

**PRESIDENT URIBE'S HIGH APPROVAL RATINGS:  
WHAT DO THESE POLLS TELL US?**

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## **The Question**

If you follow events in Colombia you have surely heard that the current president, Alvaro Uribe Vélez, enjoys unprecedented popularity. Since Uribe took office in the summer of 2002, the U.S. and Colombian media have been citing polls in which more than 70 percent of Colombians support Uribe. In December 2003, an InVamer-Gallup poll indicated that satisfaction with Uribe had hit a record high of 80 percent, making him the first Colombian president ever to receive such a positive rating during his second year in office. By May of 2005, the figures had fallen somewhat, but Uribe's approval rating was still an impressive 67 percent, according to the latest InVamer-Gallup poll.

These numbers would be the envy of many a government, but in the case of the Uribe administration they carry special significance. The poll results are treated, particularly by the U.S. media, as evidence of popular enthusiasm for Uribe's aggressive military approach to the nation's civil conflict. Are these inferences warranted? Is there really sufficient evidence to conclude that most Colombians agree with Uribe's policies vis-à-vis the conflict? This paper argues against making such a conclusion and explains why better survey research on Colombia is urgently needed.

## **The Problem and its Repercussions**

One basic concern is the quality of the data sets used in the polls under discussion. Mitchell Seligson of Vanderbilt University argues that it is a mistake to assume that polling methods in Latin America are as rigorous and scientific as those used to research public opinion in the United States and Europe. Drawing on thirty years of experience conducting and commissioning survey research in Latin America (and specifically, in

Colombia), Seligson (2004, xxi-xxii) warns that “poorly designed questionnaires,” “poor fieldwork supervision,” and “sloppy data entry” are common occurrences, and that “good quality data sets are more generally the exception than the rule” (Seligson 2005, 52). It should be noted that Seligson’s critique includes polling organizations that: a) have formal affiliations with transnational pollsters with household names; b) conduct surveys for powerful intergovernmental agencies; and c) enjoy solid reputations at home and abroad.

The problem goes beyond the collecting and compiling of data. Even in cases where the survey question is short and clear (such as the one contemplated in this paper) and even when very high professional standards are attained (an occurrence we can expect in Colombia at least part of the time), there is the question of how representative the samples are. In other words, do the polling firms talk to individuals from the various groups comprising Colombian society? A close look at polling operations in Colombia reveals that, on the contrary, the opinions of an important segment of the population are almost never asked. To understand the situation, it is helpful to have some background information.

Colombia’s three major polling organizations conduct their research in much the same way that their U.S. counterparts do. The approval ratings we hear cited so often come from a poll conducted three times a year by Invamer, a Medellín-based organization affiliated with Gallup, a U.S. transnational firm. Since the 1980s, the Invamer-Gallup poll has tracked the popularity of successive presidents, keeping the methods consistent and selling the data to subscribers. The poll consists of one thousand telephone interviews with Colombian adults. Phone numbers are selected randomly from

directories of fixed-line local subscribers in the nation's four largest cities. Call centers are computerized.

The sample for the tracking poll is structured so that 400 of the respondents are from Bogotá, 200 from Medellín, 200 from Cali, and 200 from Barranquilla. Half the respondents are male, half are female, and the representation of age groups reflects census figures. The sample is also distributed among socio-economic groups so that 19 percent of the respondents are upper-class Colombians, 32 percent are members of the middle class, and 50 percent are from the lower class.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the tracking poll, Invamer-Gallup conducts many other surveys for media organizations, politicians, and businesses. Colombia's other leading polling firms, Napoleón Franco-Ipsos and Centro Nacional de Consultoría (CNC) are similar in most respects, though Napoleón Franco regularly conducts door-to-door surveys, and CNC does so when the client requests. Efforts to reach a broader sample arise during electoral campaigns (for example, the targeting individuals who have voted in recent elections) but the main source of income for these firms is market research for the private sector. Sometimes they expand the list of surveyed cities, often to ten (adding the next six largest: Cartagena, Cúcuta, Bucaramanga, Ibagué, Pereira, and Santa Marta) and they occasionally survey residents in the "capitals" of selected rural municipalities.

Colombian law requires the authors of published political opinion surveys to submit the data they collected and methods they used to the national electoral commission (Consejo Electoral Nacional). Even though many Colombian opinion polls cover only the four main cities, the combined population of those cities is between 12 and 15 million people. That is a substantial portion of the national population, which is about

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<sup>1</sup> I am still in the process of clarifying how these categories are defined and determined.

42 million. The surveys are generally quite sophisticated, and by focusing on residents of the major metropolitan areas and on people who actually vote, they provide information useful to elected officials, and of interest to anyone following Colombian politics.

On the surface, everything might seem fine, but in reality the groups *not* being polled are of crucial significance to Colombian politics. The polls grossly underrepresent households without telephones, individuals who do not vote, and residents of rural areas. Furthermore, the people lacking a formal address or living in militarized zones are excluded completely.<sup>2</sup> In the final section of this paper an attempt is made to estimate the number of Colombians not surveyed. The aim of the present section is to highlight why unrepresentative polling is a problem, and which interests are favored by the current situation.

In fairness to survey research professionals in Colombia, however, it should first be said that a “true” survey of public opinion would be extremely difficult to accomplish in that country. It is dangerous for interviewers to knock on doors asking questions, whether in urban settlements frequented by predatory gangs, or in rural areas contested by guerrillas, paramilitaries, and Colombian and U.S. soldiers. It also requires laborious travel—on foot and by boat—to reach people living in chaotic slums, at high altitudes, or in vast tropical wilderness.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, fear and suspicion discourage participation and candor by respondents.

Nevertheless, the inescapable reality is that the Colombians *least* likely to be polled represent the parts of society *most* affected by the nation’s civil violence. That is

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<sup>2</sup> Note that these five categories may overlap considerably.

<sup>3</sup> For a vivid description of the challenges faced by a Colombian research team that conducted focus groups in lower income barrios and villages for a World Bank study, see Arboleda, Petesch, and Blackburn (2004, 34).

because the polls do not survey combat zones, indigenous territories, internally displaced persons (IDPs), agricultural laborers, coca and opium-poppy farmers, peasants of tiny plots of land, or small-scale fishers, trappers, and miners. Now, a pollster can correctly state that since electoral outcomes do not hinge on the views of this “unsurveyed segment,” their opinions are less relevant. But if we are concerned with fairness, it is disturbing that the people being overlooked are the ones with the fewest assets and the darkest skin (though this pattern is hardly unique to Colombia).

The key point—for those of us concerned about Colombia’s protracted conflict—is that the perceptions of the unsurveyed segment are acutely relevant. From this segment come not only the vast majority of the conflict’s victims, but also the armed combatants for all sides. Therefore, to discuss public opinion of Uribe’s policies *on the conflict* without consulting the groups in society *most affected by and involved in that conflict* impoverishes the discussion considerably. Do Colombians without telephones, voters who abstain, and rural residents support Uribe’s hardline policies? We do not know, because the polling organizations that ask such questions do not survey the so-called marginal sectors of society.

The pollsters may not be talking to Indians, IDPs, rural laborers, drug-crop farmers, peasants, and small-scale resource users, but other people are. And when journalists, academics, relief workers, human rights activists, missionaries, union organizers, and environmentalists write about their conversations with individuals from the unsurveyed segment, a fairly consistent set of opinions emerges:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In the large English-language literature on various aspects of the Colombian conflict, some recent examples that “give voice” to the rural poor, the displaced, indigenous Colombians, and Afro-Colombians include: Molano (2005); UNDP (2003); Human Rights Watch (2003); Kirk (2003); and Arboleda, Petesch and Blackburn (2004). Testimonials by Colombian victims of violence can be found widely on the Internet,

- They oppose the aerial spraying of herbicides.
- They do not want blockades or battlegrounds near their homes.
- They complain that the government neglects their needs, fails to protect their physical safety, and pursues policies that cause them suffering.
- They see the status quo as one that allows the powerful to use violence to appropriate resources from the poor.
- They have not experienced an improvement in their lives since Uribe took office.
- They do not presently express optimism.

Granted, the opinions cited here were not gathered systematically and the interlocutors have their respective biases. But it seems reasonable to say that the segment of the population not being surveyed is unlikely to rate Uribe as highly as do the Colombians who are surveyed. In other words, it is hard to imagine that support for the current president would register 70 or even 60 percent in a refugee camp, at a meeting of rural unionists, in a town under martial law, or on an indigenous reservation.

### **Possible Explanations for Exclusionary Polling**

Having identified the distortion implicit in U.S. media reports of Uribe's overwhelming popularity, it is worthwhile to ask whose interests are advanced by the truncated version of Colombian public opinion. The Uribe government is an obvious beneficiary of the perception that it has a sweeping mandate. The Bush administration benefits, too, because one of the charges made by critics of U.S. policy toward Colombia is that our aid dollars are being used in ways that cause damage to people and other living things in that land. What better way to undermine the charge than to convince Americans that the Colombians themselves heartily support the policies the United States is funding?

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for example at links from the sites of human rights, labor, and relief organizations based in the United States and Europe. The National Geographic has published compelling essays on Colombia in three of its recent issues: on coca farmers, on the Kogui of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, and on life in Medellín. The Catholic Church, through the Colombian National Bishop's Conference, is compiling an archive of testimony from displaced Colombians called Project Ruth. While the specific content of the comments attributed to the "unsurveyed segment" varies, a few broad themes can be discerned.

An excerpt from a June 2004 State Department report to a House subcommittee illustrates: “[The] latest polling shows his [Uribe’s] approval rating at more than 80 percent. These numbers also underscore the widespread popularity of Plan Colombia and the U.S.-Colombian partnership.”<sup>5</sup>

It makes perfect sense that the Uribe and Bush governments would take advantage of favorable polling data and disseminate it widely. Nor is it news that the Washington Post, the New York Times, and the Associated Press would print the numbers, attribute them to a “respected polling firm,” and investigate no further. It is somewhat remarkable, though, how frequently U.S. groups that are critical of U.S. Colombia policy will refer to Uribe’s high ratings in the polls.<sup>6</sup> The reports of support for Uribe’s hardline policies tend to be seen as a shift in public opinion, rather than a selective representation of it.<sup>7</sup>

Too many members of the U.S. press and public, and even some Americans that are sympathetic to the Colombia solidarity movement, are tacitly accepting the premise that polling urban Colombians living in houses with phones provides a meaningful understanding of Colombian public opinion. When Americans assume this uncritical stance, they (wittingly or not) are reproducing the exclusionary concept of Colombian-ness that has long pervaded Colombia’s middle and upper classes. Although it is not peculiar to Colombia for dominant groups to lack empathy for the struggles of lower-

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<sup>5</sup> Statement made by Roger Noriega, assistant secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, U.S. Department of State, when he testified before the Committee in Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives, June 17, 2004. <http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2004&m=June&x=2004061717801GlnesnoM0.7322351&t=livefeeds/wf-latest.html0>

<sup>6</sup> My intention is not to imply that solidarity groups and other movement actors are never critical of these polls, but rather to emphasize that the critique is infrequent and muted. In contrast, in Colombia, the polls and the nuances of each new round of data are vigorously debated, and general awareness of the polling samples’ limits seems much higher. The polls’ representativeness is sometimes questioned in op-ed columns and letters to the editor, and most of the polling professionals I spoke with identified the issue as at least a minor problem.

<sup>7</sup> A notable shift did occur, however, among urban Colombians with phones: from supporting Pastrana’s negotiation efforts to supporting Uribe’s militarization campaign.



class groups, Colombia represents an extreme case in that many people from the “right” families or parts of town fail to see some of their fellow nationals as “gente.”

A similar phenomenon is associated with the conflict itself. Though war has raged in Colombia for over half a century, during many periods the bloodshed and destruction have remained entirely peripheral to life in “good” neighborhoods. Commentators cite the absence of elite participation in the armed forces and the small share of national wealth dedicated to the war effort as evidence that Colombia’s ruling groups have not considered the establishment of security in the periphery to be a top priority.

In fact, the conflict has caused great suffering for many middle and upper-class Colombians, and is very high on the current administration’s agenda. Caveats aside, urban Colombians living in houses with phones are not the ones experiencing the brunt of the conflict. For them, security has been improving under Uribe. To the extent that the violence is not directly affecting them and given that they are wrapped up in the challenges and demands of their own lives, they may prefer not to contemplate the costs to innocent people of the policies they support. Intimately familiar with their country’s long history of violence, many Colombians might understandably suffer from “carnage fatigue,” to coin a phrase.

Various factors—political motives, material interests, psychological factors—explain the willingness of Americans and Colombians to ignore the opinions missed by the polls, but the fact remains that exclusionary representations of Colombian public opinion are counterproductive *if our goal is to find a way to end violent conflict in Colombia*. Instead of polls asserting that a strong majority supports Uribe’s belligerence, we need representative surveys that investigate the opinions of all Colombians. Since that

data is presently lacking and will remain treacherous to obtain as long as the conflict persists, for the sake of argument let us say that the unsurveyed segment of Colombia does not support Uribe's program. What portion of the Colombian population are we talking about?

### **Trying to Assess the Numbers**

Unfortunately, we lack not only opinion survey data, but also population data for this segment of Colombian society. We can start by saying that a few decades ago a majority of Colombians were rural people without telephones. A combination of violence and the modernization of agriculture and infrastructure pushed a large number of people into the cities, but many urban households still lack phones today. According to the CRT, the telecommunications agency of the Colombian government,<sup>8</sup> 54.6 percent of homes had telephone lines in 2003.<sup>9</sup> In urban areas, 31 percent of homes lack access to fixed lines and 89 percent of rural homes lack such access. The CRT reports that the use of mobile phones is rising, but the trend is for households to supplement or replace their fixed service with mobile service, not for people without traditional phone service to acquire the newer types of phones.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Comisión de Regulación de Telecomunicaciones.

<sup>9</sup> This figure does not reflect the number of *working* lines. Note that in lower income households, service is more likely to be inoperative with greater frequency and for longer periods.

<sup>10</sup> Three additional sources provide different numbers but underscore the point that many Colombians lack phones. Using statistics from DANE (Encuesta Nacional de Hogares 1995 and 1999; and Encuesta Nacional de Demografía y Salud 1995), the Colombia unit of the World Bank calculated that 84% of urban and 15% of rural Colombians had access to telephones in 1999 (See *Country Poverty Report 2002* <http://wbIn0018.worldbank.org/LAC>). The cities sampled for that data were Barranquilla, Bogota, Bucaramanga, Cali, Manizales, Medellín, and Pasto. The Encuesta Nacional de Demografía y Salud 1995, realized in collaboration with Profamilia, reported that 35.5 of households had telephones; 48.9% of urban households and 3.7% of rural households (<http://www.measuredhs.com/pubs/pdf/FR65/00%20Matter.pdf>). A 1999 IDP report (Leibovich and Núñez 1999) used data from the Encuesta de Calidad de Vida 1997 to calculate that in the urban sector, 9.78% of poor households and 46.65% of non-poor households owned telephones; while in the rural sector, 0.29% of poor households and 4.87% of non-poor households owned telephones.

By assembling commonly cited figures it is possible to give a vague sense of how many Colombians comprise the unsurveyed segment. The population of Colombia is estimated to be around 42 million. In rural areas, 85 percent of the population subsists below the poverty line. More than half of the electorate abstains from voting in presidential elections. At least ten percent of the population is living abroad. Many agencies place the number of the internally displaced at over 2.5 million. The population that UNDP 2003 refers to as the “other” Colombia (the departments of Amazonas, Arauca, Vichada, Guainia, Guaviare, Vaupés, Caquetá, Putumayo, Casanare, and Meta) was 1,866,853 in 1993. This number does not include the “other” Colombians living in acute conflict zones in departments such as Antioquia, Bolívar, Chocó, Córdoba, Magdalena, Nariño, Santander, Sucre, etc. The number of indigenous Colombians is estimated to be around 800,000. The defense ministry places the number of armed combatants at 16,580 for the FARC; 4,500 for the ELN; and 10,560 for the AUC.

Tracing these figures back to their source, one often ends up at the far-from-perfect national census that was completed in 1993. In May 2005, the Colombian government began conducting a new census of the population.<sup>11</sup> Its results should help address the information gap, but census takers face the same obstacles pollsters do: it is dangerous and difficult to survey conflict zones, squatter settlements, shantytowns, the colonization frontier, and wilderness areas. As for residents, fear and other motives may prevent people from providing information to agents of the government. Moreover,

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<sup>11</sup> In the interim period, the department of national statistics (DANE) has carried out periodic surveys of approximately 25,000 households (Encuesta Nacional de Hogares 1995 and 1999; Encuesta de Calidad de Vida 1997; and Encuesta Nacional de Demografía y Salud 1995). Departments, such as Arauca and Guaviare, were not included in some of the surveys. Other government agencies, such as the family welfare institute, have conducted separate surveys, but they use DANE data and the 1993 census to structure their samples.

political interests may mitigate against the accurate reporting of, say, the location of drug cultivators or the decimated numbers of an indigenous group.

### **Conclusion**

We are left with a very murky picture. Returning to the initial question, what do Uribe's high approval ratings tell us? Well, they provide reliable information on a key sector of Colombian society, but they say nothing about an equally important segment of the population. Until we have more systematic research on the presence and the opinions of indigenous Colombians, agricultural laborers, peasants, drug farmers, and small-scale fishers, trappers, and miners, we will not be able to properly assess the current political situation, and we will be ill equipped to identify ways to end the violence. The dearth of data on these groups will also continue to hinder development and conservation efforts.

With the escalation of the conflict in recent years, few researchers still travel around Colombia studying the plants and fauna and talking to people whose subsistence livelihoods are intertwined with the land, river, or sea. I often wonder what will be left of those ecosystems, cultures, and folkways when field research finally becomes less dangerous again. I am haunted by the words of the director of ethnic groups for the Colombian ministry of the interior, Jesús María Ramírez Cano, upon his resignation last year: "I do not want to witness the burial of the last Nukak. I do not want to add another Kogui mamó to this list of those who have been murdered."<sup>12</sup> Because the survival of certain groups and ways of life is at stake in Colombia, paying attention to the unsurveyed segment becomes nothing less than an act of bearing witness.

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<sup>12</sup> Cited in the Boston Globe, November 16, 2004. See full citation below (Lakshmanan 2004).

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