

# Opinion Polls in Transition, The Case of Tunisia

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# What does transition mean?

- The society itself is in transition to democracy.
  - Thus, public opinion becomes relevant; political opinion polls appear.
  - But people are not used -- and may be afraid -- to give their opinion freely.
- Opinion polls themselves are in transition.
  - Because of major changes in technological and social means of communication.
    - At the technological level: cell phones, internet access, etc.
    - At the social level: Resistance to being interrupted by “strangers”, increase in individualism, ...
- In such a situation...
  - Is it possible to conduct reliable polls?
  - Is it possible to trust polls?
  - Is it possible to control polls? Should we?

# Is it possible to conduct reliable polls?

Two conditions:

Trust

Infrastructure

# Is it possible to conduct polls?

First condition: trust

- Trust is the *sine qua non* condition to conduct polls.
  - From respondents who need to be convinced that their answers will be kept strictly confidential.
  - From sponsors who need to be convinced that the pollster they hire will give them the true picture of public opinion (if this is what they want...).
  - From the media who need to be convinced that the information they publish is reliable.

# From defiance to trust

- Both the World Values Survey and the Arab Barometer of 2013 show, for Tunisia,
  - Low levels of trust in institutions like government, parliament, media, fairness of elections, etc.
  - High levels of perception of corruption in gvt.
  - Perception that the government control the media.
  - In the WVS, high levels of non-response to questions pertaining to trust and to vote intention.
- However,
  - Very positive perception regarding freedom to express opinions, to vote (80%+).
  - Trust in media higher than in 2010: 49%.
  - Before 2011, Tunisia did not participate in these surveys.

# Is it possible to conduct polls?

## Second condition: infrastructure

- Presence of pollsters before 2011: Yes
  - Institut El Amouri (1974, 1994)
  - PointCible (1991)
  - **Sigma Conseil (1998)** - electoral polls
  - **Emrhod (2000)** - electoral polls
  - **3C Études (2002)** - electoral polls
  - Tunisie-sondages (2010)
  - BJKA (2011?)
  - Institut international des études et des sondages?
- Some of them
  - Sub-contracting for international Pollsters.
  - Some directors trained in renowned Schools, members of Public Opinion Research Associations (ESOMAR, WAPOR).

# Infrastructure in transition

- Face-to-face: Pollsters in Tunisia already have the infrastructure to conduct f2f polls, but
  - Need to use cluster sampling, long fieldwork.
- Telephone: Already used, among cell phone users (good coverage of the population).
  - Access to up-to-date lists of telephone numbers?
- Web surveys: Internet coverage was 48% in 2013, still too low but
  - It won't be long before web polls spread.
  - Some pollsters use web panels (no random sample).
- The main problem is already and will increasingly be access to representative sampling frames (Diop, 2011).



# Infrastructure and trust

The infrastructure is available but

- **Face-to-face:**
  - Is the method that is the most likely to provoke social desirability i.e. non reliable answers.
- **Telephone:**
  - How can respondents trust that it is really a pollster who calls?
- **Consequences:**
  - People may not express their opinion at all (high level of don't knows) or may not express their true opinion (Khan & Rahim, 2011)
  - Therefore there may be bias in favor of some opinions or some political parties.

# In summary

Trust in institutions is increasing

The infrastructure is available.

Everything is in place to conduct reliable electoral polls.

Should Tunisia control polls? Why and how do democracies control polls and what are the consequences?

# Electoral polls & elections

Should we control polls? Why?

- Polls give an information that people may use to take their decision. We presume that polls may influence the vote.
- And we tend to think that some pollsters may become too close to some political actors or other sponsors and tend to “fiddle with numbers” to please those who pay them.
  - The closer a pollster is to a political actor, the more likely the numbers he publishes will depart from the actual situation (Shamir, 1986).
- In short, we are afraid that biased polls may influence the vote.

# Electoral polls & elections

But do polls really influence the vote?

- Gallup & Rae (1949) checked on the possibility of a *bandwagon* effect, i.e. people voting for the party who leads in the polls.
  - They concluded to the absence of such an effect.
- Since then, the possible influence of polls has been studied over and over (Hardmeier, 2007) and no substantial influence of polls on the vote has been proved besides...
  - A possible influence on sophisticated voters who may cast a “strategic vote” in some circumstances but these possible moves tend to cancel each other out.
  - No influence on unsophisticated voters, the so-called “undecided” (bandwagon effect).

# Electoral polls & elections

Control of opinion polls: What happens elsewhere?

- What is controlled:
  - The survey methodology itself, i.e. how the polls are conducted.
  - The availability of methodological information.
  - The publication of polls (Embargo during campaigns), a very common measure.
    - The Wapor 2012 report on the “Right to publish opinion polls” shows that:
      - 36 out of 61 countries had an embargo on publication.
      - Embargo usually less than 7 days, often 1-3 days.
      - Only 9 with more than 10 days, usually 15.
      - Ban of polls during the whole electoral campaign is extremely rare.

# Electoral polls & elections

Control of opinion polls: What happens elsewhere?

- How are electoral polls controlled:
  - Control Commission. ex: France
    - Experts control the polls themselves before publication. They have access to the data files and all the information on weighting.
    - Difficult and time-consuming.
    - The media do not always cooperate with the Commission.
  - Control on the publication itself. ex: Canada:
    - The electoral law (2000) prescribes the information that should be present when a poll is published during the campaign (plus a one day embargo before the election).
    - It has not been enforced. Difficult to enforce? It means a control over media content and people are not fan of that.

# Electoral polls & elections

## Control: The consequences

- Self discipline prescribed by associations is usually more complied with than legal obligations.
- With an embargo on publication,
  - People have to rely on outdated results.
  - And/or pollsters go on conducting polls during the campaign and the results are circulated “unofficially”.
  - There is no quality control. Polls may be biased, willfully or not.
  - Pollsters could publish results outside of Tunisia. There is no way to control that.
  - It is impossible to detect bias if we can’t compare polls with each other and with election results.
  - In short, there is a possibility that unreliable information influence the vote.

# Electoral polls & elections

Control: Solutions

- The Transparency Initiative (AAPOR, ESOMAR, WAPOR).
  - The criteria is the availability of complete information about the methods used and the results obtained.
  - Pollsters are required to make all the relevant methodological information available on their web sites.
- Training of journalists -- and the public -- so that they can evaluate and interpret poll results.



# Tunisia in transition

What is happening?

# Tunisia and Electoral Polls

## Control of electoral polls

- Actual situation:
  - Electoral Law, art. 70, prohibits the publication of electoral polls during the electoral campaigns.
  - Electoral Law, art. 73, states that HAICA is responsible to insure that the prohibition is enforced outside Tunisia.

# Tunisia 2011-2014

What happened? Are polls trusted?

- **Prince Arthur Herald (2011):**
  - “...de nombreux Tunisiens remettent en doute la fiabilité des sondages à propos de l’élection de l’Assemblée Constituante, d’autant plus qu’ils sont maintenant interdits depuis le 30 septembre dernier”...
  - “En général, les sondages en Tunisie ne sont pas tellement fiables car on ne sait pas la plupart du temps d’où ils viennent et qui les sponsorisent.”
- **Jeune Afrique (2014):**
  - “Ce fut l’ultime paradoxe d’une campagne qui n’en a pas manqué. Tout le monde en parlait, tout le temps, mais personne ne les a vus, et ceux qui les réalisaient n’avaient pas le droit d’en faire état, sous peine de tomber sous le coup de la loi. ”
  - “Le 25 octobre, veille du scrutin, les chaînes d’information en continu BFM et i-Télé ont prédit en boucle une victoire d’Ennahdha. Une légèreté assez incompréhensible dans la mesure où les sondages "secrets" annonçaient un match au coude-à-coude et indiquaient tous une légère avance au profit de Nida Tounes.”

# Tunisia 2014 legislative election

Institut	Date	Taille de l'échantillon	Courant de l'amour	Congrès pour la République	Ennahdha	Nidaa Tounes	Ettakatol	Front populaire	Al Joumhouri	Indécis	Total
<a href="#">3C Études</a>	déc-13	1 681	2.2	0	31.6	27.2	0	10	3.8	-	74.8
<a href="#">Emrhod</a>	janv-14	-	0	0	16.4	23.3	0	5.3	1.8	-	46.8
<a href="#">Sigma</a>	janv-14	1 362	1.3	2.4	34.6	41.6	3.6	7.1	1.3	54.4	91.9
<a href="#">Emrhod</a>	févr-14	1 200	2.2	2.1	18.4	20.6	1.9	6.4	1.4	-	53
<a href="#">Sigma</a>	févr-14	1 517	0	2.8	33.1	52.3	1.5	3.8	2.4	-	95.9
<a href="#">Emrhod</a>	mars-14	1 051	1.6	2.4	20.9	25.7	2.4	7.4	2.4	-	62.8
<a href="#">Sigma</a>	avr-14	1 636	0.8	2.6	35.4	46.8	1.8	5.1	1.6	62.9 (ind. + abstention)	94.1
<a href="#">Sigma</a>	mai-14	1 013	1	1	28.7	50.5	3.1	5.1	2.3	-	91.7
<a href="#">Sigma</a>	mai-14	-	2.5	2.6	24	41.3	3.9	6.2	2.3	-	82.8
<a href="#">Emrhod</a>	juin-14	-	0	0	14	17.1	4.7	3.9	2.9	-	42.6
<a href="#">Institut int'nal études &amp; sondages</a>	juin-14	-	-	-	38	33	-	-	-	-	-
<a href="#">Sigma</a>	juin-14	-	0	3.1	21.7	45.1	3.5	7.3	3.2	-	83.9

- Missing information: Sample size: 5/12; % non-disclosers: 10/12; prop. of “other” parties: 12/12.
- We can't compare the numbers because they are not all on the same basis.
- Proportion of non-disclosers extremely high.

# Tunisia in transition

What happened?

- In short, exactly what is expected, i.e.,
  - No control over polls' methodology.
  - Lack of information on the published polls, impossible to compare polls with each other.
  - “Secret” information circulated without any control on whether the polls were indeed conducted and by whom.
  - Lack of trust in polls, in part because they are outdated.
  - Media publishing information with no possible check on the reliability of what is published.

# Conclusion

Challenges for the publication of electoral  
polls in transition to democracy

# In conclusion, challenges

- The capacity to conduct reliable polls means...
  - Access to good sampling frames.
  - Improving the reliability of answers :
    - Reducing non-response by
      - Using a ballot to get the information on voting intentions.
      - Using a leading question.
      - Training interviewers.
  - Being able to compare estimates between pollsters & with results.
    - Publication of polls during campaigns. Information about poll methodology on pollsters' websites and in the media.
- Good polls will help build trust in polls and therefore
  - Convince people to answer.
  - Help improve the methodology of electoral polls.
- If we hide surveys when we can evaluate them, we deprive ourselves of the means to improve them.