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# Who's Afraid of Election Polls?

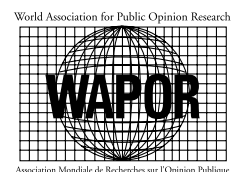
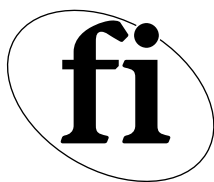
Normative and Empirical Arguments for  
the Freedom of Pre-Election Surveys

The Foundation for Information is an independent organisation registered in Amsterdam. It was formed in 1996 by ESOMAR. The Foundation operates on a worldwide scale. It takes action to protect the rights of individuals and commercial enterprises to obtain and make use of information without any unfair or unnecessary restrictions.

ESOMAR's mission is to promote the use of opinion and market research for improving decision making in business and society worldwide. Founded in 1948, ESOMAR unites 4000 members in 100 countries, both users and providers of opinion and marketing research. ESOMAR stands for the highest possible standards – both professionally and technically. The ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice has been adopted by all ESOMAR members, by the International Chamber of Commerce and by over 97 national and international market and opinion research associations world-wide.

Founded in 1947, the World Association for Public Opinion Research – WAPOR aims to further the use of scientific survey research in national and international affairs. WAPOR is officially recognised as a member of the International Social Science Council (ISSC) and thus supported by UNESCO. There are over 500 members in more than 60 countries.

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# Who's Afraid of Election Polls?

Normative and Empirical Arguments for  
the Freedom of Pre-Election Surveys

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\* This text is based on a statement by the author to the Austrian  
Parliament on behalf of ESOMAR, February 2001

## INTRODUCTION

*“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”*

*Article 19, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.*

Despite the fundamental right expressed in this article, debates are held at regular intervals about the collection, analysis and dissemination of information with respect to voting behaviour. In a number of cases, these discussions tend to focus on the possible presumed negative effects of opinion polls on the outcome of elections and as a consequence, attempts are made to introduce bans or tighter restrictions on the conduct or publication of opinion polls. But what about the real effects? What are the arguments for the freedom of pre-election polling?

In this publication, Professor Wolfgang Donsbach provides a state-of-the-art evaluation of pre-election surveys. This thorough analysis helps to clarify what influence polls might have upon the voting process and summarises the empirical findings regarding possible influences.

Safeguarding the right to conduct and publish the results of public opinion polls is a key attention area for the ‘Foundation for Information’. The study of Professor Donsbach, in our view, serves the purpose to create a better understanding of the need for freedom to conduct opinion and market research.

We trust that the report will also contribute to the promotion of pre-election surveys in accordance with the highest professionally accepted standards of quality and performance as specified in the Guide to Opinion Polls published by ESOMAR and WAPOR.

**Dr. George Vassiliou**

*Chairman, The Foundation for Information*

## **FOREWORD FROM ESOMAR**

Since the inception of polling, various hypotheses and theories have been put forward regarding the possible effects that published election polls may have on voting and voter behaviour.

The most well-known the 'Bandwagon Effect' suggests that the published results of polls encourage the (undecided) voter to vote for the party leading the polls.

Other theories postulate the opposite; that voters may be influenced towards 'facilitating' or 'preventative' tactical voting; or that poll results lead to 'defeatist' or apathetic voting behaviour.

Because of the importance of the outcome of elections and the value of true democracy, heated controversy rages about who benefits from publication of poll results – the stronger, the weaker, other parties? There are also sometimes legal arguments, some of which are spurious, for and against the publication of polls, as well as those based on the inherent theory of democracy.

However, what about empirical evidence? Should policy makers, political parties, the press be afraid of election polls? Or can the, often and unfounded, antagonistic debates be qualified as 'much ado about nothing'?

In its role as one of the guardians of free speech the Foundation for Information monitors the rights to collect, process, use and publish information obtained in accordance with professionally accepted standards. A key part of this duty is to publish material that will continue to advance the cause of legitimate data collection in all its forms and the right of individuals and other entities to free speech.

This report by Professor Wolfgang Donsbach on the real effects of pre-election surveys and polls provides excellent empirical data. Moreover, it significantly contributes, in our view, to the attempts of ESOMAR and WAPOR to continue to advocate the freedom to conduct opinion and market research to the benefit of society.

**John Kelly**  
*President, ESOMAR*

## **FOREWORD FROM WAPOR**

Along with ESOMAR, WAPOR strongly supports any initiative which helps ensure that public opinion polls are conducted to the highest professional standards, WAPOR members, who come from more than 60 countries and all continents, have committed themselves to a Code of Professional Ethics and Practices. In this Code, members recognise their responsibilities in conducting public opinion surveys towards not only their sponsors and respondents, but also to the wider public.

The war against censorship of opinion polls, which many had thought was won, is having to open up on new frontiers across the globe – from Fiji to Portugal, from Cyprus to Ireland, and doubtless elsewhere. The issue of freedom of information, long recognised by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Europe’s Human Rights Convention, has still to be positively established and entrenched. This is despite the unequivocal recommendation of the Council of Europe back in 1985 that polling institutes should follow existing Codes and that further restrictions on public opinion polls were both unnecessary and undesirable.

This timely publication, based on detailed research by the eminent Professor Wolfgang Donsbach, examines the evidence on whether poll findings induce potential voters to vote in a particular way. It explores both the “bandwagon” and “boomerang” effects, the source of much debate on the part of politicians and pundits in the run-up to elections.

WAPOR welcomes this important publication and hopes that the excellent work of the Foundation for Information and of Professor Donsbach will lead to a more informed public debate on the vital issues it explores.

**Brian Gosschalk**  
*President, WAPOR*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. Do opinion polls influence voting behaviour</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Delineating the problem</b> .....	<b>4</b>
2.1 Independent variables: phenomena presumed to have an influence .....	4
2.2 Phenomena upon which an influence is presumed .....	6
<b>3. Discourse dimensions</b> .....	<b>7</b>
3.1 The legal dimension .....	7
3.1.1 Legal rights involved .....	7
3.1.2 Practicability .....	8
3.2 The theory of democracy dimension .....	10
3.2.1 Significance of election polls .....	10
3.2.2 The political significance of election polls .....	10
3.2.3 Evaluation of tactical voting .....	13
3.3 The social science dimension .....	15
3.3.1 The significance of election polls .....	15
3.3.2 Technical accuracy .....	19
3.4 Empirical findings on the influence of opinion polls .....	22
3.4.1 Hypothetical effects .....	22
3.4.2 Methods .....	23
3.4.3 Findings to date .....	23

# 1. DO OPINION POLLS INFLUENCE VOTING BEHAVIOUR?

## Summary

The results of the numerous studies on the topic can be summarised as follows:

- A. The results are inconclusive and depend to a great degree upon the method used and the particular political circumstances at the time.
- B. In general we can say that the more natural the test situation, the smaller the influence which is measured, or the lack of an influence at all. Experiments and self-reports give the strongest indications and natural experiments provide the least indication of an effect of poll results.
- C. If there were an influence at all, then it would be upon voting intention in the sense of a bandwagon effect.
- D. Under the prerequisite of certain electoral systems (five-percent margin) supporters of the smaller party, or the party which requires the smaller party for a coalition, can be convinced by opinion polls to vote for their party of second choice.

As a whole, the **effects remain** first of all **minimal and** secondly **they can be seen as completely harmless**. For their limited proportions there are various reasons. First, based on probability theory, there are usually several, slightly different election forecasts. Secondly, election forecasts are quite obviously perceived selectively in favour of one's own opinion. In a study of the German federal election of 1976 there were clear indications of this (chart).<sup>1</sup>

Thirdly, poll results prior to the election tend to get drowned out amidst the many other statements on the outcome of the election. Content analyses have shown that journalists' forecasts and politicians' forecasts are much more prevalent. Unlike election polls, they are frequently bound to a specific interest and almost always based on conjecture.

Fourthly, statements, man-in-the-street interviews and the like are apparently much more effective than poll data in influencing expectations of the climate of opinion and also (although the likeliness of this is questioned) voting intentions.

Fifthly, **the significance of election polls for the average citizen is overestimated by both politicians and social scientists**. This is because members of both groups have an above-average education and are used to working with information that is presented with quantitative symbols (percentage figures). For less well-educated persons such comparative percentages remain relatively abstract and as a result not very impressive. Furthermore, election polls have an essential significance for politicians and researchers. For the former, they are information about their political fate and for the latter (at least some of them) the way they make their living.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Donsbach, W. (1984), p.



### Selective perception of election polls

	Only those respondents who have had contact with election polls	
“And do you remember who was ahead? Was it the CDU/CSU or the SPD/FDP?”	CDU/CSU supporters %	SPD/FDP supporters %
CDU/CSU	44	24
SPD/FDP	25	50
Tied	14	13
Depended on source	7	6
Don't know	10	7
	100	100

*Donsbach 1984, p.399*

Yet still, we can expect that under certain circumstances election polls do affect voting behaviour. They can provide a kind of “interpretative assistance” which helps undecided voters make up their mind. But the media are full of such interpretative aids, which are usually disguised and exert a subtle influence, whether in the form of journalists’ speculation, politicians’ showy claims to victory, or the selective choice of photos, quotes, etc. Among these judgmental sources, election polls are a relatively neutral and rational interpretative aid.

In other words: even if an influence of opinion polls on voting behaviour were to be established, in terms of democratic theory and especially in legal terms it would be a harmless one. On the contrary: **there is much that speaks for a more rational voting behaviour resulting from knowledge of opinion polls.** Kirchgässner maintains based on a logical-mathematical model of voter behaviour, that the successive conduct and publication of (serious) opinion data before elections tends toward an equilibrium among voters. Equilibrium is defined as being when no voter wishes later to have voted otherwise than he or she really did. I will spare the reader and myself the proof using mathematical formulas.<sup>2</sup>

In any case, election polls and forecasts are a source of information available to and desired by voters in democracies that should not be withheld from them. A ban on election polls prior to elections, or more specifically prior to election day, is thus to be ruled out.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Kirchgässner, G. (1986): *Der Einfluss von Meinungsumfragen auf das Wahlergebnis.* In: Klingemann, H.D. & Kaase, M. (eds): *Wahlen und politischer Prozess.* Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, pp. 232-47

A modern constitutional democracy must believe in the responsibility of its citizens. This also includes belief in the capacity of its citizens to independently select information relevant to them and use this information sensibly. **Bans on election polls before elections create** – most likely intentionally – **privileges for political parties or** – as a side effect – **for other influential groups.**

To be judged in a different light are opinion poll data which are published on the day of the election itself and made available while the polling stations are still open. In view of the norm that all voters should have potential access to the same information when they cast their vote, these could rightly be prohibited based on legal and theory of democracy arguments. Whether it is possible to realise such bans in the age of modern communications technology is another question.

## 2. DELINEATING THE PROBLEM

Discussions about the actual or hypothetical influence of polls upon the voting process first require a clarification of the various phenomena and concepts. In social science terminology we can speak of independent and dependent variables as well as various dimensions of the problem.

### 2.1 Independent variables: phenomena presumed to have an influence

The independent variables are the factors from which we suspect an influence on other variables. In the context of opinion research we can distinguish between

- A. Opinion polls which represent snapshots of opinion at various points in time prior to election day;
- B. Explicit or implicitly suggested forecasts based on opinion polls prior to election day;
- C. Predictions based on polls conducted on election day itself (usually in the form of exit polls);
- D. The publication of early returns before voting is over;
- E. Projections based on initial results taken from selected voting districts that were chosen according to statistical principles.

The last two forms can be dealt with fairly quickly. According to common democratic expectations, the same information should be available to all voters on election day. This also means that no groups of the population should have more or less information than others based strictly on their geographical location.

As a consequence, in Germany, as in most other countries, neither early returns before voting is over nor projections of election results can be published because all polling stations close at the same time. When official results are unavailable until after the polling stations close, they can no longer have an influence on voting. In other countries the situation is somewhat different with closing times which evidently differ.<sup>3</sup> This has prompted, for instance, a research committee to be set up by the Austrian parliament after the last parliamentary election because results of individual polling stations that had closed earlier became available to the public on the Internet.

Politically, this problem can easily be dealt with in most countries by means of appropriate measures in election legislation (such as the same opening hours for the polling stations and sanctions on election helpers who publish early returns). For this reason we will not discuss the matter further here. However, the results of studies on the “western voting phenomenon” in the U.S. – due to the different time zones - can be cited as evidence for the general impact of published election polls, since the motivational thrust which lead to these results are comparable in character to the result of opinion polls published prior to the election.

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<sup>3</sup> Such as in the U.S., where as a result of geographical circumstances there are four different time zones and thus differences in the closing times of polling stations (western voting phenomenon).

The first three of the above-mentioned poll forms (opinion snapshot, forecast and exit polls) differ in terms of validity and power of persuasion, but not fundamentally with regard to their empirical base. They are all opinion polls based on the survey of a sample by telephone, in face to face interviews or – less often – interviews by mail or via Internet and/or e-mail.

The difference between these poll forms is that, as a rule, the closer they get to election day, the greater their accuracy. The exit polls on election day are as a result the most reliable. With greater temporal proximity, the greater the chance that they will be perceived as an exact representation of the opinions of the population and will be taken seriously as such. However, in most cases exit polls results will only be available after the real polls have been closed, and are thus irrelevant as a factor influencing voting decisions.

The persuasiveness of the other two forms of opinion poll depends, amongst other things, upon whether the institute or media present them as “forecasts” or as a “snapshot” of current opinion. Technically they only differ in that in forecasts the undecided and no replies are added to one of the parties or to the non-voters and also the raw data are modified using specific weighting factors. Opinion snapshot polls as a rule are publications of the raw data.<sup>4</sup>

This justifies treating these three phenomena as a single entity, and to continue to strictly separate the publication of early returns. The latter is not an opinion research problem, but related to election regulations and the observance of these regulations – and thus a political and legislative problem. I will use the all-encompassing term “election poll” in the following section.

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<sup>4</sup> *There are, however, also mixed forms i.e. snapshots which convert the undecided and no replies without making a forecast about the result of the election.*

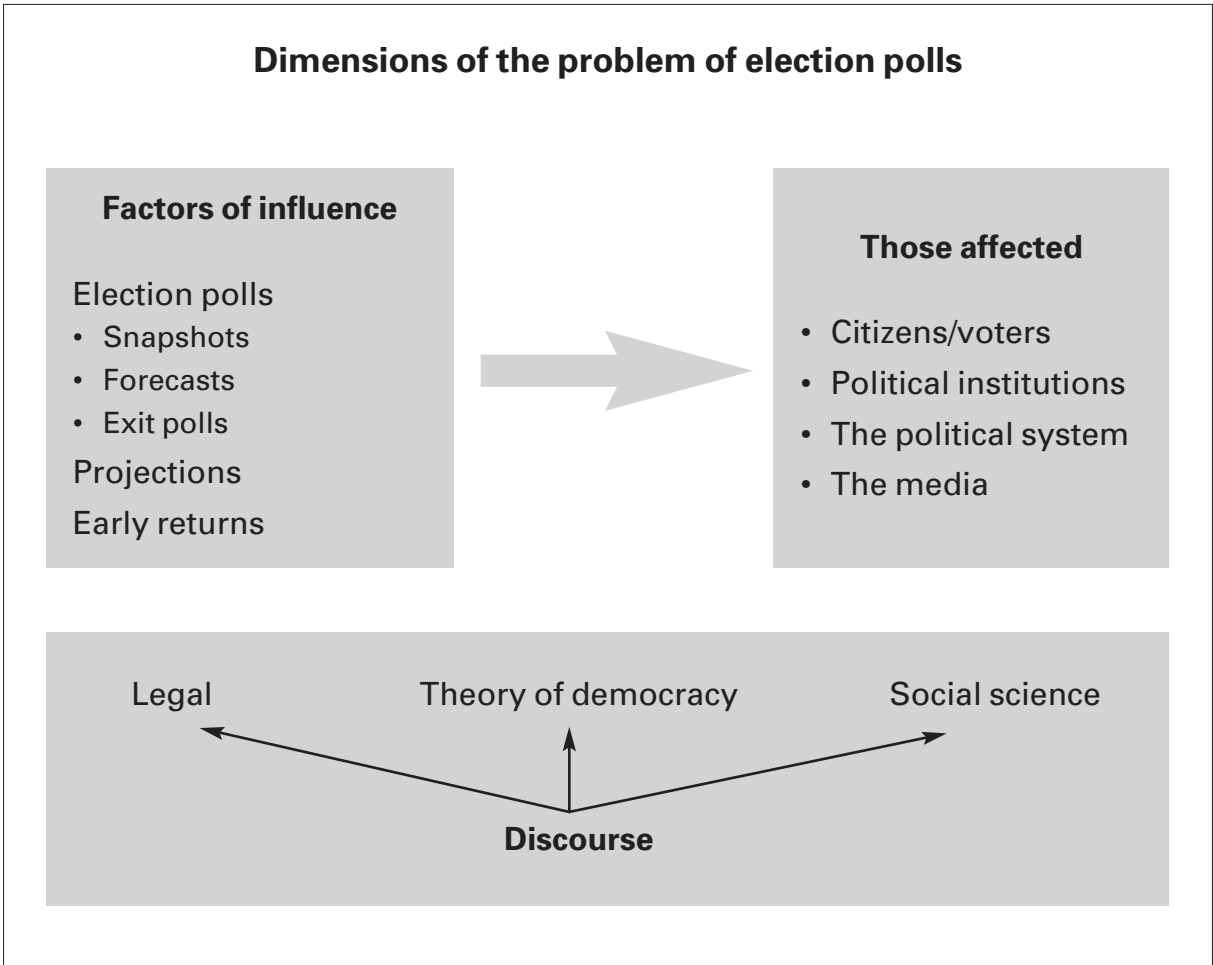
**2.2 Phenomena upon which an influence is presumed**

The phenomena upon which election polls can have an effect can basically be divided into three dimensions: the length of the effect, the type of effect and the system or “unit” being affected.

Short-term effects (voting intentions) arise more or less directly upon contact with a message. Medium-term effects occur during the course of an election campaign, and long-term effects gradually change the political system or other subsystems of society such as the media.

To distinguish between direct and indirect effects, one must clarify whether election polls directly influence voter attitudes and behaviour, or whether they tend to influence other attitudes and behaviour, which in turn have an indirect influence on voter attitudes and behaviour.

Looking at the systems affected, it is useful to draw a distinction between the citizen as voter, the political institutions, the political system and the media. The first case refers to the effect of election polls on cognition or the behaviour of the individual, that is to say, the individual’s vote. The second case refers to the effect on public support of a political party. In the third case the point of reference is changes in the rationality of political behaviour and in the last case changes in media contents. The following chart summarises this.



### 3. DISCOURSE DIMENSIONS

Roughly speaking, the connection between the cause and effect factors are discussed on three different levels: the legal aspects, the theory of democracy aspects and the social science aspects (see chart). By nature the first two are more closely interwoven as they deal with predominantly normative issues, that is, questions regarding the area of “should”, whereas social science – at least in my opinion – represents a strictly empirical dimension.

#### 3.1 The legal dimension

Under the legal dimension, the relevant question is whether it is wise and indeed possible to regulate election polls. Restrictions of this type range from a ban on publishing the results of election polls from a certain date onward to generally prohibiting opinion polls or forbidding the use of specific questions.

Several countries introduced such “embargoes” or “moratoriums”. According to a survey by the European Society of Opinion and Market Research (ESOMAR) and the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), 30 of the 78 countries we surveyed currently have restrictions of one kind or another. The most common are publication bans during a specified period prior to the election, for example seven days in France or three in Canada.<sup>5</sup>

##### 3.1.1 The legal rights involved

In constitutional democracies, independent of the specific legal system, limitations generally concern the following areas:

- The freedom of scientific endeavour of the polling institute and its scholars, i.e. the right to freely select topics and subjects for scholarly investigation and to research them according to the methods considered appropriate. This right, which in German legislation<sup>6</sup> is closely connected with freedom of communication, is so far-reaching, that to my knowledge no democracy has forbidden the conduct of election polls. An exception are opinion polls on election day itself, which, however, fall under the jurisdiction of election regulations and therefore can be weighed against an equally important right, namely the right to a properly conducted election. Otherwise the constitution only allows censorship of scientific research if it is connected with the investigation of areas which involve fundamental values of society, for example, with human genetics.
- The economic freedom of the polling institute. In a society with a market economy, this means the vested right of a business enterprise to actively pursue its trade. Since most survey research institutes are private enterprises, they depend upon commissioned work including commissioned election polls.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Donsbach, W. (2000): *Public Opinion Polls: Legal Regulations*. In: *The International Encyclopaedia of Elections*. pp. 246f.; ESOMAR/WAPOR (ed.) (1997): *Freedom to Publish Opinion Polls*

<sup>6</sup> Both are in Article 5 of the Grundgesetz (German constitution), paragraphs 1 and 3

- Freedom of the press and broadcasting freedom. In those countries that have enacted a moratorium, it is the rights of the media which first and foremost are restricted. Election polls can be conducted and also made known – to a respectively small group of persons – but they may not be published in the mass media. This is a serious interference in the freedom of the press and would be unthinkable in many liberal democracies such as the U.S. or the U.K.
- Freedom of information of the public. Freedom of the press and broadcasting freedom are granted and protected among other reasons because they are to serve the freedom of information of the public and thus democratic opinion formation (“institutional guarantee”). Moratoriums on election polls, from a constitutional point of view, affect the citizens themselves most of all. They divide society into two classes: those who are familiar with election polls because – as political parties, media or large companies – they are able to commission them, and the rest of society, who are not familiar with them because their only form of access to these polls – via media reporting – is denied.

In spite of this phalanx of legal rights, there have been, and continue to be, initiatives to introduce bans or tighten restrictions even in democracies and at the initiative of democratic-minded politicians. In Germany, for instance, as in most democratic countries, restricting opinion polls is considered very questionable and would only be legitimate if a serious and incontestable negative influence were empirically proven. A law to this effect would not in principle be anti-constitutional – it could be justified through Article 38 of the constitution as a precautionary measure to guarantee an “orderly election”. It would however, have to be weighed against the aforementioned rights and those rights derived from Article 5 (freedom of the press and broadcasting freedom, freedom of information and freedom of scientific endeavour) would provide the greatest obstacles.

In the state of Nebraska in the U.S. following the chaos of the last presidential election there are currently plans on the part of several politicians to prohibit opinion polls on election day (exit polls) and possibly the publication of the first projections as long as polling stations are still open in the western part of the country. These plans have little chance of success. A moratorium on opinion polls prior to election day would be unthinkable due to the legal-normative strength of the *First Amendment*.<sup>7</sup> In discussions on this topic among American social scientists or lawyers, restrictions are usually regarded as a sign of an underdeveloped democratic system.

### 3.1.2 Practicability

In addition to the legal-normative aspect there is also the question of whether such bans are feasible and enforceable. Even before the introduction of new global communication technologies such as the Internet there was always the theoretical possibility of gaining access to opinion poll results via the media in neighbouring countries. This was particularly the case in densely populated Europe.

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<sup>7</sup> “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances”

Since it is constitutionally more difficult to prohibit the conduct of opinion polls than to prohibit their publication, results of some form will always be in circulation somewhere. Politicians will always have access to these results because they need them to guide their election campaigns. The media will have them either because the politicians have slipped them the results or because they commission polls themselves to be able to provide suitable background reporting or even in order to later stand as wise predictors of the outcome. Other “elite” will also have the results passed to them either from politicians or journalists, most likely with the motive of mobilising support.

From Belgium we are familiar with the case where stock market speculation took place over election day, and speculators who knew from (unpublished) poll results the probable winner of the election made immense profits. In Belgium there is a moratorium on opinion polls prior to the election!

The Internet further increases the danger of a two-class society. Sources in a country where an election is about to be held can either anonymously place the data on the web or – if they want to be absolutely sure to avoid legal consequences – provide the results to another source abroad. That would avoid any legal regulations but – what is even more serious – again create two classes of voters. The “digital divide”, the gradual separation of members of society who use the new information technologies and those who cannot or do not want to use them, will divide the electorate. The former click onto the corresponding web pages and cast their votes in the awareness of the presumed distribution of votes and the rest of the population which votes without access to information.



## 3.2 THE THEORY OF DEMOCRACY DIMENSION

### 3.2.1 Significance of election polls

Election polls are an important source of political information in all modern democracies. In the previously mentioned ESOMAR/WAPOR study 82% of the experts we interviewed said that the media in their country reported opinion poll data practically every day or at least very frequently. In the U.S. observers are of the opinion that election polls are of greater importance than the results of the primaries.<sup>8</sup>

Mendelsohn and Crespi see two completely different anthropological-philosophical concepts underpinning the perception that opinion research has a dangerous influence on the political system, and the views of those who see no reason for concern.<sup>9</sup> The first group ("platonian school") bases their assumption on a pessimistic view of man and an optimistic view of the effects of the media. Man is basically vulnerable and can be led by the modern media. The second view sees voters as complexly functioning units who are quite able to act according to their own predisposition and goals. This distinction reflects the different media effect paradigms in communication research: on the one hand the malleable and passive recipient and on the other the active recipient, who only allows the media to have an effect when it corresponds with his or her own needs.<sup>10</sup>

Against this background, the theory of democracy debate about possible bans on election polls also has a philosophical-anthropological component: regulating election polls denies the citizen's ability to deal with information wisely and in line with his or her own objectives. Instead it is assumed that citizens need to be protected from such information because it could lead them to actions against their will. This paternalistic view is inappropriate in a mature democracy. Only in extreme cases of danger of manipulation can it be justified to deny access to certain information and opinions. For historical reasons in Germany and Austria this is the case for example with racist or national-socialist publications, and in many other countries out of religious-normative or educational reasons for morally relevant information. Withholding scientifically ascertained information about the strengths of the various political parties and possible election results certainly do not fall into this category.

### 3.2.2 The political significance of election polls

Election campaigns are characterised, among other things, by suggestions to the voters by the candidates of their alleged chances for winning. No politician stands up in front of voters and points to his or her imminent defeat. Politicians' statements are by nature partisan, they are also frequently deliberately false, against their better knowledge, that is,

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<sup>8</sup> Mann, Th. E. & Orren, G.R. (1992): *To Poll Or Not To Poll...And Other Questions*. In: Mann & Orren (eds.): *Media Polls in American Politics*. Washington, 1-18

<sup>9</sup> Mendelsohn, H. & Crespi, I. (1970): *Polls, Television, and the New Politics*. Scrandon

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Biocca, F.A. (1988): *Opposing Conceptions of the Audience - The Active and Passive Hemispheres of Mass Communication Theory*. Anderson, J.A. (ed.): *Communication Yearbook*, vol. 11, 51-80; Schulz, W. (1982): *Ausblick am Ende des Holzweges? Eine Übersicht über die Ansätze der neuen Wirkungsforschung*. In: *Publizistik*, 27 (4), pp. 4-9-73

the knowledge they have from opinion polls. The truthfulness of empirical statements (and this is what such statements are when politicians say “we will win”) made by politicians are thus highly dubious and misleading should the voter draw upon this description of reality for his or her own voting decision.

When politicians wish to address the population at large most effectively they generally use the mass media. Journalists see it as a role of their profession to reveal public opinion in their country and along with this to speculate about the distribution of opinion – for example at the time of an election. In a historical analysis political scientist Susan Herbst determined that 80% of the journalists who were already working in the field before the advent of opinion polling scouted out public opinion by talking to other journalists in bars and 26% by evaluating the comments of other newspapers.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the source for conjecture about public opinion was (and today in some instances still is) their colleagues – and not the population.

The rise of public opinion research has changed a good deal in this regard. The monopoly of journalists on determining public opinion has disappeared. Some suggest that this is the reason journalists are uneasy about opinion research.<sup>12</sup> In a comparative survey among German and French journalists, a distinct majority in both countries – in sharp contrast to the otherwise prevailing liberal attitudes in the profession – was in favour of a ban on election polls.<sup>13</sup>

Added to this somewhat tense relationship between journalists and public opinion research is the problem that members of the profession are not without their own political interests or at least not without certain biased perceptions. This is particularly the case in continental European countries– such as in Germany – in which journalists traditionally play an active political role.<sup>14</sup> The dependence of media contents upon the subjective opinions of the individual journalist or the editorial staff – and this applies not only to commentaries but also to factual reports – has been proven empirically and unequivocally numerous times.<sup>15</sup> In other words: from an empirical-scholarly point of view, the validity of journalists’ claim of who is likely to win an election has at best a questionable base.

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<sup>11</sup> Herbst, S. (1990): *Assessing Public Opinion in the 1930s-1940s: Retrospective Views of Journalists*. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 67, pp. 943-949.

<sup>12</sup> Lang, K. & Lang, G.E. (1984): *The Impact of Polls on Public Opinion*. John L. Martin (ed.): *Polling and the Democratic Consensus. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science.*, vol. 472, Beverly Hills, London, New Delhi, pp. 129-42.

<sup>13</sup> Donsbach, W. & Antoine, J. (1990): *Journalists and the Polls: A Parallel Survey Among Journalists in France and Germany*. In: *Marketing and Research Today*, 18, pp. 167-174.

<sup>14</sup> Donsbach, W. (1993): *Journalismus versus journalism - ein Vergleich zum Verhältnis von Medien und Politik in Deutschland und in den USA*. In: *Beziehungsspiele - Medien und Politik in der öffentlichen Diskussion. Fallstudien und Analysen von Wolfgang Donsbach, Otfried Jarren, Hans Mathias Kepplinger, Barbara Pfetsch*. Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh 1993, pp. 283-315

<sup>15</sup> Cf. for example Kepplinger, Hans Mathias (1989): *Theorien der Nachrichtenauswahl als Theorien der Realität*. In: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, B 15 (89) (Beilage zur Wochenzeitung: *Das Parlament*), pp. 3-16; Patterson, Th. E. & Donsbach, W. (1996). *News Decisions: Journalists As Partisan Actors*. *Political Communication* 13(4):455-68.

Election campaigns are thus dominated by clearly biased statements from politicians and statements from journalists that either reflect personal bias or the influence of the opinion of their professional colleagues. In a media content analysis of the German federal election of 1976 we discovered that most of the statements about who would win the election and the current distribution of opinion were made by the politicians (43%) and by journalists (33%). Opinion pollsters only accounted for 17%.<sup>16</sup> Also in the content analysis conducted by Schmitt-Beck (1996) and by Brettschneider (1999)<sup>17</sup> the significance of opinion polls ranged far behind the statements of journalists.<sup>18</sup>

The results of a content analysis of the German federal election of 1998 are not fully compatible to these studies, but they indicate that a change has taken place. Each article or program was checked to see whether it contained explicit statements about the outcome of the election and whom it was that made the statements. Of the 15,583 reports in 14 different print media and 5 television networks between March and September of 1998, 5% contained such statements. Among the originators of the statements, however, the weight has shifted compared to the seventies. Today it is indeed opinion researchers who make the majority of the statements on the election outcome. In 1998 they made one out of two statements about the possible outcome of the election. But politicians also continue to try to encourage their supporters: one out of four of the statements came from them, and one out of seven was from the author of the report.<sup>19</sup>

The reasons for this change are to be found in the much more frequent publication of opinion polls results by the media, having either commissioned the polls themselves or taken the results from other sources.<sup>20</sup> Then too, the population also takes greater notice of opinion polls. In the '50s, only 17% of the Germans said they had seen election polls in the media and in 1994, 67% said the same.<sup>21</sup>

But there is no threat to the political culture to be seen in this development, instead – just the opposite – it represents an objectification of communication before elections. In spite of the margins of error resulting from the methods and occasional handling errors – or much less often – conscious manipulation, the results of public opinion polls are still comparatively rational information in a sea of partisan and biased statements from other sources about the possible outcome of the election.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Donsbach, W. (1984): *Die Rolle der Demoskopie in der Wahlkampf-Kommunikation*. In: *Zeitschrift für Politik*, 31, S. 388-407, p. 402

<sup>17</sup> *Demoskopie im Wahlkampf – Leitstern oder Irrlicht?* Manuscript

<sup>18</sup> Schmitt-Beck, R. (1996): *Mass Media, the Electorate, and the Bandwagon. A Study of Communication Effects on Vote Choice in Germany*. In: *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 8, pp. 266-91. Unfortunately the author does not list the specific distribution of figures.

<sup>19</sup> Donsbach, W. (1999): *Drehbücher und Inszenierungen*. In: Noelle-Neumann, E., Kepplinger, H.M., Donsbach, W.: *Kampa. Meinungsklima und Medienwirkung im Bundestagswahlkampf 1998*. Freiburg & München: Alber, pp. 141-171, p. 155

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Brettschneider, F. (1996): *Wahlumfragen in den Medien. Eine empirische Untersuchung der Presseberichterstattung über Meinungsumfragen vor den Bundestagswahlen 1980-1994*. In: *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 37, pp. 475-493.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Brettschneider, F. (1991): *Wahlumfragen. Empirische Befunde zur Darstellung in den Medien und zum Einfluss auf das Wahlverhalten in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und den USA*. München: Minerva Publikation. Daten aus dem ZUMA Sozialwissenschaften-Bus III/94.

### 3.2.3 Evaluation of tactical voting

Tactical voting is understood to be a voter's decision to adjust his or her vote according to the expected outcome of the election. From a normative perspective, this is criticised because the decision is not made in favour of the political party that is the voter's first choice, but a second or even third choice receives the vote. This can be a decision to vote for the party that is expected to win the election, thus putting oneself on the winner's side. Or it can also be a decision in favour of a party that the voter would like to see achieve a quorum<sup>22</sup> and make it into parliament. Or it can also be the decision to vote for a party which the voter would like to see strengthened – in order to limit the power of another political party.

Critics frequently object that this kind of behaviour is first of all not customary and secondly detrimental to the democratic process. Both of these allegations are incorrect. According to the Gibbard-Satterthwaite theorem, in any decisional situation with three or more individuals none of the decisions is free of the possibility of manipulation by strategic behaviour. Voters naturally also keep in mind the effect their vote might have on the outcome of the election and weigh the various constellations against each other. This behaviour is fully customary particularly in the current times of a weakening commitment to political parties.<sup>23</sup> But in previous times as well it is also likely to have occurred fairly frequently because voters naturally consider how the election is likely to turn out and what their vote will count for in the end. The assumption of a somehow socially or cognitively determined "natural" first preference for a single party always was just an unconfirmed hypothesis. Today's crossover voting has ultimately refuted this assumption.

Germany is a case in point. Here it is even customary under certain constellations of party strength and potential coalitions for smaller parties to call for so-called "borrowed votes" from the voters of befriended parties and/or even be encouraged to this end by the larger party in order that they might maintain their coalition partner.<sup>24</sup> It is therefore by no means unusual for voters to consider the strength of the parties in their voting decision. The parties even encourage this at times. If such considerations are based on election polls, in contrast to the assertions of politicians or journalists, they at least have a scientific and essentially non-partisan base.

Tactical voting is not necessarily detrimental to democracy. On the contrary, such considerations can help to bring about functioning majorities (by means of coalitions) or prevent dominating positions of power of a party. This in effect gives it an important democratic function, that of a stabilising influence on the political party system.

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<sup>22</sup> *In Germany the five percent hurdle.*

<sup>23</sup> *Roth, Dieter (1998): Empirische Wahlforschung. Ursprung, Theorien, Instrumente, Methoden. Opladen: Leske & Budrich*

<sup>24</sup> *The FDP (Free Democratic Party) is a particular candidate for borrowed votes, depending upon the political situation, from SPD (Social Democratic Party) or CDU (Christian Democratic Party) voters. Usually such campaigns run under the trick of "only" asking for the second vote, which, however, according to the German election system, is the only vote responsible for the distribution of seats in the legislature.*

Even politicians themselves might have need of scientifically measured opinion poll results to be able to prepare for possible political constellations. In addition to this strictly functionalistic argument politicians also – even just before an election – inform themselves about what the people currently think of them. The British philosopher Edmund Burke put it in a nutshell: *“No...legislative right can be exercised without regard to the general opinion of those who are to be governed. That general opinion is the vehicle and organ of legislative omnipotence.”*<sup>25</sup>

In the end it is solely the affair of the voters how they make up their minds about who to vote for. It would be incompatible with the idea of free elections for information to be consciously withheld which is available and desired by the voters and considered to be relevant. In Germany in the year 1994, 94% of the population were opposed to a ban on election polls with just 6% in favour.<sup>26</sup> With the help of election polls voters can make their decision fully aware of the consequences. It would be much less compatible with the democratic rules of the game if political parties were to be able to make use of (unpublished) election polls in determining their strategies and tactics – and thus also for influencing the voter – and voters were to be left in the dark.

A marginal aspect of the theory of democracy considerations on tactical voting concerns the logical question of whether it is at all possible to make exact forecasts of social behaviour (in this case voting behaviour), when knowledge of these forecasts in turn influences the same behaviour. In other words: If a lot of people know that some people or many people may cast their vote according to tactical considerations, then they themselves will not do so.<sup>27</sup> Since this phenomenon cannot be solved logically (except with reference to an infinite regress) and in practical terms is of little significance (due to the limited number of voters who cast their vote based on the knowledge of forecasts) we will not discuss the matter further here.

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<sup>25</sup> Edmund Burke: *Politics*, 1791

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Demoskopie – informiert oder manipuliert?* In: *Die Woche*, 25.8.1994

<sup>27</sup> Simon dealt with this phenomenon of election forecasts early on. Cf. Simon, H. A. (1954): *Bandwagon- and Underdog Effects and the Possibility of Election Predictions*. In: *Journalism Quarterly* 18, S. 245-53; on the general problem of scientific laws see Nagel, E. (1961): *The Structure of Science. Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanations*. London.

### 3.3 THE SOCIAL SCIENCE DIMENSION

In the social science dimension we focus on a value-free description and explanation of attitudes and social behaviour in the context of elections and election polls. There are essentially three areas of relevance: the significance, the accuracy and finally the effect of election polls on attitudes and behaviour. I will deal with the latter point in an extra section, since the effects of election polls are what actually prompted this paper.

#### 3.3.1 The significance of election polls

##### Significance for the citizens

The effect of election polls cannot be separated from their significance. Only if a large share of the public takes notice of election polls and considers them to be a relevant and credible source of political information, can we – aside from experimental investigations – expect an influence. In this respect the significance of election polls for the media and for politicians also belongs in this section.

As regards the significance for the *population* we can once again distinguish between two indicators: the objective frequency of exposure to election polls and subjective attitudes toward them.

Using the first indicator, the significance of opinion polls has definitely increased. In the mid-'90s in the U.S. 55% of the population said that they regularly or occasionally followed the results of opinion polls. Ten years prior the figure was still at 41% and in the '40s, when the question was asked for the first time, it was 28%.<sup>28</sup>

The data on election polls from Germany is even more specific. In spite of not fully comparable figures, the trend is obvious. During the federal election of 1957, 17% said that they had seen poll results. During the election of 1976 the figure increased to 56% and in 1990 it was 81% of the population.<sup>29</sup> After the election of 1994 however, the share sank back to 68%.<sup>30</sup>

And at the same time attitudes toward opinion polls have improved. In the U.S., at least until the mid-nineties, normative-democratic support for polls in general as well as for election polls rose. When asked whether polls were a good thing or a bad thing for democracy 87% replied "a good thing." Ten years earlier it was only 76%. Here the younger the respondents, the more positive their opinion of polls.<sup>31</sup> And in each case the greater share are of the view that survey research serves a useful purpose (86%), that responding to polls is in their own interest (65%), and that being interviewed is interesting

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Gallup, A. & Moore, D.W. (1996): *Younger people today are more positive about polls than their elders*. In: *The Public Perspective*, August/September, pp. 50-53

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Cf. Brettschneider, F. (1996): *Wahlumfragen und Medien*. In: *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 37, pp. 475-93; Donsbach (1984): pp. 397.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. ZUMA *Sozialwissenschaften* Bus III/94.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Gallup & Moore, p. 52

(64%).<sup>32</sup> The figures in Germany are also very positive. According to a Forsa survey in 1994, 75% found the results of opinion polls “very interesting” or “interesting”.<sup>33</sup> And in 1987, 51% of the population liked the word “public opinion research” and only 20% didn’t like it.<sup>34</sup>

In spite of these positive attitudes, during the same period response rates among surveys of the population sank. Whereas in 1980 only 18% refused to be interviewed for the American General Social Survey (GSS), in 1992 it was already 27%.<sup>35</sup> In many other countries, or at least in those where figures are available, the trend is similar. There are a number of reasons, but they rarely have anything to do with a negative attitude towards opinion research. They have to do with the switchover from face to face interviews to telephone interviews, with the increased length of the surveys, the greater number of surveys<sup>36</sup> which are conducted today, with the frequently slipshod design of the questionnaire and interviewing procedure as well as demographic changes (more adult family members work outside the home, more mobility).<sup>37</sup> But the drop in willingness to participate in surveys is by no means an indicator that their democratic and economic function be called into question.

### Significance for politicians

For *politicians*, too, the significance of election polls has clearly increased. Governments, individual political parties or – depending on the electoral system – individual candidates commission their own surveys ever more often, in order to adapt their political strategies, or at least their public remarks. From the point of view of social science this resulted in the question early on whether this allows a populist element undesired in indirect democracies to worm its way into the political system. Political scientist Kurt Sontheimer feared a “structural insecurity of our democracy, whose representative character as prescribed by the constitution is continually made to waver as a result of reference to widespread vulgar-plebiscitary notions.”<sup>38</sup>

A study by Page & Shapiro (1983)<sup>39</sup> investigated this hypothesis of a growing political “responsiveness” empirically. Using a broad base of data ranging from the ‘30s to the ‘80s, they compared political decisions with trends in public opinion preceding the decisions. Indeed from the ‘60s on there appeared to be somewhat greater responsiveness on the part of American politicians than at the time when surveys were quite rare.

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. O’Neill, H.W. (1996): *Our greatest interest and most frustrating challenge is how to increase the rate of public participation in polls.* In: *The Public Perspective*, August/September, pp. 54-56

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Demoskopie – informiert oder manipuliert?*

<sup>34</sup> *Allensbach Archives. IfD survey 4096/I, October 1987*

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Smith, T. (1995): *Trends in Non-Response Rates.* In: *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 7, pp. 157-170, p. 161

<sup>36</sup> *An alleged 18 million telephone calls a day are made in the U.S. in order to carry out surveys (in the broadest sense of the term no doubt).* Cf. *Demoskopie – informiert oder manipuliert?* In: *Die Woche*, 25.8.1994

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Smith, *op.cit.*, p. 167

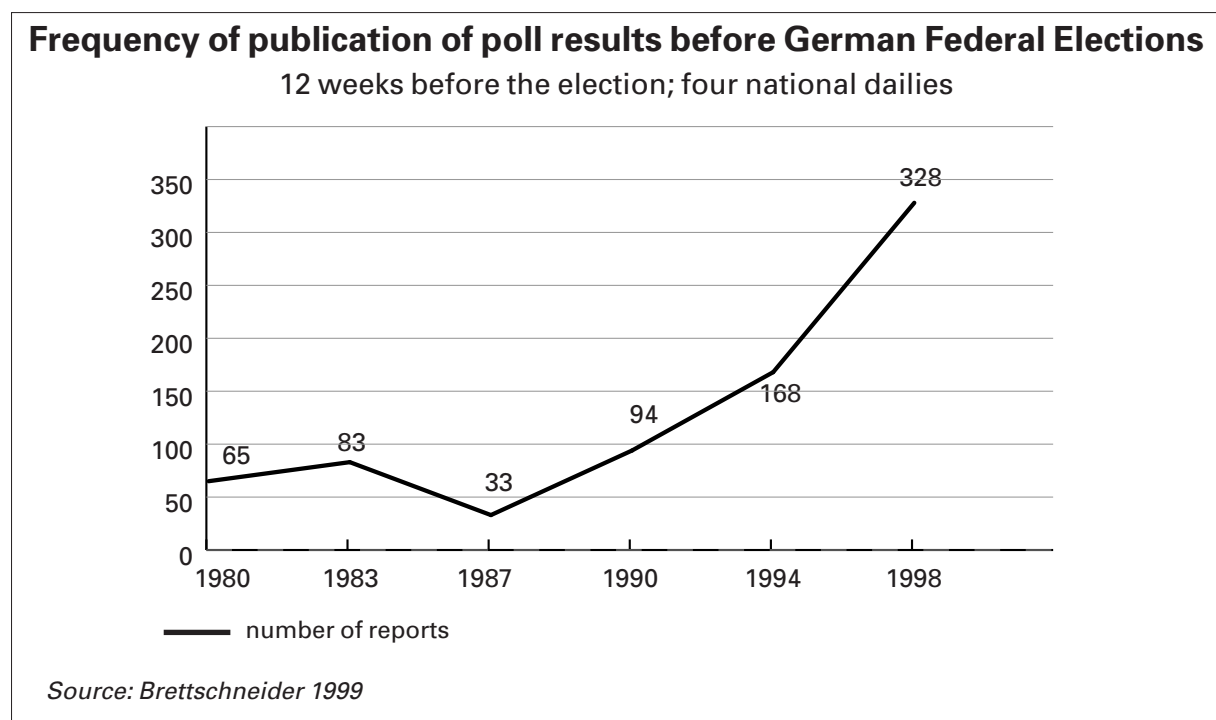
<sup>38</sup> Sontheimer, K. (1964): *Meinungsforschung und Politik. Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit den Ansprüchen der Demoskopie.* In: *Der Monat*, Heft 187, pp. 41ff., p. 44

<sup>39</sup> Page, B. I. & Shapiro, R.Y. (1983): *Effects of Public Opinion on Policy.* In: *American Political Science Review*, 77, pp. 175-190.

Brettschneider applied this investigative model in Germany, but was unable to find comparable developments.<sup>40</sup> Even if such changes were to occur in the long term – and there are some things that point to this – it is not the fault of opinion polls and even less so of election polls, instead it results from the personalities of the politicians and the extent to which institutions remain faithful to their principles.

### Significance of election polls for the media

The increased relevance of polls for the population and politicians is mirrored by an increased significance of opinion polls for the *media*. In Germany the number of articles in the four national prestige newspapers Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Frankfurter Rundschau, Süddeutsche Zeitung and Welt has grown steadily. Between the election years of 1980 and 1998 they increased five-fold (chart).<sup>41</sup> The reason for the appeal of election polls for the media is obvious. They are current data with a high level of newsworthiness and containing an occasional surprise. They are clearly structured, seldom abstract information. They are easy to present visually and thus accommodate the media's tendency to become more colourful and use strong images, to gain the attention of the recipient and adapt to their perceptive requirements (easy cognitive grasp).<sup>42</sup>



According to Ladd and Benson (1992)<sup>43</sup> the number of polls conducted by American newspapers doubled between 1976 and 1988 and those conducted by television tripled in number. The authors comment on this as follows: “The media have not only published

<sup>40</sup> Brettschneider, Frank (1995): *Öffentliche Meinung und Politik. Eine empirische Studie zur Responsivität des Deutschen Bundestages*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Brettschneider (1999), *Manuskript* (Zentralarchiv Köln)

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Hardmeier, S. (2000): *Meinungsumfragen im Journalismus. Nachrichtenwert, Präzision und Publikum*. In: *Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft* 48, pp. 371-95

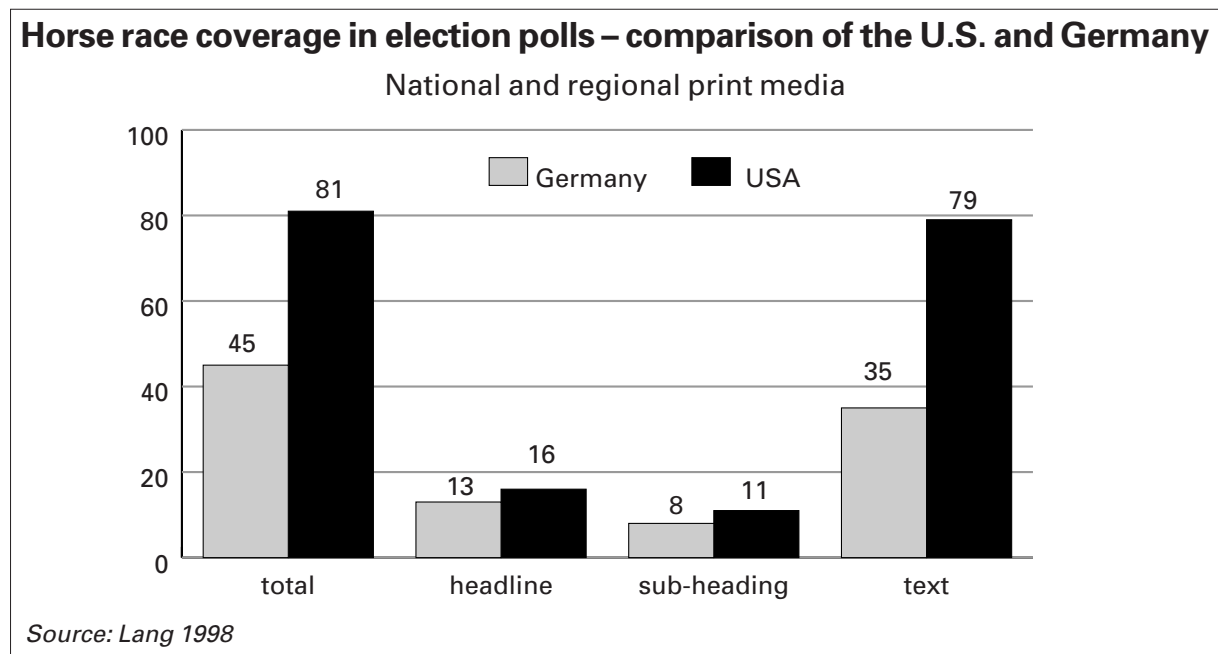
<sup>43</sup> Cf. Ladd, E. C. & Benson, J. (1992): *The Growth of News Polls in American Politics*. In: Thomas E. Mann & Gary R. Orren (eds.): *Media Polls in American Politics*. Washington, 19-31



poll data but many polls are in control of the media themselves...News organisations decide about time, methods, topics, analyses, and publication of surveys.”

In other countries as well, including the European countries, the frequency of surveys commissioned directly by the media have increased. In the context of democratic considerations, however, no danger can be seen in this for the present. For centuries it has been one of the primary roles of the media to articulate public opinion and –in line with the aforementioned quote from Edmund Burke – to inform those in government of the opinion of the people. In the 1930s an instrument became available with which public opinion can be determined very exactly. It is only natural that the media make growing use of this instrument, in order to fulfil the role demanded of them by the constitution. As Albert Gollin put it: “If the press...has become more of a Fourth Estate in fact, then polls can be said to be one of its sharpest swords”.<sup>44</sup> This also applies to election polls.

But the way in which the media handle survey data is another story. There are basically three points of criticism: First, polls are strictly used for so-called horse race reporting. This means that the media only concentrate on who is ahead in the election race, or on whom has made gains or losses. In-depth analyses of the political processes of opinion formation and the development of an informed opinion are for the most part not covered. This phenomenon has in fact been corroborated in several studies in various countries.<sup>45</sup> But there are considerable differences. A comparative content analysis of opinion research in German and U.S. media clearly showed that such superficial “horse-race” presentations are more frequent in the U.S. media.<sup>46</sup>



<sup>44</sup> Gollin, A. E. (1980): *Polls and the News Media: A symposium*. In: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 44, p.446

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Brettschneider 1991, 1996; Yeric, J. L. (1992): *Television's Reporting of Campaign Polls: The New Political Communicator*. Paper presented at the 18th Conference of the International Association for Mass Communication Research, Sao Paulo, Brasilien; Hardmeier, S. (2000): *Meinungsumfragen im Journalismus*, op.cit.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Lang, S. (1998): *Verwendung und Darstellung von Demoskopie in Printmedien*. Master Thesis, Dresden. Content analysis of the coverage of the following news media: Germany: FAZ, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Freie Presse Chemnitz, BILD, Spiegel, Focus; USA: New York Times, Washington Post, USA Today, Newsweek, Time.

The second point of criticism has to do with how information on methods is dealt with. To this end professional organisations such as the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR) and the European Association for Market and Opinion Research (ESOMAR) have developed standard guides. Numerous studies in various countries have shown that most media neglect to provide their readers or viewers with the necessary parameters with which it is possible to assess the quality or validity of the results.<sup>47</sup> Be that as it may, it has also been shown that the majority of the public isn't able to deal with technical information on the sample, margins of error, response rates etc. anyway.<sup>48</sup>

Finally it is also possible that media publish opinion polls when they correspond to their own expectations for the election (or their own wishes) and hold the information back when they contradict them. This kind of selection is to be expected, since journalists in any case tend to select information or emphasise information if the intended effect on the public is useful to them (Kepplinger).<sup>49</sup> Opinion poll results can fall in this category.

### 3.3.2 Technical accuracy

Robert Groves<sup>50</sup> distinguishes between sources for distortions, i.e. deviations between the distributions in the universe and in the sample measured, according to errors which occur as a result of *non-measurement* and those which occur from the *measurement* itself. The former consist of coverage errors (certain parts of the universe are not reached by the sampling method), non-response errors (certain parts of the universe are not contacted or not reached in field research) and the normal, sampling errors based on probability theory. On the other side, measurement errors can be caused by mistakes or characteristics of the interviewer, of the respondent, the questionnaire, or the form of the interview.

I would like to offer another, less theoretical classification. In opinion surveys there are unavoidable, avoidable and intentional errors. Methodological errors in surveys generally are based on samples and samples have by definition a margin of error based on probability theory. This is unavoidable and can only be contained by the size of the sample, but cannot completely be prevented. Even large samples run the risk of occasionally going astray and not being an accurate representation of the universe.

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Brettschneider, F. (1996): *Wahlumfragen und Medien*; Donsbach, Wolfgang (1999): *Drehbücher und Inszenierungen. Die Union in der Defensive*. In: Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth, Kepplinger, Hans Mathias, Donsbach, Wolfgang: *Kampa. Meinungsklima und Medienwirkung im Bundestagswahlkampf 1998*. Freiburg, München: Alber, pp. 141-171; Miller, M. & Denham, B. (1994): *Horserace, issue coverage in prestige newspapers during 1988, 1992 elections*. In: *Newspaper Research Journal* 15, No. 4, pp. 20-28

<sup>48</sup> Lordan, E.J. (1993): *Do methodological details help readers evaluate statistic-based stories?* In: *Newspaper Research Journal* 14, No.3/4, pp. 13-19

<sup>49</sup> Kepplinger, Hans Mathias (1989). *Instrumentelle Aktualisierung. Grundlagen einer Theorie publizistischer Konflikte*. In: Kaase, Max, Schulz, Winfried Schulz (eds.): *Massenkommunikation (Son-derheft der Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie)*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag. pp. 199-220

<sup>50</sup> Groves, R.M. (1987): *Research On Survey Data Quality*. In: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 51, pp.156-172

## Unavoidable errors

In election polls there is also a possible *time-related error*. Forecasts consist of the attempt to predict future events. Election polls are conducted several days, sometimes several weeks before election day. This involves the danger of a discrepancy between behaviour measured previously and subsequent actual behaviour. People can have changed their minds in the meantime. This discrepancy was one of several causes of the dramatically wrong forecasts for the British lower house election of 1992.<sup>51</sup> An exception here is the *exit polls*, which measure behaviour that has already taken place.

But even with behaviour which has already taken place – and in particular for forthcoming behaviour – the *climate of opinion* can have an effect on replies. People give replies that are in favour of public opinion and are considered socially acceptable. This can also have an effect on a vote for a particular party. However there are methodological ways of compensating for this error (recall questions as weighting factor).<sup>52</sup>

A further problem arises from the *missing data* of a not insignificant share of a sample. At the time of the interview many people still do not know for whom they will vote or they refuse to answer the question on their voting intention. There are procedures of allocating these respondents to certain voter groups based on their replies to other questions or on their sociodemographic characteristics. But they still contain an incalculable risk.

## Avoidable errors

Avoidable errors are those errors that could have been avoided, if *best practice* based on the professional knowledge available had been used. It is an unfortunate development for the branch that rapid growth has brought with it a number of persons in the field who lack the necessary social science training. Lang & Lang already described this in the early '90s in their "poll of pollsters". The results of their survey of opinion researchers " ...do not as yet give cause for alarm but they should sound an alert. They show the newcomers, who are progressively supplanting the old guard of seasoned pollsters, to be somewhat less oriented to the professional ethos that the pioneers brought with them into the field."<sup>53</sup>

Avoidable are also those errors which take place as a result of a lack of care, out of cost reasons or time pressure and especially those made when survey researchers allow clients to insist that they use specific questions or analysis procedures against their better judgement. The German Science Foundation put out a memorandum under the direction of Max Kaase entitled "Quality Criteria for Survey Research". They include the

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<sup>51</sup> *The opinion polls and the 1992 general election. A report to the Market Research Society. S. 12ff.; Jowell, R. et al. (1993): The 1992 British election: The failure of the polls. In: Public Opinion Quarterly 57, pp. 238-63*

<sup>52</sup> *Cf. Noelle-Neumann, E. & Petersen, Th. (2000): Alle nicht jeder. Einführung in die Methoden der Demoskopie. Berlin u.a.: Springer, pp. 290ff.*

<sup>53</sup> *Lang, K. & Lang, G.E. (1991): The changing professional ethos: A poll of pollsters. In: International Journal of Public Opinion Research 3, pp. 323-339*

following as necessary for the development of a good investigation: gathering information on the topic of the investigation, making use of results from data archives and question archives, using results from systematic basic research (i.e. split-ballot experiments), embedding individual questions within a system of relevant indicators, testing the reliability of responses using control questions, pre-tests, documentation of the results during the development of the questionnaire and including new results in time series (methods research).<sup>54</sup>

### **Intentional errors**

Intentional errors arise when someone *wants* to gather and publish false data, in order to exercise an influence with these data. These allegations apply to sampling, the questionnaire, the evaluation and the presentation of the data.

There has always been speculation about whether such practices might also occur at reputable institutes. Proof of this has never been found. When election polls were wrong it usually was due to errors of the first or second type. It would be shortsighted for an opinion research institute to pass on false results against their better knowledge and risk destroying their reputation in the long term and the chances for new commissions. However, it might sometimes happen that an institute (or even more so their client) selects a point in time to publish election polls, so that certain effects on public opinion occur (or are avoided). This would be a practice which – with any political news – is very widespread in the media and which falls under the heading of “instrumental actualisation” described previously.

That errors in the form of unintentional or intentional deviations between reality and measured reality are not an important topic for opinion research and election research becomes clear when we compare forecasts and official voting results. At the Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, which regularly publishes its forecasts prior to German federal elections, the average margin of error for all parties from 1957 to 1998 was less than one percent. Most American institutes were also between 0 and 3% off the final result for Bush and Gore. The slogan for the 2001 AAPOR conference which is traditionally determined in a contest is: *“Polling – Now more accurate than the election itself”...*

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (1999): *Qualitätskriterien der Umfrageforschung*. p. 24; Cf. auch Noelle-Neumann & Petersen (2000), pp. 612-618

### 3.4 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS ON THE INFLUENCE OF OPINION POLLS

#### 3.4.1 Hypothetical effects

The most important question of the social science dimension regards the possible effects published election polls have on voting behaviour. We previously focused on those affected by such an influence and distinguished between the citizens/voters, political institutions, the political system and the media. For reasons of space and since a number of hypotheses on the various changes in politics and the media have already been made, I would like to concentrate here on the effects on the voter. They form the core of the political discussion surrounding election polls. At the fore is the assumption that a citizen's decision for or against a party or a candidate is no longer made without influence, that is, according to rational or subjective considerations, but that factors outside of the political sphere influence this decision.

One of the most frequently named hypotheses is the bandwagon effect, that is, the theory that the results of election polls put social pressure on some of the undecided voters to vote for the side that is expected to win. Other hypotheses maintain the opposite is true or have as a point of reference other forms of influence such as voter turnout. The following overview lists the various effects hypotheses.

<b>Label</b>	<b>Effect on ...</b>	<b>Beneficiary</b>
<b>Bandwagon</b>	Vote	The stronger party
<b>Underdog</b>	Vote	The weaker party
<b>Defeatist</b>	Voter turnout: the supporters of weaker parties do not vote	The stronger party
<b>Lethargy</b>	Voter turnout: the supporters of strong parties do not vote	The weaker party
<b>Mobilization</b>	Voter turnout: the supporters of one or both parties are more active	The stronger, weaker or both parties
<b>Guillotine</b>	Vote: the supporters of smaller vote for their second choice	Large parties
<b>Facilitating tactics</b>	Vote: the supporters of a party vote for their second choice in order to facilitate a coalition	The other parties
<b>Preventive tactics</b>	Vote: the supporters of a party vote for their second choice in order to prevent a majority	The other parties

Most of the investigations carried out to date have concerned themselves with the bandwagon effect, i.e. the speculation that people want to be on the winning side and therefore vote for the winner predicted by opinion polls. In recent times in Germany the guillotine hypothesis and the tactical hypotheses have also received the attention of scholars as a result of the significance of smaller parties and the five-percent hurdle.

### 3.4.2 Methods

As with all topics, the findings are dependent upon the methods used. The methods determine the certainty with which statements can be made. When investigating influences, the following five methods can be identified in the literature:

- **Plausibility argumentation:** Here conclusions are drawn from a combination of election polls and the official vote that a causal connection between the two exists.
- **Self-reports:** Statements made by respondents about influences on their voting decision.
- **Ex-post-facto analyses:** A connection is made between exposure to poll data and expectations of the outcome of the election or a person's own voting behaviour.
- **Natural experiments:** External circumstances at an election, as for example the difference in time zones within a country or a by-election which may be necessary allow a comparison of voting behaviour with and without knowledge of the outcome of the election.
- **Field or laboratory experiments:** Here scientists form experimental and control groups that only differ in their awareness of poll data or election forecasts.

### 3.4.3 Findings to date

#### Plausibility arguments

Plausibility arguments are naturally the weakest explanation of election poll effects, however they stand at the beginning of the process. During two elections in the forties, George Gallup drew the conclusion from the relationship of published poll results, which had predicted a definite winner, and the actual voting results, which saw the other candidate as president, that the theory of the bandwagon "was destroyed."<sup>55</sup>

Since this time there have been numerous deviations in the history of opinion research between election forecasts and election results. These deviations do not show any specific pattern – which would either speak for or against a certain effect, for example the bandwagon effect. One example is the British lower house elections of 1992, in which the dramatic deviations were explained by a whole series of factors, but none of the arguments claimed them to be a result of the forecasts.<sup>56</sup>

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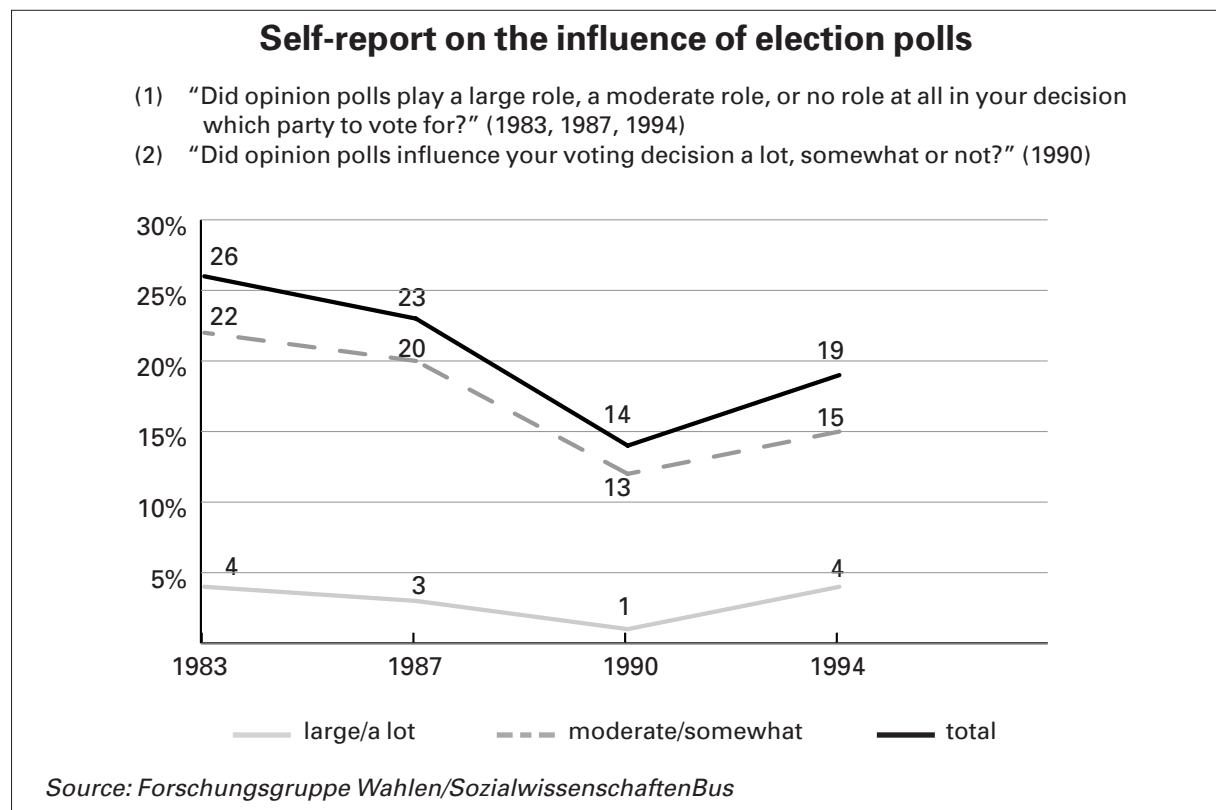
<sup>55</sup> Gallup, G. (1940): *Is there a bandwagon vote?* In: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 4, pp. 244-49

<sup>56</sup> *The most important factors according to a task force investigation were outdated statistics as basis for the quota sampling, late changes in the electorate's opinion and the influence of the climate of opinion on answers given in the interviews. Cf. The opinion polls and the 1992 General Election, op.cit*

## Self-reports

Self-reports by respondents also tend to be weak proof of effects, because people usually are not in a position to objectively recognise the causes of their own way of thinking and acting. Mixed in with the replies are attributes based on insecurity or ignorance as well as socially desired replies and reactions to the climate of opinion. Still, such results from surveys are an interesting indicator, if not of effects, at least of the perception and significance of election polls.

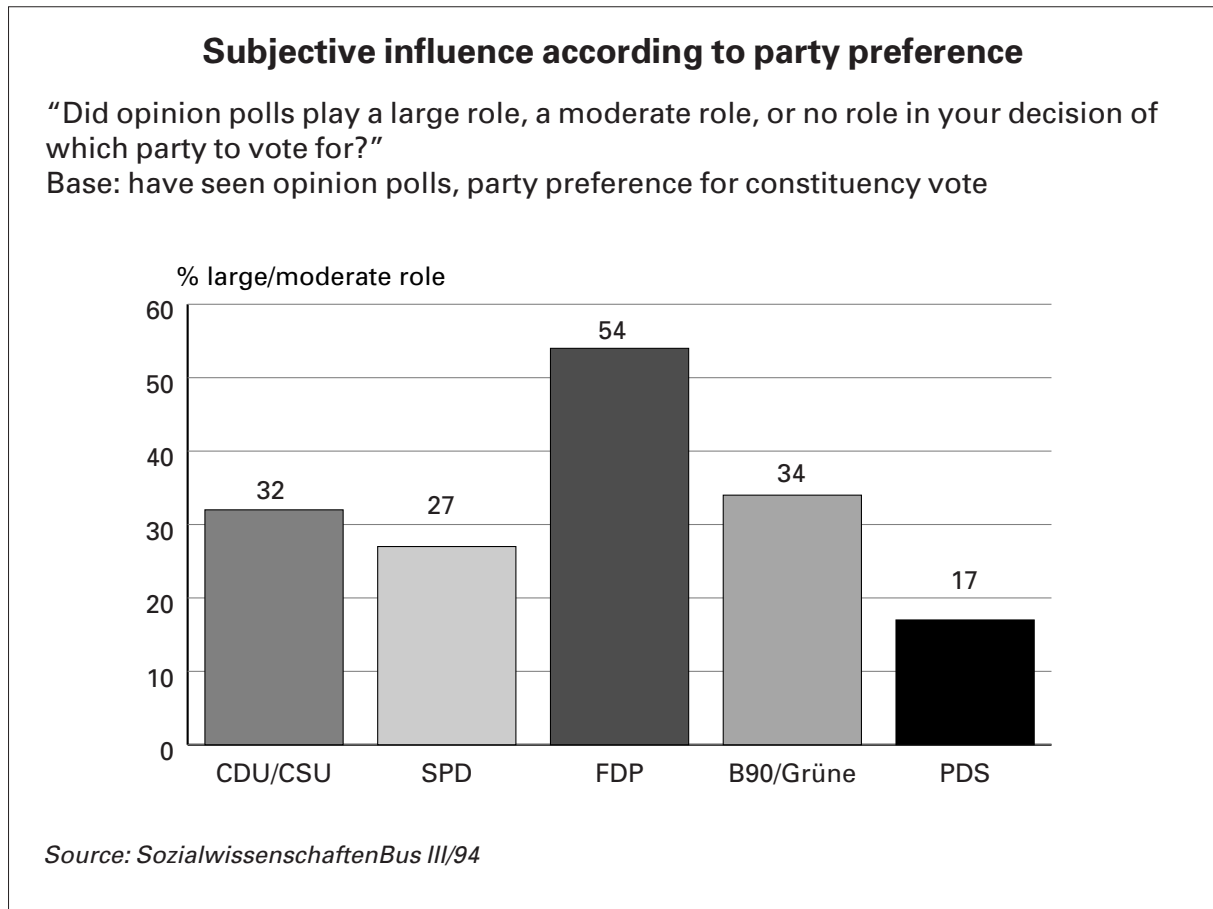
Using nearly comparable questions the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen (Election Research Group) and the Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen (ZUMA - Center for Surveys, Methods and Analyses) asked their sample after the election whether and to what extent they let themselves be influenced by election polls in their own voting decision (exact wording in the chart). The results – up to the year 1994 – show a downward trend. Whereas in 1983, 26% said they were influenced at least somewhat, in 1994 it was only 19%.



However there are indications that this influence varies by party preference. In Germany the opinion poll results have more of a self-perceived impact on supporters of the small FDP (Free Democratic Party) than on the supporters of other parties (chart). This is also confirmed by findings from the year 1990, according to which an average across all parties of 1.7% of the voters said that they changed their choice as a result of opinion poll data, but for the FDP the figure was 4.9%.<sup>57</sup> There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the FDP as a small party is affected by the five-percent-hurdle. Their supporters have to assume that their vote is lost if the party does not make it into parliament. In a situation

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Brettschneider, F. (1992): *Der taktische und der rationale Wähler. Über den Einfluss von Wahlumfragen auf das Wählerverhalten bei den Bundestagswahlen 1983 bis 1990.* In: *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 33, pp. 55-72

that appears hopeless, it can be more rational to vote for the party of their second choice. Secondly, FDP voters are on average better educated than the supporters of the other parties. Interest in opinion polls correlates with education, since the abstract percentages only have meaning and appeal for more educated voters.



However, longitudinal studies show that the differentiated interest of the supporters of various parties is not fully stable over time. Apparently in addition to educational level and strength of a party (or how close they are to the five-percent-margin) comes the individual coalition constellation of a specific election.<sup>58</sup>

### Ex-post-facto analyses

In a study on the German federal election of 1976 we investigated whether the perception of election polls had an influence on the expectation of who will win the election. Here the criterion was once again scaled down: it was not a person’s own vote, but his or her perception of the climate of opinion. In the analysis we compared the expectations of those that had heard or read about opinion polls with the expectations of the group, which had not come into contact with opinion polls. It should be pointed out here, that at this point in time all the opinion research institutes reported simultaneously similar expectations of the outcome of the election, that is, a victory for the social-liberal coalition of those days consisting of SPD and FDP.

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. Brettschneider (1999), *Demoskopie im Wahlkampf*



### Ex-post-facto analysis on the influence of election polls

	Respondents with a specific party preference	
	Have heard/read about opinion polls	Have not heard/read about opinion polls
<b>“Who do you think will win the election?”</b>	<b>N=660</b> %	<b>N=330</b> %
<b>CDU/CSU</b>	42	45
<b>SPD/FDP</b>	58	55
	100	100

*Differences not statistically significant;  
Source: Donsbach 1984, p.400*

As the chart shows, there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups of respondents. This allows us to conclude that contact with opinion polls neither influenced people’s expectations of who would win the election, nor – something much more difficult to achieve – their own vote.<sup>59</sup>

A similar study in the U.S. came to a slightly different result. West investigated with two surveys whether perception of polls had an influence on the decision of who to vote for in the presidential election and also in a referendum in Rhode Island.<sup>60</sup> This was measured with the question “During the last month, television, newspapers, and magazines have reported the results of national polls that measure the popularity of the candidates running for president. Have you read or heard any of the results from these national polls taken during the last month?” However, the regression analysis resulted in a statistical correlation between perception and the decision on the referendum, but *not* for the presidential election.

In contrast, Schmitt-Beck discovered a bandwagon effect in the German federal election of 1990. He correlated media use with expectations on the outcome of the election and these on the other hand with voting intentions or the actual vote cast.<sup>61</sup> The media contents were determined using content analysis. Interest in political reporting influenced expectations on the outcome of the election and this in turn influenced voting among undecided and less informed voters in favour of the party that appeared to be the winner. The author interprets this as a “majority-led proxy voting,” an everyday rational decision based on little information. However – and this is decisive in this investigation – according to content analyses most of the statements about the outcome of the election were made by journalists and *not* by survey researchers!

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Donsbach (1994), *op.cit.*, pp. 400f.

<sup>60</sup> Here the question was adapted accordingly. Cf. West, D.M. (1991): *Polling effects in election campaigns*. In: *Political Behavior* 13, pp. 151-63

<sup>61</sup> This was a panel study with a post-election survey, see Schmitt-Beck, *op.cit.*

## Natural experiments

In natural experiments, situations are created by means of external circumstances, in which at least two groups differ in the presence or absence of a specific factor. The opportunity arose for a natural experiment on the effect of the voting behaviour of others on a person's own vote in Germany in 1965. Since a representative of parliament died shortly after the election, a new election was necessary in one of the electoral districts. The opinion research institute INFAS calculated what the results would have been if no one had been aware of the results. The calculation was according to the existing voting results for Germany as a whole and the sociodemographic characteristics of the electoral district. This theoretical forecast was compared with the actual vote in the electoral district. There were no significant differences, that is, no bandwagon effect in favour of the winning party CDU.<sup>62</sup>

Receiving the most attention from researchers is the so-called *western voting* phenomenon in the U.S. While the polling stations are still open for another four hours in the western states, the media are already publishing the first results of *exit polls* or projections from the eastern states. Voters in the west thus have the chance to vote knowing the probable outcome of the election or at least the trend. As opposed to field and laboratory experiments, the dependent variable here is actual voting behaviour, not hypothetical behaviour in a situation free of consequences.

When Johnson and Goldwater faced each other in the election of 1964, there were a full five empirical studies on this phenomenon. With one exception they were all panel surveys (multiple surveys with the same person). In two studies control groups were formed, in order to achieve a true experimental investigative design.<sup>63</sup> Mendelsohn & Crespi summarised the results: (1) Since most of the voters had already made up their minds ahead of time, there were only a limited number of voters who could have potentially been influenced. (2) Only 4% of the voters had contact with forecasts or projections ahead of time. (3) There was no significant influence of the projections on voter turnout, neither in the form of a mobilisation nor a lethargy effect. (4) There was also no influence on the vote cast, neither in the sense of a bandwagon effect nor an underdog effect.<sup>64</sup> A study during the 1968 election, which in the view of critics had more favourable circumstances for an influence of *western voting*, led to the same conclusion: there is no significant influence of the election night projections.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. Hartenstein, W. (1967): *Mit Prognosen leben: Der Einfluss von Wahlvoraussagen auf das Wahlverhalten*. In: *Interdependenzen von Politik und Wirtschaft*. Festschrift für Gert von Eynern. Berlin, pp. 285-306

<sup>63</sup> Clausen, A.R. (1966): *Political predictions and projections: How are they conducted? Do they influence the outcome of elections?* Washington; Fuchs, D.A. (1966): *Election-day radio-television and western voting*. In: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 30, pp. 226-36; Lang, K. & Lang, G.E. (1968): *Voting and non-voting*. Waltham; Mendelsohn, H. (1966): *Western voting and broadcasts of results on presidential elections*. In: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 30, pp. 212-25

<sup>64</sup> Mendelsohn, H. & Crespi, I. (1970): *Polls, television, and the new politics*. Scrandon, p. 236

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Tuchman, S. & Coffin, T.E. (1971): *The influence of election night television broadcasts in a close election*. In: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 35, pp. 315-26

Several more recent studies appear to prove an influence, but they involve procedures that are questionable in methodological terms. In two studies, people in the western United States were asked after the election if they did not vote because of the projections. One-digit percentages were the result in both studies.<sup>66</sup> Two other studies found proof on the aggregate data level, but not on the individual data level. In aggregate analyses the danger of spurious correlations is particularly high.<sup>67</sup>

Probably the most thorough and thus most valid study is an investigation by Adams on voter behaviour in the western state of Oregon during the presidential election of 1984. In Oregon there are two neighbouring counties which are very similar in their sociodemographic composition, but which lie in two different time zones (Mountain time – Pacific time). As a result the inhabitants of the one county had an opportunity to see or hear about projections from the east for one more hour. With the support of the election helpers it was determined how many voters came to vote at what time. There was no significant effect of the time zone – and thus the probable contact with election projections – on voter turnout.<sup>68</sup>

To my knowledge no further studies on *western voting* have been conducted more recently. The matter seems to be closed – also in political terms – due on the one hand to many findings that point to no effects and on the other to the very limited chances for regulations under the American legal system in any case.

### **Controlled experiments**

Experiments have the advantage that the researcher can control the situation and arrange the character and use of the effect factor to such a degree that the relationship between the independent and dependent variables can be strictly established. They have the disadvantage, however, of creating an artificial situation and the behaviour of the test persons remains free of consequences. In general, experiments tend to exaggerate any effects in comparison to people's natural behaviour.

Usually in such experiments on the effects of election polls and forecasts one group of test persons are informed of certain distributions of opinion or forecasts whereas the other group (control group) either are given other forecast figures or none at all. This kind of study was first conducted by de Bock (1972). He found a significant influence on those who had been informed of opinion polls on their intention to turn out to vote: supporters of McGovern who were informed by poll results that their candidate stood no chance did not want to go to vote (defeatism effect).<sup>69</sup> The author limited the validity of his findings to very one-sided elections.

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<sup>66</sup> Cf. Tannenbaum, P.H. & Kostrich, L.J. (1983). *Turned-on TV, turned-off voters . Policy options for election predictions*. London, New Delhi: Sage; Niemi, R.G. et al. (1983): *Pre-election polls and turnout*. In: *Journalism Quarterly* 60, pp. 530-32

<sup>67</sup> *Only on the level of individual data is it possible to prove a correlation between the variables for identical persons*. Cf. Wolfinger, R. & Linquti, P. (1981): *Tuning in and turning out*. In: *Public Opinion*, February/March, S. 56-60; Dubois, P.L. (1983): *Election night projections and voter turnout in the West*. In: *American Politics Quarterly* 11, pp. 349-64

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Adams, W.C. (1985): *Early TV calls in 1984: How Western voters deplored but ignored them*. Paper at the Conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication

<sup>69</sup> Cf. de Bock, H. (1972) : *Influence of in-state election poll reports on candidate preference in 1972*. In: *Journalism Quarterly* 1976, pp. 457-62

A similar investigative design was chosen by Navazio. He too told the test persons in a questionnaire different poll results. Among the better educated there was a slightly significant effect on their voting preference in the direction of a bandwagon effect (in favour of the majority) whereas among the less educated there was a tendency in the opposite direction (underdog effect).<sup>70</sup> Ansolabehere & Iyengar also discovered a bandwagon effect in the experimental study.<sup>71</sup>

The end results are rather confusing however. Based on the experimental studies to date a greater share of the results point in the direction of a bandwagon effect, i.e. in favour of the expected winner. However, there are also studies that show the opposite effect or differentiated effects, i.e. the results in one group point in one direction and the results in the other group in the opposite direction.

I have already called attention to the questionable validity of this kind of experiment. Two further findings contribute to putting into context the effects of election polls; here the influence of election polls is compared with the influence of other sources. Cotter & Stovall gave their three groups either poll results, the opinion of experts or a man-in-the-street interview on the probable outcome of the election for mayor and then compared the voting intentions of the test persons. In two of the three settings there was a significant bandwagon effect: the strongest being for the man-in-the-street interview, however, with a somewhat weaker effect for the poll results.<sup>72</sup>

Daschmann's findings from a very similar experiment on the occasion of German state legislature elections further put into perspective the influence of polls results. The author used special reprints of a local newspaper, which helped make the situation more natural. In a 2x2 design one out of two of each of the groups received as stimulus, information on the victory and the defeat of the governing parties, in one case via poll results and in the other via several statements from specific persons. Subsequently measured were among other things, the estimation of the opinion of the majority and their own voting intention. It was shown, that the statements (exemplars) had a clear and significant influence on the perception of the opinion of the majority ("climate of opinion"), whereas the poll results remained without any effect (tables). Neither of the stimuli had a significant effect on voting intentions.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. Navazio, R. (1977): *An experimental approach to bandwagon research*. In: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 41, pp. 217-225

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Ansolabehere, S. & Iyengar, S. (1994): *Of horseshoes and horse races: experimental studies on the impact of poll results on electoral behavior*. In: *Political Communication* 11, pp. 413-30

<sup>72</sup> Cotter, P.R. & Stovall, J.G. (1994): *Is one as good as another? The relative influence of pre-election surveys on voter behavior*: *Newspaper Research Journal* 15, No. 4, pp. 13-18

<sup>73</sup> Daschmann, G. (2000): *Vox pop and polls. The impact of poll results and voter statements in the media on the perception of a climate of opinion*. In: *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 12, pp. 160-81

**THE EFFECT OF EXEMPLARS  
ON PERCEPTION OF THE GOVERNMENT'S PERFORMANCE**

<b>Personal opinion</b>	<b>Anti-government exemplars</b> (n = 70)	<b>No exemplars (control condition)</b> (n = 120)	<b>Pro-government exemplars</b> (n= 74)
Average rating of the government's performance * (Means, 0 = very bad / 100 = very good)	49.0a	52.6a,b	56.0b
Percentage of subjects who rated the government's performance as positive** (51 points or higher on a 0-100 scale)	25.7%	39.2%	58.1%

*Note:* The exemplar distribution was 4:1 or 1:4.

\*  $F(2/264) = 3.1, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$ . Means associated with different superscripts differ significantly at  $p < .05$  by Duncan test.

\*\*  **$\chi^2 = 20.1, df = 4, p < .001$ .**

*Source: Daschmann 2000*

**THE EFFECT OF POLL RESULTS ON  
PERSONAL OPINION OF THE GOVERNMENT'S PERFORMANCE**

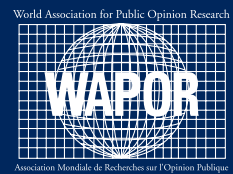
<b>Personal opinion</b>	<b>Anti-government poll results</b> (n = 71)	<b>No poll results (control condition)</b> (n = 123)	<b>Pro-government poll results</b> (n= 75)
Average rating of the government's performance * (Means, 0 = very bad / 100 = very good)	52,7	52,5	52,7
Percentage of subjects who rated the government's performance as positive** (51 points or higher on a 0-100 scale)	38.9%	41.5%	41.9%

*Note:* The poll results said the government parties would reach/would not reach the majority of votes

\*  $F < 1.0, n.s.$

\*\*  $Chi_ < 3.0, n.s$

*Source: Daschmann 2000*



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