

Public Opinion Polls in Chile

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Public opinion polls have taken on a central role in Chilean politics and society. Poll results are regularly used to support certain views, oppose others, evaluate legislative initiatives, assess the government's popularity and anticipate future electoral scenarios. Although polling is such an essential component of the public debate, the professionalism and ethic standards of many polling companies is far from satisfactory. In recent years, polling techniques have improved dramatically and a handful of highly reputable companies have emerged. Yet, there are several problems that need to be overcome to make the field more reliable and accountable. In what follows, I first present a brief history of polling in Chile. I then describe the most important polling companies operating today. I discuss the role polling has played in recent elections, underlining the close links between certain political parties and many polling companies. Finally, I address how polling influences the political agenda. I conclude with an assessment of the challenges that the public opinion polling need to overcome to consolidate its position as a reliable source of information of the public will and an accountable and self-regulating discipline.

A History of Polling in Chile, 1958-2001

Public opinions polls date back to 1958 when sociologist Mario Hamuy conducted a study of political views and culture in the Santiago metropolitan area, where 32% of Chile's 7,4 million inhabitants lived. Others joined Hamuy in the 1960s, experimenting with different sampling strategies and exhibiting different levels of accuracy (López and Martínez 1999). Polls were first used in presidential elections in 1964, when Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei defeated socialist Salvador Allende by a 55,7%-38,6% margin. Because conservative parties opted out of the election to make it easier for Frei to win, there was little uncertainty about the results of that election during the campaign and, naturally, there was little polling done. Six years later, the presidential election was hotly contested. Several polls were taken during the campaign, mostly covering Santiago or the three largest urban centers (Santiago, Valparaíso and Concepción), which together comprised slightly over 60% of the national population. Salvador Allende edged out conservative Jorge Alessandri by 1.5% (36,3 to 35,0). Alessandri supporters, relying on polls that showed him ahead in Santiago, had anticipated a close victory. In the end, Alessandri did win in Santiago (38,1% to 34,5%), but lost so decisively in northern Chile that Allende became the plurality winner (Urzúa Valenzuela 1992: 639).

In 1973, the Pinochet dictatorship, established after the military coup that overthrew Allende, temporarily halted public opinion polls. Although a dynamic marketing field developed in the late 1970s and early 80s, political polls were not conducted until the mid 1980s. There were several regularly held non-government polls to measure unemployment and poverty, particularly in Santiago, but surveys scientifically designed to assess political views were not conducted. As 1988 approached, the year that Pinochet's custom made constitution mandated a plebiscite to choose between democratic transition and 8 more years under Pinochet, more attention was paid to political attitudes of Chileans. The *Latin American School of Social Sciences* (FLACSO) conducted a poll in Santiago in late 1986 (Centro de Estudios del Desarrollo/FLACSO, 1987) and the *Centro de Estudios Públicos* (CEP), a conservative think-tank financed by different businessmen, conducted its first poll in early 1987.

The field got crowded as the October 1988 plebiscite neared, with several companies publicizing their results, but not their methodology. Most of those mushroom companies disappeared after Pinochet lost overwhelmingly in the plebiscite. In the 1989 presidential and parliamentary elections, new companies appeared, but polling was seen as part of the electoral strategy of the candidates rather than as an accurate description of electoral preferences. Because most polling companies were associated, or directly owned, by politicians from different parties, their reliability and accuracy was regularly questioned by the mass media. The 1990s witnessed the consolidation of polling as a legitimate and reliable tool to assess public views, though new companies have continued to enter the market in election years making bold claims and predictions. Reputation has increasingly become a central component of polling companies, but the lack of a regulatory framework and the absence of a national professional association of pollsters makes it difficult for public opinion to easily distinguish between legitimate pollsters and those with methodological, ethical and conflict of interest problems, given their poor polling and sampling techniques or their association with particular candidates.

Polling Companies in the 1990s

Today, there are several established companies, with good reputation, highly reliable and methodologically rigorous. The most dependable public poll is conducted twice a year by CEP, a non-for-profit conservative think-tank. Modeled after the Brookings Institution, CEP regularly produces publications intended to influence public policy and promote free market ideals. Although CEP also conducts special polls to measure national attitudes on moral values and other current affairs, its regular poll has acquired an uncontested national legitimacy. The CEP poll is also the only truly national poll. Although 86% of Chileans live in urban areas, CEP is the only polling company that incorporates the rural population in its sampling.

Feedback, Benchmark, Gemines, MORI-Chile and *Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Contemporánea* (CERC) are also household names for the mass media and social and political actors. Although more than a dozen other companies were active in producing pre-electoral polls for the December 2001 parliamentary election, most new companies

suffer either from lack of credibility for their close association with certain political parties or will have to endure the untrustworthiness of having wrongly predicted election results. In fact, a few companies have been pushed out of the market because of erroneous electoral predictions. Gallup-Chile erred so dramatically in all electoral predictions between 1988 and 1992 that it lost its credibility and was forced to close. Other companies that have suffered from credibility are Gemines, Adimark, MORI and CERC. Adimark teamed up with television networks to conduct exit polls for the 1993 presidential and parliamentary election. Because of the lack of an ethical code of conduct and no regulatory framework, television networks rushed to air the exit polls results before voting ended. Because the bulk of the exit poll predictions were wrong and as a result of the public outcry for announcing the results before voting ended, television networks have refrained from conducting exit polls since. As a result of the gaffe, CEP terminated its relationship with ADIMARK and began to conduct its polls on its own, further consolidating its position as the most respected polling company in Chile. To be sure, the vote-counting process in Chile takes little time. In all elections since 1989, the results have been known within a couple of hours after precincts close, reducing the demand for accurate exit poll results. Yet, the bad reputation earned by past exit polls makes it difficult to reposition that tool in the eyes of the public.

A few media outlets have begun teaming up with polling companies to conduct their own studies. Canal 13, the Catholic Church-owned television network, recently teamed up with *El Mercurio*, the most influential newspaper in the country, and OPINA S.A. (a private polling company) to conduct period polls in Santiago and other major cities. *La Tercera*, the second most influential newspaper, has teamed up with Feedback to conduct polls on political views and attitudes of Chileans.

Political parties have also relied on private polling to inform their platforms. Conservative Independent Democratic Union (UDI) has strong links with Benchmark and Gemines, companies partially owned by active UDI militants. Conservative National Renewal (RN) relies on *Fundación Futuro*, a private foundation owned by Sebastián Piñera, a former RN senator and current party president. The Christian Democratic Party (PDC), member of the governing center-left *Concertación* coalition, is closely associated with MORI and CERC, owned by PDC militants. The Socialist Party and the Party for Democracy (PPD) have close ties to Feedback. The presidency has also made good use of polling since the return of democracy in 1990. In fact, no former president used polling more consistently to inform his public agenda than current leader Ricardo Lagos. Lagos's personal pollster, Javier Martínez, is believed to conduct weekly surveys to assess the president's popularity and the electorate's perception of government's initiatives.

Other Polls and Surveys Conducted by the Government and Non-Profit Institutions

Other organizations and institutes also conduct regular polls. The government's CASEN poll, conducted every two years, measures poverty and the effect of public policy efforts to eradicate it. First conducted in 1987, CASEN has gained a reputation of rigoroussness and reliability. With more than 50,000 households surveyed and more than 200,000

interviews, CASEN poll can also be defined as a mini-census. The University of Chile's Department of Economics has conducted a quarterly poll in Santiago to measure unemployment for over 20 years. More recently, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) began conducting a detailed poll to measure human development. Their Human Development Report is produced every two years and it is considered one of the most reliable assessments of deeper societal changes in perceptions and attitudes. Fundación Paz Ciudadana, a non-for profit organization concerned with preventing crime and strengthening civil society, conducts annual polls to assess the effect of government policies to reduce and combat crime.

Most recently, Latinobarómetro, a Latin American company with headquarters in Chile, has also widely publicized its findings. Although the Latinobarómetro is designed to conduct similar polls in all of Latin America, using an international network of existing polling companies, its Santiago location is an indication of how much the field has developed in the country in recent years.

Public Opinion Polls And Political Campaigns

Naturally, the reliability of the polling industry is affected by how close their electoral predictions are. In the most recent presidential election (December 1999), the candidate of the ruling *Concertación* coalition, Ricardo Lagos, faced out against the popular leader of the conservative opposition, Joaquín Lavín and other 4 candidates. After a hotly contested campaign where Lagos and Lavín's camps put out polling results showing them ahead, the first round voting resulted in a razor-thin victory for Lagos, sending the election into a run-off. Lagos went on to win by 51,3% to 48,7%, but the closeness of the first round vote cast a shadow of doubt over the methodology and accuracy of some of the most prominent polling companies.

Table 1 shows the electoral predictions of the most important Chilean polling companies. Only CEP conducted a nationwide poll based on probabilistic sampling, with the rest conducting either Santiago only or all cities with more than 40,000 inhabitants, which covers about 70% of the national population. Because not all companies report their margins of error, they are not included in Table 1. Many companies came very close to the final first round results, but their credibility was initially put into question because they were associated with the conservative candidate (as in the case of Futuro, Benchmark and Gemines). The CEP poll, conducted a month before the election, over estimated the support for alternative candidates, but it might have well been that many of those who intended to vote for other candidates changed their vote in the days before the election. The polls conducted by CERC and MORI also overestimated the vote for alternative candidates, but predicted a larger margin of victory for Lagos. Both polling companies have been associated with the PDC and their predictions were harshly criticized by other pollsters as being more of a campaign stunt than an accurate picture of the electoral preferences of voters.

The support for alternative candidates was of particular importance given that 3 of the 4 alternative candidates were leftists widely considered as taking votes away from the candidate of the *Concertación*. Because the Chilean constitution mandates a run-off in case no candidate gets more than 50% of the votes in the first round, the electoral strength for leftist alternative candidates was pivotal for the second round. The MORI poll grossly overestimated the support for the 4 alternative candidates, attributing 11% to the three leftist candidates, and 6% to the conservative candidate. In the end, the combined vote for Joaquín Lavín and the alternative conservative candidate was 47,9%, much higher than the 42% predicted by MORI. Despite the errors in their predictions, the 1999 presidential elections showed the importance polls have gained in influencing political campaigns. The two leading candidates conducted weekly private polls to assess the effect of their campaigns and the press reported enthusiastically the results of almost any poll released by reputed and emerging companies.

Although most polling has been historically conducted through face-to-face interviews in the respondents' residences, some companies, most notably Fundación Futuro, have recently begun to use Computer Assistance Telephone Interviewing (CATI) to reduce costs and speed the time spent interviewing. Those companies have been severely criticized because only about 60% of Chilean households have telephone lines and more than 20% live below the poverty line. Yet, with the appropriate sampling corrections, the problem can be minimized and accurate and reliable information can be gathered at a much lower cost. It is highly likely that, as time progresses, more and more companies will move from expensive and time-consuming home visits by interviewers to less expensive and faster CATI model.

Table 1. Public Opinion Polls Predictions for 1999 Presidential Election

Company	Date	Lagos	Lavín	Others*	Null/ blank/ undecided	DK/ NR
Benchmark	Nov 1999	42.7	39.8	11.4	6.1	
CEP	Sept-Oct 99	39.9	38.2	5.4	13.7	--
CEP**	Sept-Oct 99	46.4	44.4	6.2	2.9	--
CERC	Dec 1999	45.0	39.0	12.1	1.8	2.1
Futuro**	Nov 1999	47.0	47.0	7.0	---	--
Futuro	Nov 1999	45.0	45.0	7.0	4.0	--
Gemines	Nov 13-23, 99	41.7	41.5	5.2	--	11.6
MORI	Nov 17-24, 99	42	36	17.0	--	5
Actual Vote	Dec 13, 1999	48.0	47.5	4.5	--	--

* Includes Arturo Frei, Gladys Marín, Sara Larraín and Tomás Hirsch. ** Excluding null and blank.

Sources: Espinoza 1999, Ministerior del Interior 2002, CEP 1999, 1999, CERC 1999.

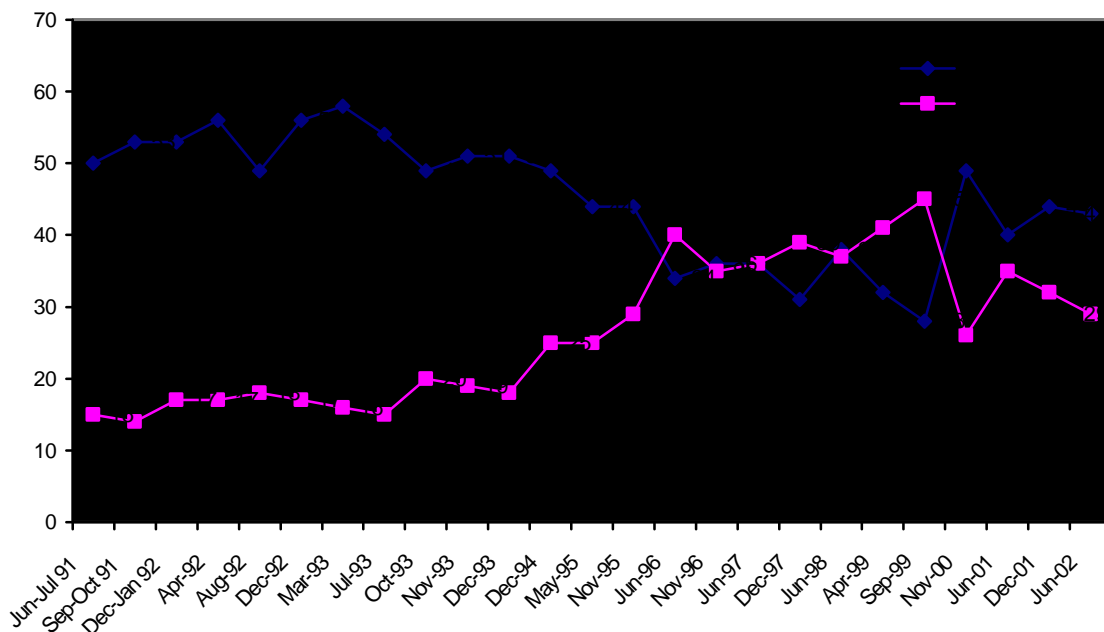
Public Opinion Polls as a Source of Knowledge and History

After more than 15 years of active polling and after 12 years of continuous democratic rule, the information gathered over time by public opinion polls has allowed for the creation of a sizable databank of information on political attitudes, values and views of

Chileans over time. There are two time series data that constitute the most cited and trusted evaluations of politics and of the economy by Chileans during the 1990s. The presidential approval index and the evaluation of the country's economic conditions are widely used as snapshots of the social and political mood of Chileans over time. Both time series have been constructed based on questions periodically asked by the CEP poll.

The presidential approval rating series (Figure 1) begins with data from one year after president Patricio Aylwin's inauguration in March of 1990. Aylwin was a member of the PDC, one of the *Concertación* coalition parties. His successor, Eduardo Frei (March 1994-March 2000), was also a PDC and *Concertación* president. Ricardo Lagos, a Socialist and *Concertación* president, was inaugurated in March of 2000. Most analysts agree on that the honeymoon period after transition to democracy ended around 1995, when disapproval ratings began to increase. Many have also noted that despite having enjoyed unparalleled economic prosperity during the 1990s, Chileans were discontent with the presidential leadership. President Lagos, on the other hand, has governed during times of international economic hardship, yet his approval ratings have risen to levels similar to those enjoyed by president Aylwin during his democratic honeymoon period.

Figure 1. Presidential Approval Ratings in Chile, CEP Polls, 1991-2002

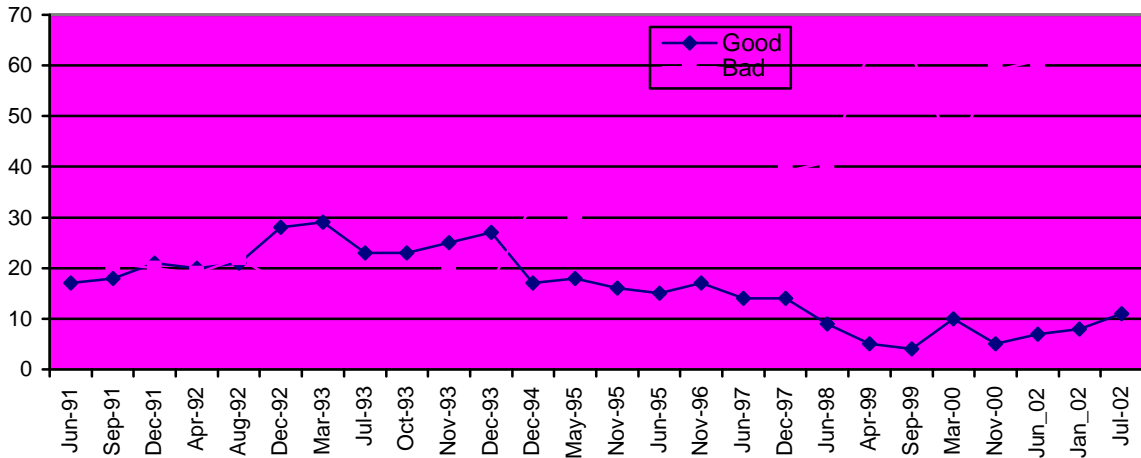


Source: Centro de Estudios Públicos 2002. (CERC has also tracked presidential approval ratings since 1990, but its samples are not probabilistic).

Figure 2 shows the individual perception of the national economic situation. Although the country's GDP doubled during the 1990s, discontent with the economic outlook began to rise after the end of the Aylwin period (March 1990-March 1994). The economic

recession that hit the country in 1999 (the first in 15 years) brought the negative evaluations to more than 60%. Although the economic recovery has been weak in the 3 years that have followed, discontent with the economic situation has eased, even though it remains slightly over 50%.

Figure 2. Individual Perception of the National Economy, CEP polls, 1991-2002



Source: Centro de Estudios Públicos, 2002.

Conclusion

The field of political polling is thriving in Chile. Many companies are currently active and several new ones enter in and out of the market when demand (political campaigns) increases during election years. Yet, even though the techniques used and the methodological approaches utilized have improved since the first polls were conducted more than 40 years ago, they are not as accurate as in industrialized nations. Although the creation of an association of pollsters that can oversee and promote good practices and share methodological information would serve Chile well, some companies in the field have achieved a level of legitimacy that renders them as central actors in the public debate and as influential voices in shaping the public agenda.

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