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Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Opinion Poll Performance in the 2012 Mexican Presidential Election

By Verónica B. Hoyo | February 28, 2013

Opinion polls are measurement tools. When they abide by the rules of the scientific method in the estimation of their sample and their overall design, electoral opinion polls offer a snapshot of citizens' political preferences at a specific moment in time (usually, a particular date or period during the campaign season). Uncertainty is, thus, an inherent characteristic in all surveys because they attempt to shed light on an ethereal phenomenon, that of public opinion. The complexities of capturing the actual viewpoints of the general public have long been the subject of analysis, but experts agree that they stem from the difficulty of clearly defining who the public is, given the impossibility of quantifying each individual's responses in our contemporary societies. In short, polling is neither an exact science nor a simple glance into a crystal ball; rather, it is an imperfect yet useful technique for estimating electoral likes and dislikes at a particular point in time.

Despite their natural limitations, political surveys and opinion polls constitute an essential source of infor-

mation in democratic electoral processes. Our modern, representative democracies require citizens capable of choosing between different alternatives in order to take action and delegate power to those standing for office. Since time is in short supply and information is needed for decisionmaking, opinion polls provide voters with cues on, for instance, which campaign themes to focus their attention on, who to follow more closely, and what to expect in terms of the race itself. Polls are, basically, thermometers to gauge the zeitgeist.

Similar to other sources of information (such as the media, political parties, interest groups, etc.), opinion polls and the polling firms that conduct them are subject to manipulation and have their own agendas to set forth. This is precisely why evaluating opinion poll performance is an intricate affair that involves going beyond purely questioning the methodological properties of this statistical exercise, but rather a more comprehensive analysis of their history, their usage and interpretation, as well as their potential for exploitation and manipulation.

Polls in Mexico

Historically speaking, opinion polls are a relatively recent phenomenon in Mexico. Although some were carried out during the 1950s and 1960s, particularly for marketing and sociological purposes, political surveys did not become a reality until the late 1980s. Their rather short history, coupled with their utilization during the 70-year-long reign of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) as propaganda tools to legitimize the regime, has impacted how the Mexican public perceives and relates to opinion polls even today. There is a deeply ingrained notion that most (if not all) polls are fraudulent and that they are an easy way for those in power to sway or influence the masses, so as to guarantee that they remain in power.

Moreover, there is little knowledge among the Mexican public about what exactly opinion polls do and cannot do, and even less on to how to interpret them.¹ This public mistrust of opinion polls has also been exacerbated by the national media. On the one hand, there is an over-exploitation of survey data in all media outlets. Today, it is practically impossible to find a single major news broadcast, front-page newspaper story, or even breaking news report that does not quote some type of opinion poll as a source of evidence. More often than not, these poll data are presented as point estimations (usually, percentages) without any other context—such as source, sample size, sampling techniques, margins of error, coverage, sponsor, and other important information that must be included in any methodological note.² On the other hand, and in conjunction with the media's obsession with citing polls as facts, there has been a rise of new (usually small and rather obscure) polling firms at all levels of government (federal, state, and local), which are often created during a particular polling season and then are either dismantled or simply fall into oblivion at the end of it or shortly there-

after, raising questions about their alleged scientific endeavors. Not all those opinion polls and surveys published and presented to the Mexican public meet minimum standards of quality, nor do they all come from reputable or well-known sources.

Additionally, and further tarnishing the reputation and respectability of the pollster industry in Mexico, the 2010 state elections—the immediate antecedent to the 2012 ballot—were terrible for preelectoral polls since their estimations had larger margins of error vis-à-vis the actual electoral results, and some of the polls even called the wrong winner in certain gubernatorial races fought that year.³

In general, it is seldom clear for the Mexican public what the significance of the poll data being presented is, who is paying for those polls, when they were taken, how they were developed and carried out or why (i.e., with what goal or specific agenda in mind). Mistrust, then, seems a natural reaction in this particular historical setting where survey methodology has been strategically and/or rhetorically used and abused by all major political actors.

The 2012 Polling Season

A brief look into the particular context of the 2012 electoral race is needed, in order to explain why opinion polls had such a controversial role. First, it was the third fully competitive election in which there was no ex-ante assured winner. Second, and even though the democratic credentials of Mexican elections were not universally challenged, the 2012 ballot followed a very close race in 2006—the margin of difference then between the winner, Felipe Calderón of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), and the runner up, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática

1. The question about whether surveys should be conceived as predictive or descriptive tools is, obviously, not exclusive to Mexico. But in most advanced democracies, where there has been a longer polling tradition (such as the United States), the general public is, if not more aware of their methodological limitations, at least willing to consider them as helpful analytical instruments, as well as more accustomed to see them be presented and used as trustworthy sources by all major political actors, regardless of the outcome of the election.

2. Examples of these so-called poll data without context abound in the free, pamphlet-like newspapers distributed outside metro stations and other places such as *Publimetro*, *Más por Más*, etc.

3. Most errors were concentrated in those polls concerning the states of Oaxaca, Puebla, and Sinaloa.

(PRD), was only 0.58 percent⁴—which meant that the result was not equally accepted nor acknowledged by all participants in the race.⁵ Finally, this most recent election was held under a heightened sense of personal, physical insecurity given the social and political violence related to the salient government’s security efforts, as well as material insecurity provoked by the global economic crisis. This objective and perceived increase in violence had a clear impact in opinion polls and the polling industry as a whole. Not only were there cases of kidnappings of interviewers—namely, from Consulta Mitofsky and Parametría in Michoacán—widely reported in the national media, but the Mexican public had become much wearier of expressing their political views (and any other, for that matter) either by telephone or in face-to-face interviews. Even different polling houses acknowledged the existence of a number of states/regions in the country where safety precautions made it difficult, if not impossible, to carry out their research.⁶

The year 2012 was also a first in terms of the start of the polling season for any presidential election in Mexico. This time around, pollsters began interviewing people about different scenarios, potential candidates, and their overall preferences for the presidential race three years before the actual ballot.⁷ Similarly, a major national

newspaper (Milenio) was the first to emulate what happens in other, more advanced democracies and presented a daily tracking poll of presidential preferences during the course of 101 days prior to the actual vote.⁸

Finally, in terms of the legal framework in which polls take place in Mexico, preelectoral polling has been a regulated activity since 1994.⁹ In an effort to provide transparency and accountability to the polling industry, the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) established a number of minimum methodological criteria that all political and electoral surveys must meet.¹⁰ Similarly, all polling houses are required to deliver an electronic copy of their studies, as well as their methodological reports, to the IFE no later than five days after their publication.¹¹ Another important factor to consider when studying the performance of opinion polls in Mexico is the existence of a three-day ban on electoral poll publication prior to the actual ballot. This ban makes it harder for polling instruments to accurately estimate the final results because the voters’ preferences may change at the last minute, as can the likelihood of individuals deciding actually to go out and cast a vote.

However, despite the great difficulties that the polling industry encountered, 2012 was its most prolific year. As

4. Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE), <http://www.ife.org.mx/documentos/Estadisticas2006/presidente/nac.html>.

5. In the 2006 election aftermath, AMLO refused to recognize his defeat and would eventually proclaim himself to be the “*Presidente legítimo*” and call for a “civil resistance plan” whereby his sympathizers blocked one of Mexico City’s main avenues, Reforma, for over a month (48 days). See, for instance, <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/389114.html>, as well as <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2006/09/17/index.php?section=politica&article=003n1pol>, and the official account of these events in his personal narrative, <http://lopezobrador.org.mx/semblanza/>.

6. See <http://www.milenio.com/cdb/doc/noticias2011/68012e92653397df54e4c399ca11b38f> and <http://eleconomista.com.mx/sociedad/2011/08/03/parametria-se-retira-michoacan>.

7. Edmundo Berumen, “¿Qué pasó en 2012? Los encuestadores y los Medios de Comunicación,” roundtable #3, IFE, November 22–23, 2012, p. 5.

8. Milenio’s daily tracking poll was carried out from March 17 to June 27 2012. See http://www.ife.org.mx/documentos/proceso_2011-2012/EncuestasConteosRapidos/informe-encuestadoras.html and <http://www.milenio.com/cdb/doc/noticias2011/ba3affe584foc18a954d6a77766851a>.

9. The Mexican Constitution mandates that the IFE oversees, directly and integrally, all electoral surveys and polls. Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos de México, article 41, paragraph 9, base V, <http://info4.juridicas.unam.mx/ijure/fed/9/42.htm?s=>.

10. Such criteria were jointly determined by the IFE and a panel of public opinion experts. They include the specification of the study’s goal, its sample design (sampling frame, sample size, unit selection, frequency and treatment of nonrespondents, quantification of margins of error and confidence intervals, rejection rate, etc.), a description of the method used for data collection, the inclusion of a sample questionnaire, the definition of weighting procedures employed, and the software used to process the data obtained. See Annex, http://www.ife.org.mx/docs/IFE-v2/Principal/NoticiasAvisos/NoticiasAvisos-2011/esticos2011/diciembre/CG411_2011.pdf.

11. COFIPE, article 237, paragraph 5.

table 1 shows, the IFE recorded an increase in the number of published opinion poll studies of 144 percent and 504 percent when compared to the two previous federal elections.¹² In terms of recorded media publications of polls, their number amounted to an unparalleled 4,433 during the entire campaign season.¹³

Now, if opinion polls were so popular a product, why were they so contro-

versial this time around? The answer lies in the expectations that they created over the end of the race itself. Most polls showed throughout the campaign, a marked advantage in favor of Enrique Peña Nieto (EPN), the PRI candidate.¹⁴ Second place was harder to declare, but most preelectoral polls showed AMLO (PRD) ahead of Josefina Vázquez Mota (JVM, PAN) from relatively early on during the official campaign time. This meant that, and probably due to the early start of the polling season, there was a widespread belief among the general public that it was not going to be a photo finish (as in 2006), but rather that it was a foregone conclusion and the PRI would easily regain Los Pinos. However, a couple of specific events would rapidly challenge this perception and provide some momentum to the two trailing candidates. The two critical incidents were EPN's troublesome campaign visit to the Universidad Iberoamericana (IBERO) and the subsequent development of a youth/student protest movement under the name of Yo Soy 132 that called for increased democratization of Mexican politics and the media.¹⁵

Shortly after these events, all national opinion polls started registering a decline in the electorate's favorable opinion of the PRI candidate, which also translated into a reduction of the gap between the frontrunner and his closest competitor (AMLO). These changes gave citizens

the impression that, perhaps, opinion polls until then (April-May 2012) had been either deliberately biased as the 132 movement claimed or, at least, that they had not caught up

with the latest trends in the citizens' preferences. Nonetheless, as table 2 shows, by the end of the campaign, all pollsters were reporting again that EPN had a wide lead (ranging from a 7 to 18 percentage point difference) and that his defeat was unlikely.

A Simple Evaluation of the 2012 Polls

Evaluating the performance of opinion polls is not an easy feat. Although there are many clearly identifiable, potential sources of error in an opinion poll when focusing exclusively on methodology—ranging from sampling to coverage, measurement error, or even “house” effects—the quality of polling data changes from firm to firm, from one election to another, and even from week from week.¹⁶ This happens mainly because, *ceteris paribus*, measuring the entire population of interest is impossible and preferences are constantly changing in response to campaign events and to candidates' actions and platforms. Nonetheless, it is still possible to assess the precision of a particular polling industry in a given electoral season.

Table 1. Number of Published Opinion Polls per Election

Electoral Year	Number of original opinion poll studies
2006	131
2009	53
2012	320

Source: IFE, November 2012.

12. See Edmundo Molina, “Encuestas en el proceso electoral 2012, ¿Cumplieron con la ley?”, roundtable #1, IFE, November 22–23, 2012, p. 14.

13. This number includes citations and references to polls and comprises all media publications, regardless of medium. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

14. Such advantage was even reported before the candidates had officially presented their bids to the IFE. That is, the PRI led the race even before it started. See, for instance, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-15914073>.

15. EPN's visit to the IBERO, a private Jesuit university, happened as a last minute participation (he had already cancelled his attendance twice) in a forum called *Buen Ciudadano Ibero*. See a video of what happened here: <http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2012/05/11/la-visita-de-pena-nieto-divide-a-estudiantes-en-universidad-iberoamericana>. The Yo Soy 132 was born in response to the PRI's claim that those students who had booed EPN and forced him out of the IBERO through the back door were not real students but had been “planted” there by special interests.

16. House effects refer to the systematic tendency of polling firms to favor one particular candidate or party over another.

Table 2. Vote Estimations of Last Polls Published

Pollster	Sample size	Type of question (Secret ballot or Direct question)	% PAN	% PRI	% PRD	Difference between first and second (EPN/AMLO)
1. BCG, Beltrán y Asociados	1,200	SB	28	42	28	14
2. Buendía & Laredo	2,000	SB	24.4	45	27.9	17.1
3. Con Estadística	1,150	SB & DQ	24.7	44.4	26.7	17.7
4. Consulta Mitofsky	1,000	SB	24.6	44.4	28.7	15.7
5. Covarrubias y Asociados	1,500	DQ	26	41	30	11
6. Demotecnia	1,500	DQ	23	40	33	7
7. El Financiero /Indemerc - Harris	2,000	SB	22.8	47.2	27.1	20.1
8. GEA-ISA	1,144	DQ?	22.4	46.9	28.5	18.4
9. IPSOS	1,000	DQ	24	41	34	7
10. Mercaei	1,200	SB	27.2	38.5	31	7.5
11. Parametría	1,000	SB	23.6	43.9	28.7	15.2
12. Reforma	1,212	SB	24	42	30	12
Mean:	1,326	SB	24.55	43.02	29.46	13.55
Actual IFE results	50,323,153 registered citizens in 143,437 polling stations	SB	25.41	38.21	31.59	6.62

Note: All data are shown in effective numbers, that is, do not know responses, blank ballots and will not vote answers are excluded. Source: Verónica Hoyo and Francisco Cantú, “Opening Pandora’s Box: Analyzing Opinion Polls in the 2012 Mexican Presidential Election” (paper presented at the Wayne Cornelius Festschrift, Center for U.S.-Mexico Studies, October 7, 2012).

There are a number of different measures of accuracy for preelection polls. In table 3, one of the most common metrics is used: the Mosteller 3 method, which is basically the average absolute error between the different poll estimations and the actual ballot results for all the major candidates in the race.¹⁷ Although the choice of the number of candidates is discretionary, this measure is particularly useful in the context of multiparty competition—as in Mexico—especially because the three major candidates of the last three federal elections have all come from the same three major parties: the PRI, the PAN, and the PRD. All polls listed constitute the “final election poll” for each of their firms. This is traditionally done because the last poll, given the fact that it is the one closest to the election, is considered to be the one more likely to accurately

reflect the state of the public’s opinion. As table 3 shows, 2012 is not an outlier and polls were even slightly better than in 1994, though a little worse off than in the two prior races. Much more in-depth analysis of the entire polling season, as well as of each of the actual instruments published, would need to be carried out in order to conclusively ascertain that there was no foul play from the Mexican pollsters (individually and collectively) during this most recent election. However, this quick analysis of last published polls clearly refutes the notion that the polling industry did a poor job in 2012. In fact, it performed almost exactly as it has for the past 18 years. Evidently, there is always room for improvement, but overall, the 2012 polls were as reliable as they have been in the past.

17. Frederick Mosteller et al., *The Pre-Election Polls of 1948* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1949).

Table 3. Comparing Final Poll Performance across Recent Presidential Elections in Mexico

Election Year	Number of last polls included	Average error of all last polls
1994	9	3.10
2000	12	2.77
2006	16	2.38
2012	12	3.08

Nota bene: The 12 last published polls for 2012 included here are those mentioned in table 2. Calculus of the Mosteller 3 method is my own only for the most recent election. Data from 1994 to 2006 come from Alejandro Moreno et al., "Pre-Election Poll Estimations in Mexico: In Search for the Main Sources of Error," Revista Latinoamericana de Opinión Pública (forthcoming).

Conclusion

Evaluating opinion polls is a difficult task, especially in the Mexican case. Not only has the national polling industry not yet agreed on any objective criteria to qualify the performance of their products, but most of the best-known polling firms disagree on what their actual role should be (forecasting the winner correctly as an end in itself versus thoroughly describing the attitudes and behaviors of the electorate during a specific point in time), or whether pleasing their clients (those individuals or organizations who pay for the surveys) should be more highly valued than having higher and more transparent methodological standards. The national media have also been guilty of, if not deliberately misinforming the public as to the purposes and reach of survey methodologies, at least misrepresenting their results.

Opinion polls have inundated the Mexican political market and are here to stay. Regardless of the increased public mistrust of them, they are not likely to disappear; rather (as their numbers for the 2012 election suggest), they will continue to increase their visibility. The issue now should not be how to ban them completely or make it illegal to publish them during the campaign season, as some opportunistic political actors would want us to believe.¹⁸ The real issue at stake is how to provide the Mexican electorate with higher quality information. The IFE's prescriptions to render polling firms accountable for their

products have not been adequately met by the country's polling industry, and the IFE has not vigorously enforced its rules. The requirement to deliver the studies' methodologies, questionnaires, etc., and an electronic copy of their data has been interpreted in a lax manner, thus rendering even more difficult the task of evaluating poll performance.¹⁹ A better informed, more knowledgeable citizenry is exactly what a young and imperfect democracy such Mexico's needs to deepen its reach and further strengthen its institutions. Only the collaboration of all societal actors will achieve this. ■

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18. Recently, PRD congressmen Gerardo Villanueva and Martí Batres introduced an initiative for a complete prohibition to publish or quote an electoral survey or opinion poll during the official campaign period. See <http://www.scribd.com/doc/105140432/Iniciativa-para-prohibir-difusion-de-encuestas>.

19. The datasets are incomplete or in a format that makes it very difficult (if not impossible) to replicate their analysis, questionnaires are missing, etc.