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PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES OF MASS OPINION POLLS

In the twenty-first century, there is a significant crisis in electoral procedures, which is manifested in a decline in confidence in them. It coincided with a crisis in the survey technology of public opinion research, which is manifested in a decrease in efficiency, an increase in the number of refusals, a systematic error of representativeness and dependence of results on the wording of questions. The first crisis plays into the hands of populist strategies, as those who refused to participate in the survey are not included in the sample, and the second crisis requires the development of new ways to extract and process information about individual behavior, such as the analysis of algorithms, statistics of Internet sites, and big data analysis. The purpose of this article is to answer the question of what the prospects for the development of public opinion may be considering the growing problems of representativeness.

Keywords: *public opinion, polls, representation error, plebiscitary democracy, manipulation, prospects for mass polls, sampling, democracy, autocracy.*

Problem setting. One of the most common ways to get an idea of what society thinks has been mass polls. Since their emergence as a popular tool for predicting the outcome of political elections, the debate about what exactly they measure and whether they do more harm than good has continued unabated. The paradox is that the market for mass polls presents them as a tool that impartially captures objective reality, while in fact this reality is largely shaped by the polls themselves. This characteristic could not but make it one of the most important tools of political manipulation [1, p. 20]. In the XXI century there is a significant crisis of electoral procedures, manifested in the decline of confidence in them. It coincided with the crisis of polling technology of public opinion study: which is manifested in the decrease of efficiency, increase in the number of refusals, systematic error of representativeness and dependence of the results on the formulation of questions. The first crisis plays into the hands of populist strategies, as the sample does not include those who refused to participate in the survey, while the second crisis

requires the development of new ways to extract and process information about the behavior of individuals, such as algorithm analysis, Internet site statistics, and big data analysis [2, p. 118–120]. New technologies for shaping public opinion through networks, new methods for studying communication in these networks, and even methods for predicting election results by the behavior of network users have already emerged. At the same time, big data repositories are developing – they can sometimes provide a mass of information about each person that cannot be obtained from polls. There is good reason to believe that the usual ways of existing and measuring public opinion are in crisis today, and that we will see a major transformation of public opinion in the near future.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, by using the conceptual tools of his theory of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* [3], argued (*Kritik der öffentlichen Meinung*, 1922), that 'public opinion' has the equivalent social function in societies (*Gesellschaften*) which religion has in communities (*Gemeinschaften*) [4]. German social theorist Jürgen Habermas contributed the idea of public sphere to the discussion of public opinion. According to Habermas, the public sphere, or bourgeois public, is where «something approaching public opinion can be formed» [5, p. 398–404]. Habermas claimed that the Public Sphere featured universal access, rational debate, and disregard for rank. However, he believes that these three features for how public opinion are best formed are no longer in place in western liberal democratic countries. Public opinion, in western democracy, is highly susceptible to elite manipulation.

The American sociologist Herbert Blumer has proposed an altogether different conception of the 'public'. According to Blumer, public opinion is discussed as a form of collective behavior (another specialized term) which is made up of those who are discussing a given public issue at any one time [6, p. 219]. Given this definition, there are many publics; each of them comes into being when an issue arises and ceases to exist when the issue is resolved. Blumer claims that people participate in public in different capacities and to different degrees. So, public opinion polling cannot measure the public. An educated individual's participation is more important than that of a drunk. The 'mass' in which people independently make decisions about, for example, which brand of toothpaste to buy, is a form of collective behavior different from the public.

Public opinion plays an important role in the political sphere. Cutting across all aspects of relationship between government and public opinion are studies of voting behavior. These have registered the distribution of opinions on a wide variety of issues, have explored the impact of special interest groups on election outcomes and have contributed to our knowledge about the effects of government propaganda and policy.

One of the key ones is the concept of public opinion proposed by Walter Lippmann. The criticism of the polling method becomes, for W. Lippman, the starting point for the separation of public opinion with a small letter and Public Opinion with a capital letter:

– Public Opinion with a small letter, or more precisely, Public Opinion, is that knowledge about the world around us that concerns or interests' people themselves, derived from the behavior of other people or all that is called public events. In such instances, people use the prefabrications of stereotypical schemes, interpretations, morals, etc., common to others and borrowed from them, to guide the play of the imagination and the very vision of events.

– Public Opinion with a capital letter is the image of reality according to which groups of people or individuals acting on behalf of groups, such as statesmen, act [7, p. 268].

Starting from this distinction, W. Lippmann, already as a sociologist and political scientist, begins to criticize democracy whose early theories naively assumed that public opinions themselves maximize the public utility of political decisions. Hence, the main task of democracy is to ensure that in his contemporary society Public Opinion is shaped, influenced, and accounted for in a reasonable and rational way, whether in the areas of governance or politics.

Social scientists, starting with Pierre Bourdieu, have reproached opinion polls for constructing their own reality the moment they declare their subject. The point is not that polls are insufficiently rigorous or that their results are falsified, but that they

quietly sneak into their «objective» picture of society the assumption that public opinion is only the sum of the opinions of random individuals [8, p. 124–130]. The real units of public opinion are organized groups: communities, clubs, families, parties, gangs, companies, classes. Depending on the situation, the opinion of some of them is important and influences the direction of change in society, while the opinion of others is insignificant or absent altogether. Similarly, within these groups, some individuals have a determining influence on decisions and actions, while others have no influence at all [9]. Thus Gallup and his followers first invent a technology to measure some parameter, then substantiate it by giving it the name of public opinion (which previously stood for other phenomena), and suddenly announce that the only way to encounter this newly discovered object is to use the technology they propose. Are the results of polls a public reaction to information, an officially preferred opinion that is safe to voice publicly, or have they become part of political technology unbeknownst to others? Without questioning the quality of the poll itself, it is questionable what the numbers reflect: the official viewpoint that the respondent can voice or the out-of-sample disclaimers.

The purpose of this article is to answer the question of what the prospects for public opinion might be considering the growing problems of representativeness.

Paper objective. The political argument is, on the one hand, that the isolated individual, who may have no opinion at all on the question being asked, begins to reason about it in the terms in which it is asked, and to choose one of the options suggested by the pollster. On the other hand, the same power that draws up polls also controls the information field, which rushes to the aid of the perplexed individual, offering both its vision of what problems are most important and what ways to solve them are acceptable. Finally, reducing all democratic procedures to this kind of polling cuts off political participation altogether, leaving citizens to wait until they are randomly sampled and able to express their opinions. As a result, it turns out that such «improvement of democracy» actually leads to the concentration of power in the same hands, not so much eliminating the traditional tools of grassroots political interference, as depriving them of legitimacy: after all, even if there are many discontented, it is possible to object to their protests that their opinion has already been studied, published and work on this issue is already underway within the framework of legitimate authorities, or, as Russian authorities like to say, «the conflict is resolved in a legal framework».

This model of public opinion became popular in the early 20th century in connection with the idea of plebiscitary democracy, whose theorists were alarmed by the growing claims of the «incompetent and irresponsible crowd» to govern the state and were looking for something to counter them [10]. One major solution for subsequent history was formulated by Max Weber in the idea of a presidential republic, where real political decisions are made by the old elites in general, but are democratically justified by universal suffrage, acting as acclamations (an ancient Roman form of legitimizing imperial decrees, consisting merely in the approval of citizens in the street after they have been read out). «Electoral procedures, the principle of plebiscite became for them [theorists of modern plebiscitary democracy] a way to radically limit democracy in conditions of general democratization of political life» [11].

Contemporary, quantitative approaches to the study of public opinion may be divided into four categories:

1. Quantitative measurement of opinion distributions.
2. Investigation of the internal relationships among the individual opinions that make up public opinion on an issue.
3. Description or analysis of the public role of public opinion.
4. Study both of the communication media that disseminate the ideas on which opinions are based and of the uses that propagandists and other manipulators make of these media.

The rapid spread of public opinion measurement around the world is reflection of the number of uses to which it can be put. Public opinion can be accurately obtained through survey sampling. Both private firms and governments use surveys to inform public policies and public relations.

Let us highlight the main errors in analyzing the results of public opinion polls. First, contrary to common perceptions, public opinion is not only and not so much about poll numbers, which tell us what percentage of people support a particular political position, party, or candidate. Context matters: we tend to forget that people tend to change their position depending on whether they are asked in a poll or in an election, but also depending on who is asking and who forms the list of possible answers. This, and many other small and large factors make the results of polls much less objective than they appear at first glance.

The second myth is the notion that polls are the responsibility of sociology. In fact, polls are a toolkit of political scientists and political technologists, and sociologists traditionally treat them only as one of the tools. Finally, the third myth is that in a truly democratic society decisions would have to be made strictly according to the mass preferences reflected in the poll numbers. The very idea of expressing public opinion through the aggregation of individual opinions derives from the notion of plebiscitary democracy, which reduces the role of society to the crowd, which legitimizes the leader by its support.

Are polls a political technology? This was most succinctly formulated by Pierre Bourdieu, whose essay with the catchy title «Public Opinion Does Not Exist» reflects the thesis that polls themselves create an agenda in which the respondent has only to choose from a limited set of options that have already been picked up. That is, polls are not a tool for researching public opinion, but one of the mechanisms for its production. These kinds of cyclical dependencies make public opinion (and its numerical expression in the form of mass surveys) a difficult object to study. This is complicated by two factors. First, the notorious tyranny of the majority, predicted by Mill, is taking on a compelling numerical content and beginning to exert pressure on a minority that chooses to remain silent, further increasing the pressure of the majority – this «spiral of silence» first described by Elizabeth Noel-Neumann in Third Reich Germany seems more relevant now than ever. Second, the question of how public opinion and political action relate remains open. A leader in a plebiscitary/caucus democracy has power insofar as he can present public opinion figures as his own legitimization. Proponents of a radically skeptical view of the role of public opinion in democracy argue that in representative democracy politicians ignore public opinion and only use the tools that measure it to advance their own agenda [9]. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle. In the American case, this is especially interesting to observe around the academic debate about the interdependence of U. S. Supreme Court decisions and public opinion: some argue that the Supreme

Court follows public opinion [12], while others argue that, on the contrary, public opinion changes under the influence of Supreme Court decisions [11].

What is the main problem with polls, and is it possible to solve it by alternative methods to polling technologies? Or is the problem not with polls, but with their use, as manipulative technologies or as a constructor of public opinion. If the problem of measuring public opinion is solved by new poll-free methods of data collection, the problem of manipulation of public opinion data is quite difficult to solve. To date, there are four assumptions about how public opinion will evolve in the future.

The first perspective is that the number of mass polls will increase, creating the illusion of plebiscitary democracy. The legitimacy of political leaders will rely on the publication of poll results. Significant risks of this perspective are associated with the problem of representation of those social groups who are not sampled for several reasons (lack of access of interviewers, low civic participation in polls, etc.).

The second perspective involves using data from algorithms search queries, neuromarketing, and other digital data instead of surveys. Digital traces can tell us more reliably about the behavior of different social groups. This perspective shifts the focus of analysis from opinion to behavior. Despite the seeming objectivity of these methods, a significant problem can be the misinterpretation of behavior. Second, behavioral patterns can change rapidly.

The third perspective suggests the possibility of evaluating opinions, the source of which is social networks. In this case, the method of textual analysis is used. However, such analysis implies access to users' personal pages, which would no doubt require permissions to use this data. In democracies, no one would do that.

The fourth perspective is related to the idea of deliberative democracy, the meaning of which is that there is no single public opinion. There is segmented public opinion.

Conclusions. When talking about the study of public opinion in an authoritarian country at war, several important aspects must be considered. First, contrary to the picture presented by the media, public opinion is never monolithic and integral. In opinion polls, respondents are randomly selected to ensure that a small sample represents a country's opinion on an issue [13]. Thus, there are always very different people among those who answer the pollsters' questions. At the same time, those who have already taken a position on an issue are a minority. The majority of those interviewed are people who have some opinion but cannot always fit it into the rigid structure of the survey; who have some vague feeling, but cannot even articulate it until asked directly; who do not know what is going on at all, but feel the need to come up with some answer just because they are asked. All fluctuations in opinion are then reduced to one or more numbers, which are said to reflect the opinion of the country [14].

Second, the results of polls should not be seen as absolute numbers. Opinions are not physical phenomena that can be accurately measured in numbers. Numbers from polls can only be used as approximate benchmarks, indicating that there are significant groups of people who support certain positions. Rather than stating that X% of the population approves of government actions, we should look at the relationship between support and various characteristics – age, media use, political preference, income – and the exact wording: what exactly did respondents say yes or no to.

Third, in autocracies, citizens are often afraid to answer any questions from sociologists, let alone questions about politics [15]. This generates a distortion known as the social desirability effect – citizens lie about their real preferences, which inflates survey results [16, p. 353–354].

Fourth, one of the key issues calling into question the credibility of opinion polls is which people choose to participate in the polls. Research shows that in democracies, politically active, informed, and self-confident citizens are more likely to participate in polls [17; 18]. It does not necessarily have to be supporters of a particular party, but the so-called «self-selection effect» itself distorts the real picture of society. This problem is much more acute in authoritarian states. When citizens are afraid to express their political views or perceive interviewers as agents of power, they may refuse to participate in the survey at all. As a result, supporters of the government are better represented in the sample than its critics. Inflated poll results can be used by the regime as evidence of support from the general public and as a signal to the elite to prevent apostasy. More importantly, polls that exaggerate the degree of support for the authorities have an impact on citizens. We know from social psychology that people often use the reactions of others to an issue as cues to form their own opinions. Previous research has shown that Russian citizens' attitudes toward the regime and its actions are largely determined by what they believe to be the prevailing public consensus. Poll results that exaggerate the degree of public support for the authorities may further exacerbate the social desirability effect by making critics of the regime feel outnumbered and giving a signal to express support for the regime to those who are still undecided [19; 20]. Thus, in authoritarian countries, opinion polls often become an instrument of propaganda and manipulation of citizens. The results of such surveys play into the hands of the authorities and show a distorted picture of society.

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ПРОБЛЕМИ ТА ПЕРСПЕКТИВИ МАСОВИХ ОПИТУВАНЬ ГРОМАДСЬКОЇ ДУМКИ

У XXI ст. спостерігається суттєва криза електоральних процедур, що виявляється у зниженні довіри до них. Вона збіглася з кризою опитувальної технології вивчення громадської думки, що проявляється у зниженні результативності, зростанні кількості відмов, систематичній помилці репрезентації та залежності результатів від формулювання запитань. Перша криза грає на руку популістським стратегіям, опитування з помилками репрезентації стають зброєю в руках автократій, а друга криза вимагає розвивати нові способи видобутку й опрацювання інформації про поведінку індивідів, як-от: аналіз алгоритмів, статистики інтернет-сайтів, аналіз великих даних. Мета цієї статті – відповісти на питання про те, якими можуть бути перспективи розвитку громадської думки у світлі зростання проблем репрезентативності.

Ключові слова: громадська думка, опитування, помилка репрезентації, плебісцитарна демократія, маніпуляція, перспективи масових опитувань, вибірка, демократія, автократія.

