



POLLING MATTERS:

AN INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

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ESOMAR

Professional Standards Committee





*OR...WHO'S AFRAID
OF ELECTION POLLS?*

POLLING MATTERS

Importance of Polling Before Elections

Responsibilities of Pollsters

Role of Journalists

Government Action or Self-Regulation?

WHY POLLING IS IMPORTANT

POLLS ARE PART OF DEMOCRACY. THEY CAN...

- Transmit citizens' goals and desires to government and the parties so they can better represent voters
- Assess the success or failure of government and parties -- overall and on specific issues
- Overcome incorrect assumptions that could misshape policy

WHY ELECTION POLLS ARE IMPORTANT

SCIENTIFIC ELECTION POLLING HAS BECOME PART OF
DEMOCRACY – AND POLLS HAVE BECOME MORE
ACCURATE

THEY CAN...

- Represent groups in society, majority and minority
- Give information to citizens about their compatriots' preferences
- Encourage stability during election periods

CHANGING TECHNOLOGIES ARE CHANGING POLLING

- MIGRATION TO ONLINE POLLING CREATES ITS OWN PROBLEMS

 - Coverage, questions about probability, and the speed of reporting

- FALSE EXPECTATIONS OF PRECISION MAY BE MISPLACED

- THIS MAKES THE ROLE OF JOURNALISTS EVEN MORE CRITICAL

HOW POLLING IS PERCEIVED

- Citizens insulate themselves against disappointing poll results: voters tend to believe the candidate they support will win.
- Many people are more likely to believe non-polls than scientific polls.
- Polls act as a bridge between the public and the leading members of society, even in stressful situations.

POLLING IN ELECTIONS

THE CASES OF THE US AND UK:

Surprise election results

Was it the polls or the journalists?

There are no poll blackout periods in the US, but hyperactive poll reporting in the weeks before the election may have been a factor

Pre-election polls were within error margins

POLLING IN ELECTIONS

THE CASE OF HONDURAS: A close election turned into a street battle

Were poll restrictions a factor?

Honduras has one of the strictest poll reporting embargoes in the world –a 30-day blackout on poll reporting.

In 2002 Honduras reported NO poll publication embargo.

POLLING IN ELECTIONS

THE CASE OF SOUTH KOREA: Requiring government approval

A National Election Survey Deliberation Commission:
proposing a “duty to report” – intention to conduct the poll,
the questionnaire, and the findings before publication

Could these restrictions stifle polling?

WHAT ARE POLLSTERS' RESPONSIBILITIES?

OBEY THE LAWS, YES, BUT DO GOOD WORK, BE TRANSPARENT

RESPONSIBILITIES OF POLLSTERS

Polling can be difficult, even where the process is most developed:

- *Sometimes procedures can exclude important segments of the population – as in the UK in 2015*
- *Sampling theory only goes so far – there are many other possible sources of poll error*
 - Badly worded questions
 - Election rules
 - Or just the wrong people interviewing

WAPOR and ESOMAR Project: The *Freedom to Publish Election Polls*

- Five studies, beginning in 1992.
- Fourth produced in 2012, with results from 85 countries
- Prior to 2012, most represented countries were in Europe
- 2017 study truly global – with the help of WIN and GIA, 133 countries represented
- Survey participants: ESOMAR and WAPOR national representatives, supplemented by other international groups
- For the first time, South America 100% represented

CONTROLLING POLLS

- Opinions about polling can change
- Restrictions can change: some countries set limits on the kinds of questions that can be asked -- they mostly restrict questioning on leaders and on religious and ethnic divisions
- There are also pollsters who don't follow rules: under half the country representatives say that pollsters conform to codes and guidelines

VALIDATING THE POLLS: THE TUNISIAN CASE



La Presse.tn

28 MA

Tunisie: Les sondages - Ou l'art de fabriquer l'opinion publique ?

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Tagged: Gouvernance • Afrique du Nord • Tunisie

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Enquête : Les sondages politiques en Tunisie, à quoi ça sert ?

VALIDATING THE POLLS:



A LA UNE

Législatives 2014 : La revanche des instituts de sondage

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Tweet 0



Tunisie T

PÉPITES

18/02/2015

pursue institutes to publish the survey results.

The profession had gained much credibility and trust.

“...Les instituts de sondage, qui avaient annoncé la victoire dès dimanche soir d’Essebsi, ne sont donc par trompés...”

WHAT DO POLLSTERS NEED TO PUBLISH TO BE TRANSPARENT?

- Methods used
- Questions asked
- Weighting standards – variables, base data to weight against
- ...while protecting privacy of respondents and client contracts

ESOMAR and WAPOR have Codes of Ethics

English copies of the ICC/ESOMAR Code are available here today

It is also available in Spanish at esomar.org

There are also Guidelines on public opinion polls, mobile research, research with children, online research ... And more

A Professional Standards Committee deals with complaints made against members

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF JOURNALISTS?

PROMOTING POLLS EVEN WHEN THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND THEM

ISSUES IN POLL REPORTING...

- Journalists need to ask the right questions about polls, not just report numbers and criticisms
- Polls are not just “a good story,” that can be forgotten about the next day
- The U.S. pollsters in 2016 **SHOULD** have done a more complete job of interpretation, **BUT** journalists may have been too believing of the precision of numbers
- Poll aggregators created their own estimates of who would win: high probabilities of a Clinton victory were at odds with what her 3-point national poll lead really meant

WHAT SHOULD JOURNALISTS ASK – AND POLLSTERS ANSWER?

The ESOMAR/WAPOR Guide includes the following (partial list):

- ✓ Who conducted the poll?
- ✓ Who PAID for the poll?
- ✓ What was the sample? Is it representative?
- ✓ How many interviews?
- ✓ How were respondents chosen?
- ✓ How and when were they polled?
- ✓ What questions were asked?

POLLING LIMITS: WHY GOOD JOURNALISM MATTERS

- Often, the expectations of journalists (and politicians) exceed the capabilities of even the best of polls
- Too much focus on predictions – even though most pollsters recognize that polls are not predictions.
- And too much forgetfulness that polls are estimates.
- Understanding the limits of polls is part of good writing.
- The [ESOMAR/WAPOR/AAPOR International Course for Journalists](#) free at Poynter.org. Flyers are available.

TRAINING JOURNALISTS

THE *ESOMAR/WAPOR/AAPOR ONLINE COURSE FOR JOURNALISTS*

- Hosted by the Poynter Organization
- About 3-4 hours
- Taken at reporter's own pace
- Recognizes that poll issues varies from country to country
- Right now, only in English, but there are plans to translate into other languages, with Spanish the first.

WHERE POLLS, JOURNALISM AND GOVERNMENT INTERACT

The ESOMAR/WAPOR Studies of Freedom to Publish



**WHAT WE LEARNED IS THAT – AS
BEFORE – ABOUT HALF THE
COUNTRIES HAVE GOVERNMENT
IMPOSED PRE-ELECTION POLL
EMBARGOES/BLACKOUT PERIODS
THERE IS AS MUCH EXPECTATION FOR
INCREASE AS DECREASE IN THOSE
EMBARGOES**

IN THE FIVE STUDIES...

- DESPITE GROWTH IN NUMBER OF COUNTRIES COVERED, LITTLE CHANGE
- IN EACH YEAR, ABOUT HALF THE COUNTRIES REPORT A PRE-ELECTION PUBLICATION EMBARGO
- IN 2017, 73 COUNTRIES (56%) REPORTED A PRE-ELECTION EMBARGO
 - *In Europe, most three days or less*
 - *In Latin America, most more than seven days*
 - *Uruguay has one of the shorter poll reporting blackout periods (more similar to Europe than other Latin American countries)*

IN THE FIVE STUDIES...

■ CONSISTENCY:

- NOT ONLY IS THE SHARE OF COUNTRIES WITH EMBARGOES THE SAME IN EACH YEAR, SO IS THE TYPICAL LENGTH
- IN ONE IN FOUR COUNTRIES IN EACH STUDY, THE EMBARGO WAS LONGER THAN FIVE DAYS BEFORE AN ELECTION
- IN EVERY STUDY (SAVE ONE) THERE WERE ABOUT AS MANY COUNTRIES REPORTING RULES BECOMING MORE RESTRICTIVE THAN LESS RESTRICTIVE ONES
- IN EVERY STUDY, MAJOR CONCERNS WERE EXPRESSED ABOUT THE QUALITY OF REPORTING ON POLLS

POLLSTERS AND JOURNALISTS

RATE THE QUALITY OF

	<i>POLL METHODS</i>		<i>POLL REPORTING</i>	
<i>VERY HIGH</i>	21.7%		3.3%	
<i>SOMEWHAT HIGH</i>	44.2	66%	19.8	22%
<i>IN BEWEEN</i>	23.3		28.9	
<i>SOMEWHAT LOW</i>	9.2	11%	31.4	48%
<i>VERY LOW</i>	1.7		16.5	

IN SOUTH AMERICA

- 70% of countries report that their polling is of high quality
- Just 27% say that poll reporting is.
- In Central America, polls are viewed as of lower quality; so is the reporting

POLLING IS MOST REGULATED IN LATIN AMERICA

Nearly every country restricts poll reporting before elections

Central America has especially long embargoes: the median length is more than two weeks, the shortest three days in Nicaragua

In South America, the median blackout period length is seven days. Uruguay and Argentina have shorter periods (similar to embargoes of 1-3 days in European countries).

OTHER LATIN AMERICAN RESULTS

- There is more pessimism than optimism when it comes to extensions of blackout periods –the only part of the world.
- More government regulation than simply blackout periods: half of Central America, more than a third of South America say there is a government body controlling the conduct of election polls. In the rest of the world, fewer than one in five countries report this
- Less use of professional associations: Only 18% of countries in Latin America report having a professional association which addresses complaints about polls. 25% in the rest of the world say this

OTHER LATIN AMERICA RESULTS

- GOOD NEWS ABOUT EXIT POLLING? SOUTH AMERICAN COUNTRIES ARE LESS RESTRICTIVE IN CONDUCTING EXIT POLLS
- CENTRAL AMERICA APPEARS MORE SUBJECT TO GOVERNMENT CONTROL THAN SOUTH AMERICA: TWICE AS LIKELY TO SAY NEW GOVERNMENT REGULATIONS IMPACT POLLING

DOES GOVERNMENT REGULATION MEAN BETTER POLLING?

- NOT NECESSARILY!
- OUR STUDY: IN MORE THAN THREE TIMES AS MANY COUNTRIES WITHOUT BLACKOUT PERIODS INFORMANTS SAID THE QUALITY OF POLL METHODS WERE “VERY HIGH” THAN SAID THAT IN COUNTRIES WITH BLACKOUTS
- AND GOVERNMENT REGULATION DOES LITTLE TO INSURE THAT POLLS ARE REPORTED PROPERLY

THE ROLE OF ASSOCIATIONS

- Freedom to Publish study shows role of self-regulation by associations in countries
- When publication of methods is required, it is done by associations more than by governments
- Associations focus on transparency – making pollsters publish relevant information. They self-regulate.
- They promote standards in poll reporting; levy criticism at those who refuse
 - *U.S.: The Transparency Initiative*
 - *France: Commission des Sondages*

PUBLICATION OF INFORMATION/DATA

LATIN AMERICA CAN DO SO MUCH BETTER

- In only three South American countries is methodological information reported as easily available.
- In only one Central American country is this the case
- There are no countries that report having data centers making poll data generally accessible for additional analysis

US: TRANSPARENCY INITIATIVE

- Created by AAPOR in 2014
- More than 80 members, including Gallup and media pollsters
- Provides a standard for measuring the openness of pollsters
- Does NOT judge methodology, merely the willingness of polling organization to disclose it
- Does not require providing information on polls conducted before joining the initiative

FRANCE: COMMISSION DES SONDAGES

- Established by law
- Eleven-person membership
- Two “experts,” neither of which can have been working in the field for the last three years.
- Unlike self-regulation, this is regulation by lawyers
- The punishments tend to be public criticism.

CONCLUSIONS

WHAT TO DO NOW



THE CONCLUSIONS

- There is a very high value of polls in democratic systems:
 - They are more than just the numbers
 - They provide guidance about the public's needs and desires
 - They also give information to the public
- **BUT...**

Polls need to meet international standards and have the public's trust

THE CONCLUSIONS

- Governments continue to want to be involved in controlling polling, and in many places, they can be
- This is an industry that is capable of regulating itself, but it takes the willingness of all parties to do so
- What matters: good practice, transparency and training.
- Probably all are necessary to avoid regulation

**SELF-REGULATION IS DIFFICULT
BUT SELF-REGULATION IS SO MUCH
BETTER THAN GOVERNMENT
REGULATION!**



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