Chapter 37

Electoral Polling and Reporting in Africa:
Professional and Policy Implications for Media Practice and Political Communication in a Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Opinion polling during elections plays a pivotal role in influencing the political and media agenda, and can potentially affect voting behaviour. However, evidence from various countries indicates that electoral polls have been characterised by contradictions and contentious debates which undermine their usefulness in democratic processes. The digital age has also led to a mushrooming of online polls, but some of them are of dubious quality. Thus, the chapter questions the continued use of electoral polls in multiparty politics in Africa. It argues that as a result of the inherent political and electoral volatility in many African countries, the utility of opinion polls need to be reconsidered. The paper recommends strategies for addressing the identified pitfalls, including increased professionalization of opinion polling, voter education on the limitations of pre-election polls and stronger appreciation of data journalism for media professionals. Stricter regulations, such as the embargo of election opinion polling may also be considered in different contexts.

INTRODUCTION

For over 80 years, opinion polling has been a major element of democratic polity and a source of data and information across the world. Polls are a permanent feature of democratic processes and are essential to policy making and public engagement on social issues globally (Esomar & Wapor, 2014; Lewis, 2001). As a component of survey research, opinion polls help to describe, understand, explain, analyse and predict the perceptions and behaviour of a population or its sample (Fayoyin & Ngwainmbi, 2015; Kou & Sobel, 2004).

Particularly, surveys conducted during elections in various countries are central to modern-day democratic practices and electoral strategy. According to Makulilo (2013) such polls are important for projecting voter intentions while to Ndati, Wambua, and Mogambi (2014) they help to measure the support of political parties and public perceptions on different issues. As Hillygus (2011, p. 965) argues, electoral surveys have three main uses in multiparty politics: to forecast the outcome of an election, to understand voter behaviour and to inform campaign strategies. Other writers have also highlighted the value of political polls in promoting political debates and public education (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2005; Patterson, 2005; Wright, Farrar, & Russell, 2013). Besides, polls can assist in expanding the political space of political elites (Ramshaw, 2014) and in some places serve as indications of the trajectory of future election (Wlezien, Jennings, Fisher, Ford, & Pickup, 2013). Also depending on the context, polls results can serve as a predictor of future electoral success (Zerback, Reinemann, & Nienierza, 2015).

Nevertheless, they are subject to varied controversies and contradictions. Holtz-Bacha (2012) opines that pre-election opinion polls have been misused in many countries and embroiled in public controversies. Among others, Jacobs and Shapiro (2005) and Makulilo (2013) have found that many pre-election surveys have failed in different countries, causing undesirable and contentious arguments among media, academia, politicians, and opinion leaders. From multiple case studies in sub Saharan Africa, Ramshaw (2014) concluded that election polls have accentuated acrimonious political temperaments and negatively impacted national political processes and outcomes. Additionally, the issue of reliability of elections polls has historically been raised in public opinion research. Dionne and Mann (2003) hypothesize that the odds that opinion polls about polls would end in unfavourable view of the pollster and their work is quite high. Overall, the failure of electoral polls in many countries has increased the army of sceptics on their use in our present-day political context (Holtz-Bacha, 2012).

Against this backdrop, the chapter examines the strengths and weaknesses of electoral polls in Africa and questions their continued use in multiparty elections. While recognizing that the culture of public opinion measurement is generally weak on the continent, (Church & Onyebuchi, 2012; Ramshaw, 2014), it establishes that political polls have become a major fixture of contemporary electoral dynamics. Thus, the chapter questions whether African countries should continue to utilise opinion polling as part of multiparty politics, despite its well-known failures. It argues that as a result of the inherent political and electoral volatility, African countries cannot afford the luxury of opinion polls which reinforce political cleavages and tribal politics endemic in some of the countries. The digital age, characterised by globalisation and democratisation of information has potentials for enhancing multiparty democracy and citizenship engagement. Yet, the Internet and social media platforms can be used for political disinformation and misinformation (Jessen, 2008; Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook, 2012). Therefore, the chapter calls for measures to enhance the adherence of actors in the electoral polling business to ethical standards of public opinion research. It also proposes stricter regulation, including an embargo on pre-election surveys.

The chapter is organised into five main segments. First, a short introduction on the role of election surveys in different political contexts is outlined. Second, as a conceptual orientation, the chapter presents an overview of the literature on the function and dysfunction of political polling from a global perspective. This section also highlights important issues concerning the digital age and electoral polling. Third, brief case studies from four African countries – Malawi, Kenya, Nigeria, and Egypt - are presented to illuminate the performance of opinion polls on contemporary multiparty democracy. Fourth, it discusses key issues and their implications in media and political settings. Fifth, and finally, the chapter outlines specific recommendations to address the identified pitfalls. Future areas of research are also proposed.

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