

From the Field

Opinion in the Mix

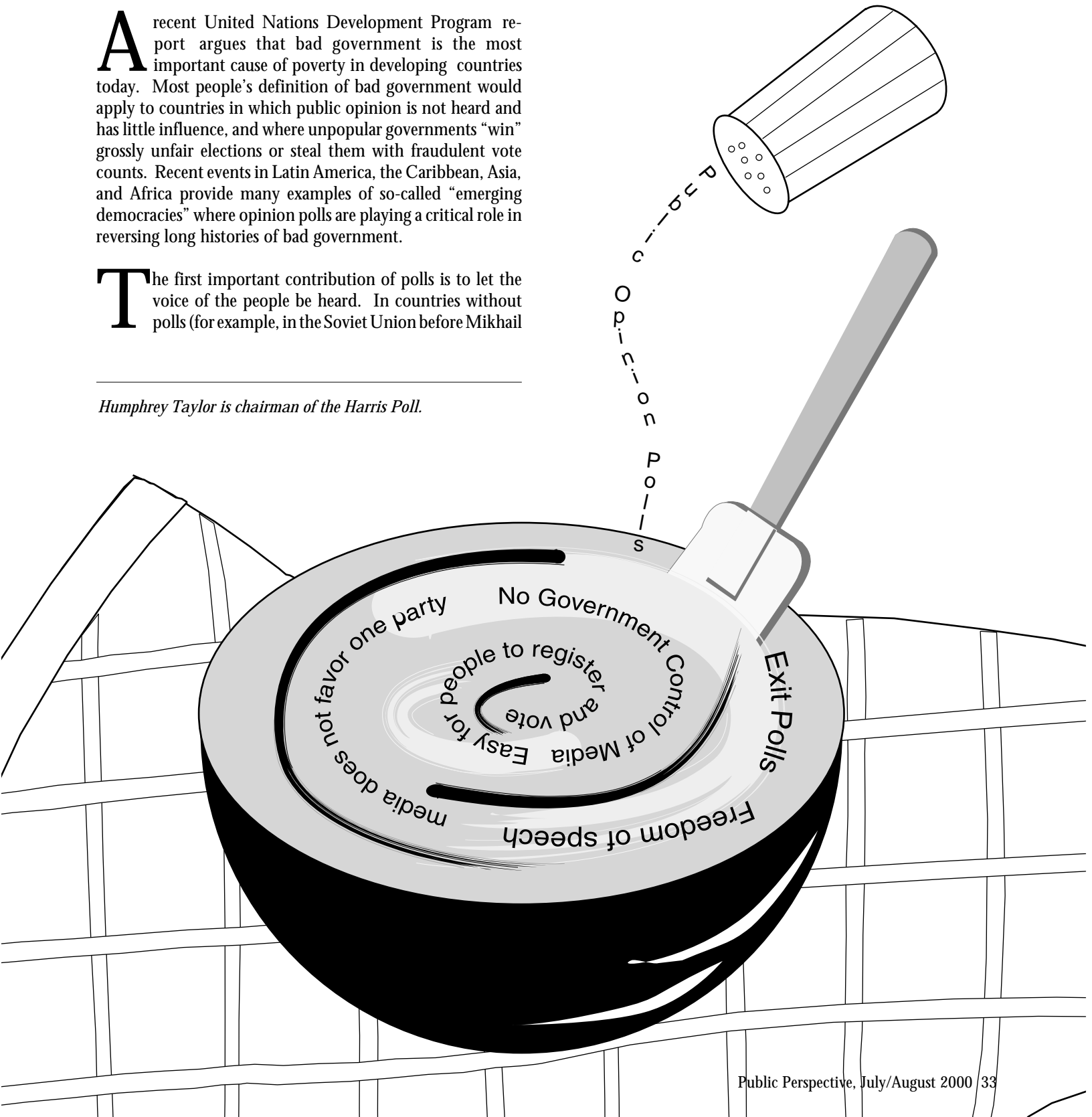
Polling, good government, and democracy

By Humphrey Taylor

A recent United Nations Development Program report argues that bad government is the most important cause of poverty in developing countries today. Most people's definition of bad government would apply to countries in which public opinion is not heard and has little influence, and where unpopular governments "win" grossly unfair elections or steal them with fraudulent vote counts. Recent events in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa provide many examples of so-called "emerging democracies" where opinion polls are playing a critical role in reversing long histories of bad government.

The first important contribution of polls is to let the voice of the people be heard. In countries without polls (for example, in the Soviet Union before Mikhail

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Gorbachev, or in China or North Korea today or in Haiti until recently) there is really no way to know what the public thinks, feels or believes about the government or about the issues and problems the government might address.

Opinion polls, while by no means infallible, are the only reasonably reliable way to measure public opinion. Only through the publication of polls can a society ensure that leaders and decision-makers in government and the private sector know and understand what the public thinks.

While governments and other leaders may or may not be assisted to make better decisions by the availability of poll data, it is reasonable to suppose that their having a good knowledge and understanding of public opinion is better for democracy than their not having it. Good information is better than misinformation.

Research has shown that most people—including most political and business leaders—tend to discuss political and public policy issues with people who have opinions similar to their own. In the United States, for example, Republicans talk more often to Republicans, and Democrats talk more often to Democrats. In the absence of polls, therefore, it is normal for most people, and most leaders, to be misinformed about public opinion and to believe that more people share their opinions than actually do. During last year's impeachment process, for instance, many people in the minority who wanted to impeach President Clinton and remove him from office could not believe they were a minority.

The media's publication of polls in countries where democracy is at risk also often encourages the representatives of disadvantaged groups, of groups opposed to the government, and of groups without easy media access to speak up for their interests. Polls therefore serve to balance the loud voices of special interests. Without polls, it is much easier for rich, powerful, and influential minorities to claim they speak for the majority when they do not.

The second major contribution of polls in new and emerging democracies is that they make it much harder for governments to steal elections. In dictatorships, whether communist, fascist, or military, dictators or their "parties" frequently claim to have won almost 100% of the vote, and there is no way to determine how people actually voted. In many newly democratic nations it is all too common for presidents and parties who were initially elected freely to prevent free elections from removing them from office. President Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines and President "Papa Doc" Duvalier originally came to power in more or less free elections, as did many of the post-colonial leaders in Africa. From then on, however, they stayed in power by ensuring that—however unpopular they were—the official

election results, which of course they controlled, showed them victorious.

In the Mexican presidential election of 1988 most people believed that Cuatemoc Cardenas defeated Carlos Salinas, and that the official vote was fraudulent. With no reliable pre-election polls and no exit polls, there was little evidence to support a challenge to the official results.

Contrast this with the 1986 election of President Corazon Aquino in the Philippines, where an independent exit poll showing Aquino to be the clear winner made it impossible for President Marcos to publish fraudulent election results and claim he had won. Nobody would have believed him.

Many things are important to ensure free and fair elections. To the best of my knowledge no country fully meets all of the criteria—not the United States, where the system gives the people, companies, unions, and lobbying groups funding the political machinery too much power; not Britain, where the overwhelming weight of the widely read national newspapers is almost always thrown behind the Conservative Party; not most new democracies where, historically, the main radio and television channels are more favorable toward their governments than the opposition parties; and not France, Mexico or many other countries where elected officials have often used government resources to support their political campaigns.

However, in many countries elections are *relatively* fair and free. It is a matter of degree. In some countries all or most of the following conditions are met:

- There is freedom of speech and freedom to run political campaigns without fear of harassment or intimidation;
- There is freedom of the press, including print and broadcast media;
- Opposition candidates and parties have reasonable access to the media, so their campaigns can be heard;
- The government does not control, dominate, or have unfair access to the media;
- The media are not overwhelmingly in favor of, or against, one candidate or party;
- The constitution assures elections must be held within some period of time;
- It is easy for people to register and cast their votes; and
- The votes are counted honestly and accurately.

Because it is unlikely all of these eight criteria will be fully met, we need to add a ninth: that there be reliable, independent pre-election polls and exit polls.

While polls are critically important in “emerging democracies” to prevent governmental abuse of power, they are also vital to the strongest and oldest democracies. Even there, governments have sometimes tried to manipulate or corrupt the opinion polls.

In the February/March 1998 issue of *Public Perspective*, I wrote about the attempts of governments and politicians in the United States, France, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, the Philippines, and Ecuador to prevent the publication of poll results they did not like, and in some cases to pay for phony poll numbers. More recently, there have been other reports of such attempts. In Russia, for instance, it was, apparently, almost impossible for the media to publish polls showing how unpopular Boris Yeltsin had become at the end of his presidency without fear of government reprisals.

In my 1998 article I also mentioned how, in 1994, Frank Luntz persuaded the American media to run stories stating that his polls found 60% of the public in support of every element of the Republicans’ Contract with America. As is well-known among pollsters, it eventually emerged that there were no such polls, and Luntz was formally censured by the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)—a sanction which has apparently had no impact on the use of his services by political candidates.

If these instances of attempted manipulation of opinion polls present the bleak side of the picture, they also serve to illustrate the importance of polling in a democratic society. Further, there is plenty of good news about the positive impact of polls in strengthening democracy.

Already this year, in the presidential election in Senegal, long-time President Abdou Diouf was shown by all of the several published pre-election polls to be trailing the eventual winner, President Abdoulaye Wade. It has been argued that Diouf might well have stolen this election—as many people believe he had in previous elections—had there been no opinion polls.

Peru and Venezuela provide two other important examples of countries where polls revealed serious challenges to authoritarian, if not dictatorial, presidents. Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori and the Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez were given a run for their money by opponents who might otherwise have looked like no-hope candidates. Without the pre-election and exit polls in Peru, it is highly likely Fujimori would have been declared the winner after the first round of voting. And the importance of polling to the Peruvian

democratic process was only confirmed by the uncertainty surrounding Fujimori’s victory in the subsequent runoff election, for which there were no exit polls.

For these reasons, the full and free right to conduct opinion surveys and publish the results—regardless of whether these annoy, embarrass or irritate the political and business establishment—are one important measure of democracy. Nevertheless, some thirty countries which call themselves democracies have banned the publication of election surveys for a week or more prior to elections, on the grounds that they have a malign influence on voting behavior. These laws have been triggered by politicians’ dislike of (some) poll results and their mistaken belief in a mindless bandwagon effect, not by any serious review of the real effects of polls.

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The arguments against banning the publication of opinion polls include:

- Bans violate the freedom of the press (and are therefore unconstitutional in the United States and other countries where the press enjoys constitutional or legal protection).
- Bans prevent the public from having access to the best (albeit imperfect) information about public opinion, without inhibiting the freedom of governments, politicians and the media to provide dishonest and misleading reports of public opinion.
- Bans make it much easier for corrupt and dictatorial governments to steal elections and sustain unpopular policies.

Unfortunately, the role of opinion polls in promoting democracy and more honest elections is neither widely perceived nor accepted. There are plenty of sincere critics of the polls and of politicians who, it is argued, “pander to the polls.” For example, Arianna Huffington in her new book, *How to Overthrow the Government*, attacks the polls and urges her readers to “say no to pollsters” by hanging up on them.

George Meany, the legendary union leader and former plumber, once asked an audience of lawyers to consider whether they would prefer life in “a city without plumbers or a city without lawyers.” A no-brainer! At first blush a city, or a country, without pollsters and polls may sound quite appealing. But wait a minute. Consider the evidence:

- If public opinion polls are dangerous to democracy, why do dictators prevent the publication of polls in their countries?
- If the publication of free, independent, reliable polls is a problem, why do so many governments try, often successfully, to so intimidate the press, and the pollsters, that they are afraid to publish them?
- If large numbers of people with a particular point of view (Ms. Huffington’s, perhaps) were to follow her advice, their opinions would be underrepresented in the polls. Is that what they want?

Many people have argued that politicians pander to the polls. But, with or without polls, politicians have always paid close attention to public opinion. Some of the greatest presidents, from Lincoln to FDR, most certainly did. The silver-tongued populist Cleon pandered to Athenian public opinion in the age of Pericles, 2,400 years before the first polls. But without polls, the chances that political leaders would misread public opinion is much greater.

To argue in favor of the publication of the most accurate and independent measures of public opinion is not to suggest that the public is always right, or that politicians should bow to public opinion to get elected. Public opinion data, like news or science, is essentially value-

neutral. As a pollster, I often disagree with the views of the majority in Harris Polls, but we publish them anyway.

Of course, Ms. Huffington is right to deplore the misuse of polls by some politicians and their consultants. President Clinton’s decision, based allegedly on a poll commissioned by Dick Morris, to lie to the nation, his cabinet and his wife about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky was indefensible. But do we believe he would have made the right decision, to tell the truth, had there been no poll? Furthermore, Morris’ advice suggests a naiveté as to how to design and analyze such a poll. It is doubtful Clinton would have been impeached had he ignored Morris’s advice and told the truth.

Those who, like Ms. Huffington, attack the polls are, whether they realize it or not, arguing against the influence of public opinion. Perhaps they believe we should go back to a restricted franchise when only those citizens who were “qualified” to vote were allowed to do so.

Without public opinion polls, the deep pockets which finance, influence and corrupt our politicians and our government would have more, not less, power. The polls are often a strong counterbalance to the loud voices of the special interests whose political goals are quite different from those of the general public. Public opinion would sometimes not be heard if there were no polls.

As former British Prime Minister James Callaghan once wrote, “If you cannot trust the public with polls, you should not trust them with the vote.” Knowledge of public opinion, whether well-used or misused, is far better than ignorance, and those who attack, censor, corrupt or intimidate the polls are the enemies of democracy. 