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Pollsters Face Scrutiny In Wake Of Uruguay’s FA-Dominated General Elections

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Voters in Uruguay’s Oct. 26 general elections put the progressive Frente Amplio (FA) on the cusp of winning control of the government for a third-consecutive time. FA presidential candidate Tabaré Vázquez finished with nearly 48% of the vote, just shy of what he needed to win the election outright (50% plus one vote) but enough to make him a heavy favorite in a runoff set to take place Nov. 30. Vázquez, a former president (2005-2010), will face Luis Lacalle Pou of the conservative Partido Nacional (PN or Blanco), who received 30.08% of the vote.

Despite the large deficit and ignoring calls by some that he step aside, Lacalle Pou is determined to see the election through to the end. "Just because 48% of the people made a mistake doesn’t mean that the other 52% will too," the PN candidate said upon announcing his decision to stay in the race. Analysts, nevertheless, say his chances are slim, even with the endorsement he received from the third-place finisher, Pedro Bordaberry of the right-wing Partido Colorado (PC), who won a disappointing 12.89% of the vote.

Polls published just ahead of the election accurately predicted the order in which the three candidates finished but overestimated the amount of support the traditional PN and PC parties, formed in 1836 at the time of a civil war, would receive. They also underestimated support for the governing FA and predicted that Lacalle Pou would beat Vázquez in the runoff by between four and six percentage points. "Pollsters showed that they don’t know how to do their job," said Juan Castillo, a union leader and FA vice president. "Or what’s even worse is that they weren’t honest. They tried to influence the electorate in accordance with the interests of the establishment."

Besides finishing first in the presidential vote, the FA also earned majorities in both branches of the legislature: it won 50 of the lower house’s 99 deputy seats and 15 of 30 seats in the Senate. A 31st seat will be held by whoever wins the vice presidency. That person will also serve as the Senate president. Overall, the FA won 14 of Uruguay’s 19 departments and fared better, compared to the last general election, in all but one of them. In 2009 it won just eight departments.

When it came to young voters (aged 18 to 30), the FA ran the tables, winning every single voter district (including rural areas that have traditionally voted Blanco) except one: Carrasco Sur, the wealthy Montevideo neighborhood where Lacalle Pou happens to have his home. Never in Uruguay’s democratic history has a governing party received such a strong Election Day endorsement, all the more noteworthy given that voter turnout was more than 90%.

Stunning defeat

For the political right, the drubbing was so thorough that the Blanco and Colorado presidential candidates played with the idea of abandoning politics altogether. Despite the strange justification he had already given for participating in the runoff, Lacalle Pou acknowledged in an Oct. 30 interview with the pro-Blanco newspaper El País that "it will be very difficult to stay in politics after suffering this bitter lesson."
The PN candidate went on to say that "the FA’s strong showing caught my attention" and, somewhat surprisingly, said that "maybe it had to do with the economic well-being of the people and the fear they have of losing some of the gains they’ve made in recent years." Among those who have seen their situations improve are rural workers, whose salaries have gone up 702% since the FA came to power in 2005.

The results were equally disorienting for the Colorados. Sen. José Amorín Batlle didn’t mince words when he told the radio station El Espectador on Oct. 30 that "everything in the party, including Bordaberry’s leadership, is being re-examined in light of the elections."

Asked what he thought about the PC senator’s comments, Bordaberry told El Espectador the next day, "Big decisions shouldn’t be made in moments of euphoria or depression, which is why I’m going to take some time and analyze the situation with a self-critical eye. We failed."

Off the mark

Regarding their own election-related failures, the heads of Uruguay’s leading polling firms had no choice but to apologize to the media outlets that hired them and to the public at large, which trusted in the validity of the surveys. What’s not clear is whether the companies also apologized, in private, to the political parties that hired them and that presumably used the information provided to redesign their respective campaigns. Various press reports suggest that Lacalle Pou, with an eye on the Nov. 30 runoff, broke the contracts he had with the companies in question.

In a Nov. 4 interview with the daily El Observador, sociologist and university professor Gustavo Leal faulted the polling firms not only for having "technical problems" but also for creating "myths" prior to the Oct. 26 elections. "There were problems with the samples taken, but there were also theoretical problems regarding how the changes occurring in Uruguay were interpreted," he said. "Some analyses associated modernity with an unexpected irruption (based on Lacalle Pou’s sudden appearance in the political scene) while in other cases the results were probably influenced by electoral preferences."

Leal went on to say, "The interpretive and theoretical frameworks used to analyze changes in Uruguayan society were based on misleading and poorly studied assessments of reality." Many in Uruguay—including politicians, press outlets, and the polling companies—are now talking about the need to better regulate the activity.

The first to accept some responsibility for the debacle was Óscar Bottinelli, director of Factum, the oldest of the polling firms. "The polls need to be regulated, along with the ways they’re managed and used publicly by the media," he said in front of the cameras of Telenoche, a television news program on which he appeared periodically in recent months as a star commentator. Bottinelli went on to say that "we’ve all made serious mistakes."

"A complicated year"

The men in charge of Equipos Mori and Cifra, the two polling firms that most twisted reality, were forced to follow suit. Equipos Mori head Ignacio Zuasnabar—preferring to describe the problems as "a few distortions" rather than "serious mistakes"—noted that the polling system also proved to be inaccurate last June when the PN held an obligatory internal vote to choose its presidential candidate. "This has been a complicated year for pollsters," he said.

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Zuasnabar went on to say that there is no reason people should doubt the moral solvency of the companies themselves. "We're having a few problems that we didn't have in the past. As such we're reviewing our work process to prevent these things from getting worse," he said. The Equipos Mori head, like his counterparts in the other major polling firms, kept the self-criticism to a bare minimum. "He protected his business," said FA Deputy Alfredo Asti.

Zuasnabar also made a point of saying that the political polling problems don't apply to commercial surveys. When it comes to consumer products, Uruguayans "don't hide their preferences the way they hide their ideas," he said.

Cifra head Luis Eduardo González admitted during an appearance on Telemundo (one of his company's clients) that "our estimates were very bad." He said his company "underestimated the FA vote and seriously overestimated the Partido Colorado vote. Therefore, for these and other reasons … I feel obliged to apologize to the viewers who joined us in the days [before the election], and I must apologize to the channel and to the channel’s news team." The Cifra director completed his dramatic television appearance by looking off into the distance and saying, "I can frankly say that this has been the biggest professional defeat of my career."

Once they had completed the round of self-criticism—which Leal dismissed as "barely a brief mea culpa"—the polling firms prudently decided to keep quiet. Radio and television comedy shows and especially social media, in the meantime, have had a field day making fun of the companies.

**Promising regulation**

The first politician to take up Bottinelli's call for regulating the polling firms was the FA's vice presidential candidate Raúl Sendic. Other FA leaders joined him in promising to use the party's legislative majorities to take action on the issue. Colorado Sen. Amorín Batlle—who submitted a regulation bill last March—sided with Sendic as well.

Leaders from all the parties agree now on the possibility of updating and perhaps grouping various already existing bills that would oblige the polling firms to publicly explain their survey methods. The overall idea is for the media outlets that hire the polling firms to facilitate public access to the pollsters' original conclusions not just the analyses done afterward.

When he first called for regulating the industry, Bottinelli spread the blame among all the polling companies and press outlets. "The polls can't be presented as a guess or a bet. They're not magic. They're earthly, part of the social sciences," he said.

Sendic, with full backing from Vázquez, was even more emphatic. "We need to have a system with more guarantees and, if it's necessary, investigate the procedures being used, because these companies influence the things society likes, consumes, and decides," the vice presidential candidate said.