



Association Mondiale de Recherches sur l'Opinion Publique

# NEWSLETTER

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## A Message From the President

# WAPOR's 50TH ANNIVERSARY



Maxwell McCombs

WAPOR passes a major milestone this year. This is our 50th anniversary, an occasion to look back and reflect upon the history of our organization and upon the international history of public opinion polling. To organize this look at the past and its implications for the future, I have made two important appointments to the WAPOR Council. Marta Lagos will chair the WAPOR 50th Anniversary Celebration Committee, and Helen Crossley will serve as WAPOR's Official Historian. I am especially pleased that these two long-time, dedicated members will guide our celebratory activities (see article on page 15).

There is much to celebrate. Today WAPOR is a far larger organization than it was upon its founding in 1947, far larger both in the number of members and, most importantly, far larger in the geographic distribution of those members across the world. Our growth as an organization is well-reflected in the quality of our journal,

the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, and in the continuing program of regional seminars and conferences that complement the annual meetings. In the remaining months of this year alone, additional meetings will be held in Mexico, Spain, Israel, and the United States.

Since the founding of WAPOR, the field of public opinion research also has changed. In the year of our founding, the field was only a year away from a benchmark debacle in the 1948 US presidential election and a subsequent key shift in sampling methodology. The sophistication of both methodology and substantive theory about public opinion has continued its significant growth over the past half century. And so has the proliferation of polling in virtually every setting, in US presidential elections, in social research on numerous non-political topics, in news reporting on major social issues, and most especially from WAPOR's perspective, in more and more countries on every continent. This international growth in public opinion polling is the frontier for WAPOR to cultivate in its second half century of service.

Although much has changed since 1947, much also has endured. At the time of our founding, a book that has influenced me and many others, Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion*, already had been in print for 25 years. It remains an enduring classic even after 75 years. *Public Opinion* and a select list of other books are the foundations of a durable and expanding field of research that is inextricably linked with representative democracy in all its political and social settings.

It is a time to celebrate both the enduring and the evolving values of WAPOR. 🌐

—Maxwell McCombs

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Focus on India

## Poll-Eve Public Opinion Surveys: The Indian Scene

by Dr. N. Bhaskara Rao

*Dr. Bhaskara Rao is founding Chairman of two leading research agencies, Centre for Media Studies (CMS) and Marketing and Development Research Associates (MDRA) and a pioneer in opinion research with three decades of distinguished background and experience.*

Thirty years ago I wrote in my book, *Politics of Leadership in an Indian State*, about how public opinion sets the base for leadership and molds that very process. My concern then—as a sociologist—was with *perceptions* and *group dynamics*. It was a couple of years later that I turned to *survey research methodology* to enlarge the scope of such inquiries into *preferences* and *practices*—as a political analyst. Until the mid 1960s, the concern of such surveys in the national context was limited mostly to four metropolitan areas by the doyen of public opinion surveys in India, Eric da Costa. It was on my return from the United States 25 years ago with a Ph.D. in communication research that I implemented a national level of public opinion surveys using country-wide field infrastructure developed by a premier market research agency. Soon after, opinion surveys on public affairs became a focus of market research firms.

Pre-poll surveys became a serious activity. The credit for elevating the status of pre-poll surveys belongs to the late Girilal Jain of *Times of India*, Arun Puri of *India Today*, and Ramoji Rao of *Eenadu*. I had the privilege of discussing surveys and sampling with each of these eminent editors of India two decades ago and of convincing them of the relevance and objectivity of pre-poll surveys. It is these very publications that have sustained public opinion surveys in India over the years. More recently, since 1994 state-owned *Doordarshan* has been a leader in featuring the findings of pre-poll surveys.

Opinion polls, in the context of national elections, are perceived as indicators of not just the dimension of victory or defeat, but also the attributes for differences and margins at micro- and macro-levels. Generally speaking, such an exercise reflects at best the trend, mood, and direction at any given point in time. Of course, by using past voting trends from previous elections, one can go much further. Opinion polls are not always sponsored by media with wide scope, although they would certainly be more relevant. Such *rolling polls* are not always feasible for newspapers to sponsor because of the resource constraints involved. *India Today* is perhaps an exception. Opinion polls sponsored

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Writing in *India Today* and *A&M* more than 15 years ago, I called for a code of conduct for pollsters, as well as for newspapers publishing poll results, to minimize the possibility of polls misleading voters and contaminating the

election scene. In fact, I have even suggested that the Election Commission should take the initiative to develop a common code for pre-poll surveys so that political parties do not resort to using them as part of their campaigns. Overall, unease

with the quality of poll-eve surveys in India can be attributed to the use of inappropriate or inadequate methodologies in all phases of the surveys, including setting sample size, questionnaire design, interviewing practices, weighting,

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Dr Rao's ↑





## Poll-Eve Public Opinion Surveys —continued from previous page

*"The recent performance of poll surveys by different agencies showed that a market research background alone is not enough to guarantee reliable and insightful poll surveys. The analytical skills needed for such surveys have to be interdisciplinary and more dynamic in light of the constantly changing political scene in the country and in poll practices."*

analysis, and, of course, reporting outcomes by both the research agencies and the media.

While the approach to sampling has, of late, become more systematic and more or less uniform among agencies, the actual selection practices vary considerably and include street corners, voter lists, different physical settings, and broad economic-criteria-based classifications. Street corner interviews, of course, cannot be expected to possess the same attributes and degree of reliability as interviews which are conducted at the household level. Opinion polls often suffer on account of unexpected developments once the electoral process starts, such as the death of a political leader (as in the case of the late Shri Rajiv Gandhi). Extended and rescheduled poll dates can also have a significant impact, as happened in the case of Orissa. I also remember when a poll survey went haywire with boycott of essential supplies under PDS to many areas just prior to the poll dates for a state assembly. Fragmentation (or otherwise) of political parties between any two elections, frequently changing alliances between parties (formal and informal), and the role of independent candidates, and even delimitation of constituencies are other factors which contribute to the accuracy level of opinion polls conducted on the eve of state and national elections in India.

**Interdisciplinary approach.** The recent round of poll surveys brings home the idea that small sample surveys can be good indicators of poll outcomes even in the Indian situation. For the second time in a row, independent CMS, with a sample of approximately 3,000 voters, was able to forecast accurate results better than the surveys with three- to five-times bigger sample sizes. Furthermore, an analysis of such polls conducted during recent years showed that market-research-based and commercially-oriented polls which tend to have larger samples, implying larger volumes of business, do not necessarily have more accurate results. Hence the relevance of an alliance with psephologists (those who study political elections), who have emerged recently with more reliable and promptly-available data on past elections and their outcomes. Also, the recent performance of poll surveys by different agencies showed that a market research background alone is not enough to guarantee reliable and insightful poll surveys. The analytical skills needed for such surveys have to be interdisciplinary and more dynamic in light of the constantly changing political scene in the country and in poll practices.

**Techniques of investigation.** The gap between the field work day and the actual voting day also determines accuracy of the final results. The shorter the process of field work, analysis, and publication, the more relevant the results will

be. Also, when surveys are conducted in various parts of the country, the questions may carry different connotations in the various local languages and dialects. This is a problem that is, to a large extent, peculiar to India. The manner in which the questions are posed by investigators, therefore, is important.

**Newspaper-specific aspects.** The interaction of the person analyzing the field data with field investigators can prove to be a major advantage. If the analyst, himself, is involved in the field work, it greatly enhances the reliability and accuracy of the analysis and avoids mistakes like ignoring the significance of no response or other such responses that occur quite often.

Poll results published with a clear byline for the research reflect a higher degree of confidence in the survey. This practice also ensures greater responsibility by both the publication and the researcher and helps achieve improvement in subsequent efforts.

In the Indian context, predicting the results of elections precisely can only be a coincidence. Like the contents of a boiling pot, election-time dynamics change continuously until the actual poll hours, unlike in more politically stable countries such as the United Kingdom or the United States. But opinion polls in India are not futile if they can identify the trend, the mood, and the direction of the outcome accurately—as is true in all countries. ☐