Sunday editions—published the polls' final forecasts. Three institutes predicted that the government coalition—comprising the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP)—would emerge in a dead heat with the opposition. The latter is made up of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens, and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor to the old East German communist party. One poll predicted an opposition

victory. The other two polling institutes, including Allensbach, predicted a narrow lead for the government coalition. Out of the total of its eleven pre-election forecasts since 1957, this was one of Allensbach's most precise. The greatest deviation—share forecast versus share of actual vote—for one of the five parties represented in the Bundestag was 0.9 percent; the average deviation was 0.5 percent.

### **Why the German Outcome was Different from the American**

One big difference between the 1992 US presidential election and the 1994 German federal election involved the fact that the economic upswing which began in America in mid-1991 really wasn't perceived during the campaign by most American voters.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, German voters were very much aware of the trend toward recovery in their country. Against the backdrop of the extreme feeling of despondency that had prevailed in Germany since spring 1992—a mood revealed by many questions used in survey research—the sense of relief that took hold in spring 1994, as voters perceived that the recession was finally over, led to an almost euphoric mood (see figure 1). The first obvious manifestation of the new mood was the outcome of the European elections held on June 12, 1994. After trailing the Social Democrats for two and a half years, the Christian Democrats suddenly pulled ahead.

### **The Importance of Being Helmut**

Still, the economic upswing was by no means the only factor helping the government coalition win a narrow victory in the October election. One almost forgets how hopelessly low the Christian Democrats and Chancellor Kohl had sunk in the eyes of the voters in early 1994. Election analysis shows that the change in mood in Germany

wasn't triggered by the release of the first economic improvement data. Rather, the first shift was initiated by Kohl himself through his unbroken, contagious optimism.<sup>2</sup> This is evident in findings of the Allensbach Institute. The turning point was the CDU convention in Hamburg, February 20-23, at which the chancellor delivered a widely applauded speech.

This sequence of events—first optimism on the part of the chancellor and then data showing economic recovery—once again confirmed Kohl's unique ability to sense change. He operates in the political future while others are still in the past. The optimism he displayed in February was contagious because it anticipated an actual future economic upswing.

To understand Kohl's significance in German politics, one needs to look at the last three federal elections together, not just the October 1994 contest alone. Going into the 1987 contest, Kohl trailed the SPD's Johannes Rau as the candidate preferred for chancellor. In the campaign's last six months, however, he opened a substantial lead over his challenger. It was exactly the same in 1990, when Kohl came from behind in preference for chancellor to open a large margin over the SPD's Oscar Lafontaine down the stretch.

And this year, as Americans like to say, it was "déjà vu all over again." Kohl trailed the latest SPD hopeful, Rudolf Scharping, by 10 points or so in the preference ratings from January through March. Then, he overtook the challenger in the spring and maintained a 10-12 point preference margin in the last months before the balloting (see figure 2).

This year Kohl made himself the absolute center of the CDU/CSU campaign, taking part in more than 100 election ral-

with my projections. The same article also suggested that my exit poll was being conducted as part of an effort to again deprive Cardenas of victory.

### US Media Were Implicated in the Polling Controversy

Throughout the Mexican presidential campaign, Basanez (MORI-Mexico) was the only pollster in Mexico to report that a close election was likely. All the other pre-election polls showed that the race was never close, except for a brief period following the one presidential debate. Basanez conducted his polls on street corners in five large cities, all relative strongholds of voters opposed to the PRI. Many of the other published polls used in-home interviews, and their samples were distributed throughout the urban and rural areas of Mexico. Unfortunately, for much of the campaign, only Basanez's poll results were reported by such reputable newspapers as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Both ran full stories giving credence to Basanez's claim that a very close race was in progress and that Mexican voters were lying to other pollsters.

It was not until late in the campaign, when I and other Mexican pollsters attacked his unrepresentative polling methods, that newspapers started mentioning results from other polls showing wide margins along with Basanez's continuing claim of a close race.

In an effort to defend his MORI affiliate in Mexico, Robert Worcester, the head of MORI in London, wrote in the *New York Times* on August 16th that "the results (of the Mexican Presidential election) will be much closer than the raw voting-intention figures showing a Government lead of 20 or more points." He was wrong. The winning vote margin was 23 points. Worcester's comments went on to justify Basanez's polling methods.

Basanez told everyone who would listen that Mexicans would not give honest answers to pollsters if they were interviewed at home. He also said they would lie to exit pollsters when they were interviewed at the polling place. Basanez and Worcester claimed the only way to inter-

view Mexicans was to approach respondents on street corners away from their homes. They were wrong! The pre-election polls in Mexico that used more traditional techniques were accurate. Even Basanez changed his story and his methods for one late poll.

### A Good Poll: Reliable Results

The exit poll I did for Mexican broadcasters and US news organizations was extremely accurate. Mexicans gave honest answers to pollsters. They didn't lie as a device for misleading pollsters. They did

---

*Mexicans gave honest answers to pollsters. They didn't lie as a device for misleading pollsters. They did what respondents everywhere do when they do not want to participate: they refused to answer. However, exit poll refusal rates were very low in Mexico compared to my US experiences. Less than 15% refused to be interviewed.*

---

what respondents everywhere do when they do not want to participate: they refused to answer. However, exit poll refusal rates were very low in Mexico compared to my US experiences. Less than 15% refused to be interviewed.

There also were attempts by groups suspicious of fraud and/or sympathetic to the PRD to prevent my exit poll from being released. Civic Alliance, a citizens' good government group and supposedly sympathetic to the PRD, and others petitioned President Carlos Salinas and IFE to block it. I was told that the President refused to interfere.

Unfortunately, IFE was not nearly as courageous or unsympathetic. It was rumored that the PRD had threatened to pull out of the election if the release of the exit poll was not prohibited. I am not sure the rumor was true, though I cannot imagine

what other leverage there was that persuaded IFE to delay the release of the exit poll until the results could be confirmed by a quick count! IFE did not reach a decision until the afternoon of election day. The decision had been delayed that long, I was told, in an attempt to pacify the PRD and keep them from withdrawing. There was no legal basis for the decision. The law was clear—exit poll results could be released after all the voting places were closed. IFE, by ruling that exit polls could not be released until after there was a confirming quick count, successfully delayed the reporting by several hours. CIRT decided that they would go on the air with my projection and analysis of the election at 10pm in Mexico City, three hours after the last polling stations had closed.

IFE's ruling was unfortunate. In 1988 the government had been accused of fraud—for delaying the release of the election commission count. Now the reconstituted election commission was delaying the public release of information about the outcome of the election by suppressing my exit poll results for several hours, knowing the PRI had its own exit poll. Delaying the release of information to the public—but not to political elites—gives the opportunity for manipulation. That is exactly the impression almost everyone wanted to avoid.

I believe the election was conducted fairly even though there were irregularities reported by observer groups. Any attempt at massive fraud, given all the various checks, would have been very foolish. It would easily have been detected. Nonetheless, respect for the election results depends on the *public acceptance of the outcome as essentially fraud free by the candidates who did not win*. This happened only in part. The second place PAN candidate, Diego Fernandez de Cevallos, quickly made a statement accepting Zedillo's victory. Cardenas did not. Widespread belief in the success of the electoral reforms probably will not come about until the PRI loses a presidential election.

---

*Warren J. Mitofsky is president,  
Mitofsky International*