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The effects of polls on Burkinabe populations during election periods

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Abstract. Opinion polls play an important and often controversial role in electoral contests. It is one of the main tools of political communication in democratic societies, where citizens receive much of their information during election campaigns. In Francophone Africa, pre-election polls are increasingly visible in the public arena. However, the release of their results during the election period has been the subject of criticism and controversy questioning their credibility: opinion polls published in the media can influence voters. The polls conducted by the Apidon Research and Survey Institute commissioned by the newspaper “Bendre” ahead of the November 2015 presidential and legislative elections in Burkina Faso drew sharp criticism from the public. Many citizens denounced them for being unreliable. Given the interest shown in this political communication tool in Burkina Faso, the authors sought to investigate the extent to which the publication of the polls influenced voting behavior. By interviewing respondents in the capital Ouagadougou and the rural province of Loubila, the authors were able to study the reactions of different social categories of the electorate. Analysis of the results showed that the impact of published pre-election polling data on voters was insignificant. At the same time, voters had a deliberately negative perception of the role in political life of the publication of pre-election public opinion monitoring figures. The results of the research revealed the problem and showed the necessity of its further study. On the one hand, future research could focus on the impact of opinion poll results on political actors to determine how they are used. On the other hand, it is useful to see whether journalists follow professional rules when dealing with such information.

Keywords: opinion polls, voters, influence, electoral behavior, Burkina Faso

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Влияние публикаций опросов на население Буркина-Фасо в электоральный период

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Аннотация. Опросы общественного мнения играют важную и зачастую противоречивую роль в предвыборных состязаниях. Это один из основных инструментов политической коммуникации в демократических странах, где значительную часть информации граждане получают в ходе избирательных кампаний. Во франкоязычных странах Африки предвыборные опросы все более заметны на публичной арене. Однако обнародование их результатов в период выборов становится предметом критики и споров, ставящих под сомнение их достоверность: опросы общественного мнения, публикуемые в СМИ, могут повлиять на избирателей. Опросы, проведенные научно-исследовательским институтом «Апидон» по заказу газеты «Бендре» перед президентскими выборами и выборами в законодательные органы, состоявшимися в ноябре 2015 года в Буркина-Фасо, вызвали резкую критику в обществе. Многие граждане осудили их за недостоверность. Учитывая интерес, проявленный к этому инструменту политической коммуникации в Буркина-Фасо, цель исследования – выяснить, в какой степени публикация опросов повлияла на поведение избирателей. Интервьюирование респондентов в столице Уагадугу и сельской провинции Лумбила позволило изучить реакции различных социальных категорий электората. Анализ результатов показал, что влияние на избирателей опубликованных данных предвыборных опросов незначительное. При этом голосовавшие имели заведомо негативное представление о роли в политической жизни обнародования цифр предвыборного мониторинга общественного мнения. Полученные результаты подтвердили наличие проблемы и показали необходимость ее дальнейшего изучения. С одной стороны, будущие исследования могли бы сосредоточиться на влиянии результатов опросов общественного мнения на политических игроков, чтобы определить, как они используются. С другой стороны, полезно посмотреть, придерживаются ли журналисты профессиональных правил при работе с подобной информацией.

Ключевые слова: опросы общественного мнения, избиратели, электоральное поведение

Вклад авторов. Р.Д. Балима – разработка идеи исследования, сбор исследовательских данных, анализ данных, написание и редактирование рукописи. К. дит П. Савадого – сбор, расшифровка и анализ данных.

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Introduction

Opinion polls according to Frankovic (1998, p. 498–499), they help to “create a sense of constant movement and uncertainty in the course of the contest, occasionally generating an element of animation without which the campaign might appear dull”. Thus, polls are prized in the media world, which uses them to keep their audiences on

their toes during election campaigns. They are also invaluable to political scientists. Research in this area has been done before and it is being done right now (Larsen, Fazeakas, 2021; Gasuku, 2023; Di Franco, 2024; Fernández-Roldán, Barnfield, 2024; Graham et al., 2024). Marquis (2005, p. 10), often highlighted the influence of polls in elections: “elected politicians and their teams are interested in knowing the movements of opinion in their constituencies, in particular, to determine the appropriate responses to make, to anticipate the consequences of their decisions, to imagine how the public and their opponents will react to these consequences, and to prepare a response to possible attacks”. It's a means of warning against electoral sanctions by making the *right decisions*. Here *right decisions* refer to the punctual desires of the majority at that time.

In French-speaking Africa, election polls are increasingly visible in the public arena. However, the practice is not without reservations, as the debate over their possible electoral effects resurfaces after their publication (Brule, 1988; Marquis, 2005).

Polls published in Burkina Faso in the run-up to the November 29, 2015, presidential as well as legislative elections have raised many questions and debates within the political class and even at the level of public opinion. The latest rounds of polls by the *Bendre* newspaper and Apidon Research and Survey Institute predicted victory for candidate Roch Marc Christian Kaboré of the People's Movement for Progress (French: Mouvement du Peuple pour le Progrès, MPP) over candidate Zéphirin Diabré of the Union for Progress and Change (French: Union pour le Progrès et le Changement, UPC). In the legislative elections, the MPP was also expected to win against its rivals. The debates sparked by the publication of the various rounds of polls intrigued us. Why such an interest in electoral polls, which were still unfamiliar to ordinary Burkina Faso citizens?

A reader who requested anonymity reproached the consultant who collaborated with the *Bendre* for “producing and publishing erroneous results that can confuse a large number of people”¹. But what is the case? Our study aims to determine the degree of poll influence published in the run-up to the 2015 choice of Burkinabe voters. To do this, we will review the work carried out on the issue of the influence of opinion polls on behavior, outline the study methodology and present and discuss the research findings. The relevance of the problem is due to the instability of political communication in Burkina Faso.

Theoretical framework

Controversies about the influence of opinion polls on voters. The issue of the influence of opinion polls on voters highlights the debate on the effects of mass media on audiences. Indeed, poll results constitute information on which the voter can base an opinion about parties or candidates, and as Gerstle (2010, p. 80–81) points out, “information removes or reduces the uncertainty of the receiver. Whether we like it or not, it is characterized by the effect it produces on at least one recipient, not to mention the public of mass information”.

Among other things, opinion polls are criticized for having a significant impact on the electoral game, and on voters in particular, if they are unaware of the manipu-

¹ Sawadogo, C.P. (2015, February 20). Sondage du Journal Bendré: La réaction du SG du MPP. *Infowakat: Portail d'actualités*. Retrieved December 1, 2023, from <https://infowakat.net/sondage-du-journal-bendre-la-reaction-du-sg-du-mpp/>

lative effect, they tend to exert on them. Marquis (2005, p. 28) concludes that “far from the objectives of opinion research, and even electoral forecasting, opinion polls can sometimes be used to instrumentalize or even manipulate public opinion”. In the same vein, Champagne (1990; 1995, p. 85) finds that the publication of pre-election polls “can lead some voters to adopt a new type of voting”. On the other hand, some researchers believe that the influence of opinion polls is overestimated.

These criticisms of polls take place in a context where the tool is trying to carve out a place for itself in political communication in Africa.

Polling in the pre-electoral context of November 2015 and its controversies.

Burkina Faso returned to the publication of electoral polls in the run-up to the coupled presidential-legislative elections of November 29, 2015. The socio-political context was marked by the political transition following a popular uprising that occurred on October 30 and 31, 2014 which put an end to the 27-year reign of President Blaise Compaoré. The very reason for this historical uprising has been Compaoré’s intention to stay in power by modifying the constitution. This context was an opportunity for Burkinabè pollsters to launch into both voting intention polls and Burkinabè citizens’ judgment of the management of the political transition. The particular context of these elections provides a propitious moment insofar as the power in place was neutral and had as its main mission to organize the elections.

Nevertheless, the polls carried out during this period caused controversy in the political landscape. As in other countries where the tradition of opinion polls is well established, politicians’ attitudes were soon turned upside down by the results of opinion surveys. Their methods are sometimes criticized when the results go against them. Thus, after the publication of the results of the first *Bendre* newspaper poll, Clément Sawadogo, then Secretary General of the MPP, said that the choice of a sample of 700 people from four of the country’s towns to carry out the poll was “insufficient in that it deprived certain candidates of the benefit of a stronger presence on the national territory”².

Generally speaking, polling professionals downplay the effects their results can have on voters’ choices. In the opinion of Honko Roger Judicaël Bemahoun, who has collaborated with the *Bendre* newspaper in conducting polls, “even if polls have an effect on voter choice, the campaign balances things out”; Yannick Farma, director of operations at IRSOA, for his part, maintains that when “the voter knows it’s a snapshot of opinions, it’s not likely to change his choice”³.

Analysis framework

The survey was carried out in the city of Ouagadougou and in 4 villages in the region (Loumbila, Nomgana, Goundry and Nangtenga). Purposive sampling enabled us to collect data from 200 citizens who had participated in the elections. In all, 93 men (46.50%) and 107 women (53.50%) answered our questions.

² Sawadogo, C.P. (2015, February 20). Sondage du Journal Bendré: La réaction du SG du MPP. *Infowakat: Portail d’actualités*. Retrieved December 1, 2023, from <https://infowakat.net/sondage-du-journal-bendre-la-reaction-du-sg-du-mpp/>

³ Sam Wend-Tin B. (2016, February 10). Sondages d’opinion politique au Burkina: une innovation majeure pour l’élection présidentielle de 2015. *L’Evenement*. Retrieved December 1, 2023, from <https://www.evenement-bf.net/spip.php?article1306>

Our investigation extended from February 16 to November 24, 2015. Its results have not been published before. Indeed, the first round of polls commissioned by *Bendre* newspaper was published on February 16, 2015. The other three were published on June 15, September 14 and September 23, 2015, respectively. As for the polls conducted by IRSOA, they were published between April 7 and November 24, 2015.

Voters aged 22 or over and registered on the electoral rolls constituted our study population according to the Article 42 of the Electoral Code of May 2015, which served as the basis for the organization of the November 29, 2015 elections.

In addition, we approached opinion leaders, notably a traditional chief, a town councillor and a religious leader, to find out about any interpersonal exchanges with members of their communities on the results of the polls. In addition, we included in the target population resource persons from fields such as the media, political science, and sociology. Finally, to gain a better understanding of the publication of surveys in Burkina Faso, we approached the initiators of these surveys to determine their motivations and the circumstances in which they carried them out.

Methodology

The mixed-methods approach was chosen for this study. According to Balima and Duchenne (2005, p. 47), “the methods are most often complementary and can be added together depending on the different data we want to obtain”.

In practice, we made use of data collection techniques such as document review by examining the literature on surveys in the context of countries other than Burkina Faso. We read the newspapers that published the reports of the various surveys. We then drew up an interview guide covering the themes we discussed with our interviewees. According to Charlier and Campenhoudt (2014, p. 97), “it includes the themes that the researcher must address with his interlocutor so that the latter's responses best answer the research question”. However, as we opted for the semi-structured interview technique, we had the latitude to address themes related to those we had set out in the guide.

After conducting the semi-structured interviews with the various stakeholders, we began by transcribing them in full and translating those conducted in the national language Moore into French. This provided us with consistent material on which to base our analyses. We then carried out a thematic analysis of the transcribed data, comparing the content of the responses theme by theme. Finally, we analyzed these themes to ensure that they were in line with our initial objectives.

The quantitative approach aims to “explain a phenomenon and is based essentially [...] on the enumeration, quantification and measurement of concepts relating to the phenomenon under study” (Bonneville et al., 2007, p. 67). The main tool used was the questionnaire, which was administered both directly and indirectly, depending on the circumstances. In our case, the questionnaire is said to be indirectly administered when the interviewer completes it himself, based on the answers provided by the respondent. It is said to be directly administered when the respondent completes it himself. Respondents with a level of education that enabled them to complete the questionnaire themselves were given the latitude to do so. Indirect administration, on the other hand, was preferred for respondents with an approximate level of education and for the uneducated. For the latter, we administered the questionnaire in Moore.

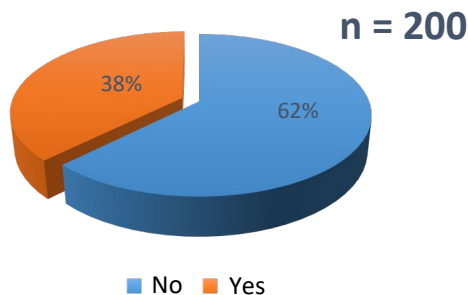
Concerning the processing of quantitative data, descriptive statistical analysis of the data collected was carried out. This type of analysis “makes it possible to structure, organize and describe a set of quantitative data, taken from a sample of a population, into a readable and coherent whole” (Bonnevillie et al., 2007, p. 125).

To achieve this, we used Epi info version 7 software, which enabled us to design an input mask on which we recorded our data. This analysis method enabled us to cross-reference the different variables in our study.

We then exported our data to Excel 2013 to calculate frequencies and present them in tables. The data distribution tables enabled us to discover how the data relating to the variables are distributed. We also used graphs to represent the information contained in certain tables.

Results and discussion

To analyze the issue of polls' influence on voters, we first need to look at how they are received by the various social categories that make up the electorate. Otherwise, it would be difficult to discover whether polls had any influence on their voting decisions.



Distribution of voters according to whether or not they were aware of the poll results

Source: performed by Regis Dimitri Balima, Casimir dit Pengdwende Sawadogo based on field survey conducted in November – December 2019.

The graph shows that 38% (red) of respondents were aware of the results of the polls that were published before the holding of the coupled presidential-legislative elections on November 29, 2015, versus 62% (blue) who said they had not been informed (Figure). This low level of exposure calls into question the massive reception of messages conveyed by the mass media set out by Harold Lasswell's hypodermic syringe theory (2015). This proves that, regardless of where people live, their exposure to the media is not as systematic as the theory of the powerful effects of the media would have us believe. Ten years after the publication of the first electoral polls in Burkina Faso, a very significant proportion of the population, due to their low level of political competence and education, are either unaware of the polls or simply unaware of their results. According to Assegna Anselme Somda, program manager at the Center for Democratic Governance (CGD), before his organization began conducting *Afrobarometer* surveys in 2008, Burkinabè were only familiar with the *Recensement général de la population et de l'habitat* (RGPH – General census of population and housing) conducted by the *Institut national de la statistique et de la démographie* (INSD – National Institute of Statistics and Demography).

Voting for the party ahead in the polls. 15% of voters exposed to the results of the polls acknowledged that they had been encouraged to vote for the party leading in the polls, i.e. 5.5% of our study sample. They acknowledged that they had voted for the MPP in the legislative elections after learning that it was ahead in the opinion polls. Men were more influenced to vote for the MPP than women (73% vs. 27%). Women's distrust of opinion polls led them not to vote in line with voting intentions.

We also note that the poll results had a much greater influence on voters in the rural commune of Loumbila (55%) than those in the city of Ouagadougou to vote for the MPP (45%). The crystallization of respondents' votes in rural areas could justify this fact. Furthermore, and to corroborate this fact, 2 of the 3 opinion leaders we interviewed for this study, namely the municipal councillor of the village of Goundry and the chief of the village of Nangtenga, specified that no one in their respective communities had come to better understand the results of the polls or to form their voting decision for the upcoming coupled elections.

According to level of education, at the November 29, 2015 legislative elections, 18.18% of those who said they had been influenced by the polls in voting for the MPP had a higher level of education. The same is true for respondents with post-primary education. Among non-educated voters, those with non-formal education and those with primary education, only one person said they had reacted in this way (9.09%). Voters with secondary education were the most influenced (36.36%). The polls therefore had a greater influence on educated voters. These results show that people with low levels of education were the least influenced by the polls.

Voting for candidates trailing in the opinion polls. The study shows that 15% of voters exposed to opinion polls decided to support certain parties based on their position in the polls (5.50%). The result was that the electorate distrusted the information provided by the polls. This is the underdog effect. As a result, 45.45% of those who came to the aid of parties lagging in the polls admitted that they had voted for PAREN because of its disreputable position in the polls.

Voting for the candidate at the top of the presidential election polls. Presidential elections are generally the most closely watched and the ones that attract the most voters to the polls. They also attract the greatest interest from pollsters to the extent that opinion polls are often used as sources of misinformation to influence or confuse voters.

The study shows that 15% of voters informed of the polls voted for Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, i.e. 63.64% of men and 36.36% of women (Table 1). Incidentally, electoral polls had little influence on voters, in that the rate of voters influenced was only 5.50% if we take into account the 200 individuals in our sample. In other countries, such as France, Brule (2005, p. 84) notes that studies carried out on the effects of polls by IFOP in 1965 on the occasion of the presidential elections of December 1965 revealed that 9% of those informed of the polls declared that they had been encouraged to vote for the candidate General Charles de Gaulle. Although this study dates back to the twentieth century, it allows us to compare the bandwagon effect of polling in two countries at a time when polling was in its infancy. The bandwagon effect of polls was much greater among French voters in 1965 than those in Burkina Faso in 2015.

Table 1

**Voter attitudes to polls predicting Roch Marc Christian Kaboré's Victory,
by gender and place of residence**

Voter behaviour	Ouaga-dougou		Loumbila rural district								Total	Percentage	
			Loumbila		Nangtenga		Nomgana		Goundry				
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F			
Vote for RMCK	3	2	2	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	11	15 %
Vote for a trailing candidate	9	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	12	16%
No effect	17	15	8	0	1	0	7	1	1	1	3	52	69 %
Total	29	20	10	0	1	1	8	2	2	2	3	75	100%

Source: performed by Regis Dimitri Balima, Casimir dit Pengdwende Sawadogo.

Table 2

**Distribution of candidates trailing in the polls
who benefited from the voters' vote, by place of residence**

Candidates	Ouaga-dougou	Loumbila rural district				Total	Percentage
		Loumbila	Nangtenga	Nomgana	Goundry		
Bénéwendé S. Sankara	1	0	0	0	0	1	8,33%
Tahirou Barry	7	0	0	0	0	7	58,33%
Zéphirin Diabré	4	0	0	0	0	4	33,33%
Total	12	0	0	0	0	12	100%

Source: performed by Regis Dimitri Balima, Casimir dit Pengdwende Sawadogo.

The Table 2 shows that 58.33% of voters declared they had voted for PAREN candidate Tahirou Barry, 33.33% for UPC candidate Zéphirin Diabre and 8.33% for UNIR/PS candidate Bénéwendé Stanislas Sankara. All the voters who cast their ballots for the candidates in the worst positions in the polls came from the city of Ouagadougou. In the rural commune of Loumbila, none of the voters declared that they had supported a candidate out of sympathy for him or her.

Conclusion

Opinion polls are now part of the election ritual in Burkina Faso. From the analysis of the data we have collected, it emerges that Burkinabe voters had little exposure to the results of the polls that were published on the eve of the parliamentary/presidential cut-off elections of November 29, 2015. 38% of the voters we surveyed were aware of the results of these polls.

The study also shows that election polls, because of their novelty, do not appeal to the majority of voters, and have therefore influenced only a tiny proportion of voters. Although polls have sometimes been called into question by certain political players, the fact remains that they have been invaluable to the vitality of democracy. However, polling is still in its infancy and needs to be further improved and popularized to establish a genuine democratic culture among politicians and citizens alike. The results of this study make it necessary to explore other research horizons to learn more about certain aspects revolving around this issue. On the one hand, future studies could focus on the effects of opinion poll results on political actors, to determine how they are used. On the other hand, it would be useful to look at how opinion polls are treated in the Burkinabe press, to discover whether journalists deal with such information following the rules laid down by their profession.

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