

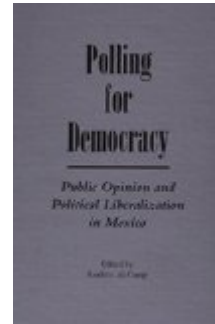
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Roderic A. Camp, ed. *Polling for Democracy: Public Opinion and Political Liberalization in Mexico*. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1996. viii + 186 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-2583-6.

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## Public Opinion and Democracy in Mexico

Roderic Camp has probably produced more books on Mexico than any other social scientist now writing. With *Polling for Democracy*, Camp has put together a very timely consideration of public opinion and the role of polling in the democratization of Mexico. This volume originated from the papers of a conference organized by Camp and held at the Mexican Policy Studies Program of the Roger Thayer Stone Center for Latin American Studies at Tulane University in 1994. Given the highly contested midterm congressional and gubernatorial elections just held, the topic of the role of public opinion in the political liberalization of this hegemonic party system could hardly be more appropriate. Camp has pulled together eight essays that are remarkably even in quality and edited so as to be brief and to the point. Scholars interested in the politics of Mexican liberalization will find that this book provides a wealth of new information about the emergence of public opinion polling in the past decade and insightful analyses of the role that polling can play in promoting political liberalization.

Camp's introductory essay and the first section consider the role of the Mexican media in Mexican politics and explore the contributions made by the media in the emergence of political polling. Juan Carlos Gamboa, a former Mexican journalist, now a political scientist, provides a thoughtful chapter on the contributions of polls to democracy and explores the extent to which the Mexican media has adhered to internationally-accepted practices regarding the sponsorship of polls and reporting on the results of polls. Those who remember the highly con-

tested and fraud-ridden presidential election of 1988 may also remember that in that year political polling emerged in Mexico. Those who remember that election with its "computer crash" may not be surprised that the Mexican news media as a whole showed about as much integrity in reporting on polls as did the government in reporting on the official results. Polls were published that had never been conducted and almost all newspapers and political magazines published information about polls that was deficient in one way or another. By 1994, though, standards had improved dramatically. When newspapers sponsored polls, they were generally careful to indicate how the poll was conducted and to discuss other methodological issues related to the poll. However, Gamboa's research shows that where newspapers were reporting on polls conducted by other organizations, no such care was taken to describe the limitations of the data reported by the polling organization or even to indicate carefully who had sponsored the poll. Television news has been even less careful than the capital city newspapers, and unfortunately, as most readers know, Mexicans receive their news by television and radio to a much greater extent than by newspaper. The provision to the public itself of public opinion data has improved, but remains imperfect.

In contrast to Gamboa's cautionary chapter, Raul Trejo Delarbre, editor of the political weekly *Etcetera*, finds polling to have reached a professional level in which polls can be treated for the most part as "an important tool for political and social analysis—neither an infalli-

ble oracle nor a means to confuse or distort public opinion” (p. 38). He notes that the coincidence of the official election results in 1994 and the predictions of several different polls earned polling a new credibility where it had been lacking in 1988. Trejo Delarbre’s reservations about the media and its use of opinion polls tend to revolve around technical questions that can, nevertheless, have important political consequences. Mexican political pollsters have debated the merits of polling respondents in their homes or on the street (those favoring on the street interviews feel the greater anonymity of the street setting is more likely to produce truthful responses about voting intentions and judgments about political figures; those favoring interviews in the home point out that such a sampling strategy can more nearly reflect the characteristics of the population being sampled). Trejo Delarbre believes that Mexicans are now willing to reveal their political preferences to pollsters, so the in-the-home interviewing strategy is far superior. This view seems to have been accepted widely now.

A second technical consideration is how pollsters should reassign undecided voters when trying to predict electoral outcomes. While most social scientists would put the undecided aside or explore reasons for their indecision, newspapers want to make accurate predictions of electoral results (and, perhaps, thereby constrain the freedom of electoral officials who have in the past perpetrated fraud on the Mexican voters). Trejo Delarbre prefers assuming that the undecided will distribute themselves in the same proportions as those who have declared their voting intentions. Not all pollsters have agreed with this assumption. For example, Miguel Basanez, of MORI de Mexico, has argued that the undecided include a disproportionate share of voters who are afraid to reveal their voting intentions because they are opposition supporters. Basanez thus argued that the level of participation (where the undecided may be among the latest to decide to turn out) would affect the actual outcome and the degree to which the actual results diverge from the preferences revealed to pollsters. Trejo Delarbre chides Basanez, also an author in this volume, about not being as explicit about his subjective interpretations of his data as he could be. Trejo Delarbre’s other criticisms of the media and its reporting of polling data are similar to those of Gamboa: the disinclination to carefully report methodologies used in polls and the importance of indicating who the poll’s sponsors are when interpreting its reported data.

Three chapters compose the second section of the book, in which changing Mexican values are explored.

Linda Stevenson and Mitchell Seligson examine whether the fading memories of the Revolution have undercut the caution about political violence formerly expressed by Mexicans. They summarize their main themes: “The hypothesis is that, over the past sixty years, negative memories of the 1910 Mexican Revolution have sparked a fear of a return to the violence of that period, which in turn inhibited the willingness of Mexicans to engage in antisystem political actions. We also argue that this collective memory has been fading with the passage of time; the surviving generation of the revolution has passed from the scene, and vicarious memories held by the children of the revolution are dimming. Consequently, inhibition to take high-risk political actions has decreased” (p. 65). Stevenson and Seligson explore this provocative thesis with survey data gathered in 1978 by Seligson and others among *maquiladora* workers, survey data originally meant for other uses. Unfortunately, the smallness of the sample (only 257 respondents) and the age of the data make it less useful than would be ideal. Stevenson and Seligson have a provocative thesis and some supporting data, but hardly the kind of data that could lead to firm conclusions about the propensity to political violence in the 1990s.

James McCann explores another question central to Mexican political change: “In a relative sense ... is the political culture of Mexico conducive to democratic representation?” (p. 83). To assess this question, McCann compares contemporary Mexican political culture to that of the United States and Canada on three major dimensions of citizen engagement in public affairs: the level of interest in politics, the amount of knowledge citizens have about politics and public affairs, and their levels of “political expertise.” Using data from Gallup Polls in Mexico (1988 and 1991), the American National Election Study (1988 and 1990) and the Canadian National Election Study (1988), McCann finds that Mexicans are quite similar to North Americans and Canadians in their level of interest in politics, sharing an elitist tendency wherein those with greater economic and social resources show more interest in politics. Mexicans also show themselves to be comparable to their North American and Canadian counterparts in their levels of political knowledge. Where Mexicans may be less prepared to participate in democratic politics than their North American and Canadian brethren is in their political expertise. In particular, Mexicans show relatively low issue preference congruence—i.e., the responses of the mass electorate to questions on issues that have been articulated by elites as being linked (e.g., the package of policies that made up

the neoliberal economic strategy) are inconsistent. The recency of neoliberal ideas to the Mexican electorate at the time of the Gallup Polls could explain some of this inconsistency, but the fact remains that the electorate does not frame policy issues in the same way as policymakers. McCann concludes on an optimistic note, though, pointing out that in comparison to earlier survey-based studies, his findings suggest a Mexican public ready to take on the responsibilities of democratic representation.

Neil Nevitte, in the third chapter of the second section, considers whether context shapes the views of respondents more than cultural values. Although North Americans and Canadians tend to share fundamental social and political values more with each other than with Mexicans, Nevitte wonders whether on issues related to hemispheric integration Canadians and Mexicans are closer to each other than to their counterparts in the United States. When asked about their views on the merits and demerits of trade restrictions and about the desirability of open borders, Mexicans and Canadians are closer together. In a sense, the asymmetries of power in the North American continent have led Mexicans and Canadians to have similar views about integration with their larger neighbor.

The last section of *Polling for Democracy* explores the political consequences of public opinion polling. Miguel Basanez returns to several of the issues raised by Trejo Delarbre, defending as he does polling on the street as opposed to the home and suggesting that undecided voters have to be considered undeclared, thus that the pollster must make decisions about how to assign the undeclared if she or he is to make a prediction about the electoral outcome. Basanez argues that the debates in Mexico in 1994 about pre-election polling (which included disputes about in-the-home or in-the-street polling and the manner of assigning the undecided for purposes of predictions) were essentially partisan in character. He maintains that the PRI and the government tried to discredit polls unfavorable to the PRI and that the opposition parties did essentially the same when polls appeared that were more favorable to the PRI. It should be noted that early in the 1994 campaign, Basanez predicted a race in which the three major parties, the PRI, the PAN, and the PRD, would run closer than they actually did. It should also be noted that Basanez's final poll made predictions closer to the final result than any other poll.

In the context of the just-completed 1997 election, the issue of assigning the undecided has reemerged. Until very late in the election, the percentage of undecided voters remained quite high, at times over 20 percent. In the congressional elections, assigning the undecided on a strictly proportional basis led to the conclusion that the PRI would receive the 42 percent of the popular vote it needed to receive a majority of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. In the actual election, the PRI failed to make 40 percent. In some state-level races, high percentages of undecided voters apparently decided late in the contest. In the state of Queretaro, for instance, only the last poll, released a week before the election, yielded a majority for the PAN, whose candidate took the Queretaro governorship on July 6.

In the final chapter, Alejandro Moreno, a political scientist who previously worked for MORI de Mexico, explores the way in which policy approval shapes voting decisions. In particular, he finds that while public preferences for neoliberal policies had some impact on the PRI's vote (PRI voters were apt to express neoliberal values), Salinas's National Solidarity Program (PRONASOL) also had an important effect on voters' decisions, at least in the 1991 midterm elections. Moreno suggests that Salinas's well-defined economic program led to high support for his administration and the overall high approval ratings he enjoyed while president led to the generally high levels of support for the neoliberal economic program itself.

For those who do not follow either the process of polling in Mexico or public opinion there, *Polling for Democracy* provides an essential introduction. It is neither too technical nor devoid of the specifics one must have to understand these themes. Surely we will be deluged with even more studies of public opinion in Mexico in coming years. We are unlikely, though, to be greeted with a book that includes the essentials of the methodological debates about polling there. Roderic Camp has once again added much to our understanding of Mexico and, importantly in this case, to our knowledge of how we gather that understanding.

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