

OPINION POLLS AND ELECTION

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2000 election year in Romania freed passions and debates on public opinion polls never seen before. As political actors are getting more and more professional inputs by incorporating social studies in their making decision process, the consequences of polls became crucial within a competitive environment with winners and losers. On the one hand the natural "illiteracy" of politicians or journalist in sampling and interviewing bring about some public misinterpretation of polls' results. On the other hand, the sociologists or pollsters spent little time introducing lay people with basic principles of their work or formulating simple rules of reading polls' results. Moreover, less effort has been invested during the last ten years into dedicated studies to measure or prove the effects of public opinion polls on voting behavior in Romania. Some people simply take into account Western professional findings on this issue. This article is trying to pay more attention to common mistakes in reading polls and also to study the effects of polls reporting on voting behavior - both changing preferences and mobilization to vote. Some conclusions on the famous bandwagon or underdog effects in Romania might really strike the one who found about them from the Western scientific literature.

Debates on opinion polls

One of the most debated issues of the 2000 electoral campaign in Romania was the capacity of releasing polls results to influence voters' preferences in presidential and parliamentary elections. The same issue has been long discussed during Bucharest local elections in June 2000. As anticipated, the controversy is starting from or extending to the competence of carrying out polls in Romania. It is of course not all the people literate in reading polls' results and that is why confusion, distrust and contest of polls' institution spread very quickly.

As we have the specific skills, although directly involved in polls production it is notwithstanding a useful exercise to take some distance from this phenomenon and try to assess it as if we were outsiders. Opinion polls are practical instruments for various decision makers and agencies, which started to break through almost every sector of the society since the World War II in the United States. All these surveys based on opinion questionnaires and

representative samples have covered different areas of public and private life: political options, consumer behavior, media ratings, etc. Either for public or private use, the main findings of this type of studies usually target decisions to buy, sell or simply choose, so that they raised a significant stake for the modern societies. Moreover, wherever a minimal democracy exists, opinion polls might help *“each of us to communicate to or find something from everyone else”* (Caiet Metodologic – Sondajul de Opinie: 1997). It is hard to imagine how one could find about what people who are not neighbors or relatives or who more often than not reside hundred of miles away think, prefer or choose, had the polls been absent.

Public opinion results are mainly statistical aggregations (usually summative aggregations) of individual opinions or preferences accounting for their distribution within a limited space or a group extracted from a large population. Romania has little tradition in opinion polls, as they have been totally lacked during the communist regime ruling an atomized society, confined to relatives and close friends, contracted by repression of any form of political communication. After 1990, once the communist rule torn down, the sociology as an academic discipline is publicly acknowledged especially by opinion polls. Modest trials following the 1989 changes have basically shown a profession under on-going foundation or reconstitution as well as efforts to import useful instruments and techniques developed in different cultural areas. Remarkable progress should be noticed especially in sampling, developing questionnaires and interviewing after the first years. They are visible indeed as good performance was achieved in prediction and estimates of the real life (pre-electoral polls, exit-polls, marketing and TV audience studies), but also a large number of private research agencies have focused on measuring public opinion.

Decision making and developing strategies based on opinion polls or sociological studies are crucial for corporate actors in the Romanian market or public sector, and this is a sign of getting more and more professional. Social sciences however lag behind natural sciences, even though one might consider the same degree of perfection and sophistication of the methods, as performance in social sciences could be easily doubted starting from the very object of study. It seems to be daring to conclude on what is changing, subjective or extracted from the real world by means of interaction between human beings. Unlike physical sciences or chemistry, where communication between the researcher and his/her own object of study is almost inexistent, methods in social sciences absorb an impressive amount of inter-subjectivity,

which is to be converted in scientific findings and conclusions. As some American authors pointed out: *“In both the physical sciences and the social sciences, it is an accepted principle that, in measuring something, the measurer, by the very measuring process itself, may affect what is being measured—both at the time the measurements are made and thereafter. In most cases in science, though, considerable effort is taken to minimize the likelihood of this measurement “bias”, and/or the effect is reasoned to be “so small” that it is not considered important. But just the opposite process takes place in the realm of opinion polls, the news media, and elections. The media’s reporting of election poll results does exactly the reverse of suppressing their possible effects on subsequent public opinion and behavior. Instead, if knowing how others say they are going to vote changes how some people vote (or, at least, how they say they will vote), then by publicizing poll results, the media are enhancing the chance that whatever effect might occur will occur”* (Lavrakas&Holley:1991).

So here are legitimate questions: how is one able to measure what is changing once previous measurements are released and as an effect of the disclosure? How is one able to control this inadvertent effect in order to understand the dynamic of a world under various influences, as if the measurer were absent? These basic epistemological questions have long ago been distorted and amplified in an endless dispute of the Romanian politics. Party leaders or other media editors publicly denounce the interference of opinion polls with the electoral competition. The logic is quite simple: as the opinion polls determine voting preferences, then strange or dangerous events might alter the democratic game: some people may attempt to manipulate public or individual opinions by faking polls results, or other honest and professional people, may involuntarily enforce orders and hierarchies, which eventually transfer the individual choice from an ideological sphere of preferences to a lottery world with winners and losers.

The last elections proved a veritable polling-phobia. Political actors developed sophisticated strategies to make up for the would-be effects of opinion polls on public opinion: releasing fake or imaginary polls results within advertising area of newspapers, denying the true results of opinion polls or spreading bad reputation rumors about research agencies, releasing “the real” results of opinion polls already published or to be published, threatening professionals and media with regulating conditions of carrying out or releasing polls.

It seems that all is coming to an end once the elections revealed the true distribution of political preferences. It is rationally expected that the official results after ballot counting is to level passions and accusations, as the game lacks any further stake. Still, many questions persisted thereafter. What if opinion polls are really able to influence voters' preferences? Then opinion polls are responsible for the failure of some parties or candidates and some followers of these parties and candidates continue to blame opinion polls, to make threats of disclosing the backstage of what is called "polls conspiracy". Strange as it may be most of these accusations are based on erroneous interpretations of polls.

Assessing polls results

The seeming simplicity of the sample and questionnaire make some people believe that polls could be conducted by anyone and even that pure advantages might be easily obtained from this activity. In fact, professional opinion polls hide a quite complicated and specialized scientific knowledge, on the borders of sociology, statistics and psychology. It is usually hard to compare all the polls based on this sophisticated knowledge with some faked polls released during the electoral campaign and carried out by ephemeral research agencies. It is worthless to mention names of such organizations that showed up in 1992, 1996, 2000 electoral campaigns and then just vanished.

However, when these short-lived agencies carry out and release opinion polls, lay people are usually confused and here comes the danger of people mistrusting any polls at all. That is why we consider a functional exercise to show how one can assess polls results and how one might measure the performance of a pollster. Media, political parties and lay people usually perceive the performance of a pollster by the quality of that polls producer. The quality of the pollster is appraised on different dimensions: the independence from the political parties, advertising agencies, media corporations, other vested interests, etc.; the transparency of the owners and capital of the company; the transparency of the methodology and data; the procedures to produce representative samples; the reputation of the research team; the quality of the interviewers; the way of processing and releasing data; the internal consistency of the data (examined by multivariate statistical analysis); research experience in different fields of social life. In order to become credible, pollsters should prove competence and logistic capacity as well as accurate and valid results, confirmed by social reality.

The first condition is easy to examine, although there is no institution in Romania to grant this kind of certification. However, the Public Opinion Barometer has been so far a professional corpus to assess and certify research capacity of one pollster or another. In December 2000, The Romanian Sociological Association decided to establish a methodological board to assess the results of public opinion studies. In February 2001 the association of professionals in public opinion and marketing research (SORMA) has been set. This is just the beginning.

But it is the second condition that seems to be essential for public certification of pollsters' quality: **the confrontation of polls with the real world is crucial for social recognition of research agencies.** This type of certification is somehow similar to the earthquake test for buildings. Even though earthquakes occur from time to time, if buildings crumble during these shaking conditions, then it is clear that the engineers failed to follow the construction standards. The same kind of test is represented by **elections** for opinion polls. From this perspective it might be said that one is not a real pollster if one has never correctly predicted the results of elections.

Indeed, there are cases when even some famous agencies might fail to provide accurate estimates for election outcome, as some airplanes may sometimes crash, but they must continue to fly. Evidence of such failures could be found in France, UK or even US. As acknowledged, the opinion reality is complex, subjective and sometimes altering. Still, failing to predict has to be explained.

Therefore, how could one realize if a research agency has produced credible and valid poll results related to political options? It is seemingly a simple thing to do: comparing poll results with the elections outcome and then see if the difference is within the maximum margin of error. In fact, things are a bit more complicated. There are some conditions that one should take into account while assessing polls' results: **the margin of error, the poll to be compared and the general tendency of different polls, the poll prediction and the indicators used to compare with elections outcome.** In fact all these requirements are usually neglected even in the methodological texts, as they are perceived as well-known and obvious. But unfortunately there is badly need to clarify these criteria of judgment as even some specialists evaluate polls according to arbitrary reasons. It is true that as some literature evidences "the rules of interpretation are hard to quantify, but this does not mean that anyone could do it no matter how". We should agree with

the authors of *Caiet Metodologic nr.1 "Sondajul de Opinie"*, that most of the misinterpretations and distortions of opinion polls are the consequence of a lack of "communication with data". The significance of mere figures and percentages in an opinion poll does not confine to their primary evidence, as isolated, first hand information (Bulai, Mihailescu, coord., 1997).

Maximum margin of error

Electoral polls aims at measuring the mood of the voters at certain moment, given a margin of error and a confidence level. It is commonly accepted a 3% margin of error for a 95% confidence level. That means that 95 polls in 100 conducted might stay within 3% confines, as compared with the population figures. For 5 polls out of those 100 the results could theoretically be out of the standard limits. This might explain why some differences occurred between different polls of different research agencies, even if conducted in the same period of time with same the methodology. The debates have sometimes focused even on 1% differences, which presumably would have signaled an increase or decrease of political actors. In fact, the statistical theory could have allowed a 6% difference, for a 95% level of confidence between two different polls, anything else being constant, assuming that one poll had been wrong in one direction and the second in the opposite direction. In practice, the differences between professional polls during the electoral campaigns have never exceeded 3%.

The last poll and the tendencies

There seem to be a rule for reading pre-electoral polls. They actually anticipate voting behavior as a trend getting together multiple campaign moments, varying upon different factors. As regard tendencies there are some empirical rules to be drawn, showing that: public opinion evidences more variation over the electoral campaign as compared with previous periods of time and public opinion towards candidates, changes more quickly than public opinion towards political parties (party affiliation). One might also observe that there is a positive correlation between the evolutions of preferences for a candidate and voting intentions for the party supporting that candidate, no matter which is actually following which.

As regard the poll that should be compared with the election outcome, it is the last results to account for the correctness of prediction, that is, the poll which is **the closest to the Election Day**. It is well-known that “the poll that polls last polls the best” (Chelcea, 2000). Usually when voting intentions are quite stable, there is a greater chance that the poll’s results to accurately reflect the elections outcome. While volatile public opinion trends are witnessed during the election campaign for some candidates or parties, then general tendencies in pre-electoral estimates must be considered in order to account for the final outcome. In fact such sudden changes might appear during the campaign when some political characters find ways to become prominent, even positive or negative. Volatile public opinion might appear even in other periods than the electoral campaign, when for instance one famous candidate decides to withdraw the competition, as Emil Constantinescu did in July 2000, or during government crisis as the one occurred in 1997, when the Democratic Party threatened to leave a fragile majority to rule the country.

Considering all these requirements, acknowledged by professionals and media, it is easy to observe that some published “evaluations” are rather abusive and wrong. It is the case when polls far away from the Election Day are compared with the final political outcome, or when professional and fake polls are compared, in order to prove that polls are for no good at all. Not to mention here the way people assimilate local elections (months before general elections) as pre-electoral polls for general elections, even though the two series of data are hardly comparable (Teodorescu, 2000). Therefore it is easy to accuse pollster of manipulation and even sue research agencies (as it happened) starting from such wrong reasoning.

Predicting elections outcome

As strange as it may appear, **electoral polls are not predictions**. Even though this is always specifically mentioned by pollster when releasing polls results (as drawing attention to the large number of undecided voters, or the time to the election day, etc.), people are still oriented to compare any poll results with the election outcome. But in fact polls are just instant barometers or quick snapshots of a certain moment in time, within a margin of error and at a given confidence level. So it is hard to consider them as reliable forecasting instruments. In order to predict, the pollster needs certain hypothesis and weighting procedures (estimation of voting turnout, the

characteristics of voters, etc.) as well as considering pre-electoral tendencies (as for instance daily tracking-polls within a week from elections).

Let's take an example: Some unbalances of the sample are corrected, if any. One should take into account only people who have a high probability to cast the ballot (and this is not to be ascertained based on merely what the respondent declares). The analysis prior to elections evidenced that people likely to vote are statistically more males (even though women are predominant in the adult population) and fewer elders. Therefore, a prediction sample needs to be weighted by expected turnout, the apparent tendencies from pre-electoral polls, and the characteristics of people who are likely to vote. This kind of predictive procedure provides us with quite robust models. Consequently, prediction should be based on logic/mathematical scenarios to take into account the time variable.

Some pre-electoral predictions estimated based on procedures described above that C.V. Tudor could get about 27% share of all votes and PRM was likely to obtain about 20%, while Iliescu and PDSR were going to decrease to about 40%. Unfortunately these predictions were not released for public use.

Reading polls and elections outcome

When pre-electoral polls are compared with elections outcome, as well as exit-polls, one usually use three indicators: **the hierarchy** (order) of parties and candidates; **average deviation**, in percentage points and **maximum deviation** between polls results and elections outcome. The maximum deviation is commonly correlated with pre-electoral tendencies from polls. A maximum over 3% error is accepted when it is the case of an unexpected increase or decrease that could not be predicted few days before the elections. This is what actually happened in the last weeks of general elections and especially during the last days of electoral campaign, when broadcasted encounters between candidates occurred. C.V. Tudor has got an increasing performance which has reflected in the voters' preferences, presumably undecided people, but also unhappy voters who wanted to sanction the former government oscillating between PDSR/Iliescu and PRM/Vadim Tudor.

Observing these criteria, we can conclude that all but two cases were within the margin of error for the first round of elections (while the second round for presidency was even better predicted as the distance between the two candidates was comfortably great) (Abraham, 2001). The two cases were

C.V.Tudor and PNL. C.V. Tudor was predicted around 20%, but still qualifying for the second round on an upwards tendency (11-21% from October to November 2000 in CURS polls).

PNL was given 10-13% in the pre-electoral polls and 10% in the exit-polls, but its real performance of 7.25% was strongly affected by the confusion of electoral logos with PNL-C, a small party, which gained a surprisingly 1.4% and in some districts, where it was listed before PNL, even 4%.

The most expressive way of reading and comparing polls results following the three indicators mentioned above is the table 1 below where exit-polls are presented (November, 26, 2000, 21:00 hours) along with official elections outcome. The hierarchy indicator shows slight differences (beyond PNL case discussed above) for IMAS and INSOMAR, but deviations are still within the margin of error and also the parties were correctly ordered afterwards when final estimates were released in the same evening.

Table 1: Exit-polls results as released at 21:00, November, 26, 2000 and official elections outcome

<i>Deputies Chamber</i>	<i>INSOMAR</i>	<i>deviation</i>	<i>CURS/CSOP</i>	<i>deviation</i>	<i>IMAS</i>	<i>deviation</i>	<i>Official elections outcome</i>
PDSR	38.4	1.79	38.8	2.19	40.5	3.89	36.61
PRM	22.8	3.32	22.2	2.72	22	2.52	19.48
PNL*	10.5	3.61	9.6	2.71	10.2	3.31	6.89
UDMR	6.8	0	6.7	0.1	7.6	0.8	6.8
CDR	6.5	1.46	6.3	1.26	5.6	0.56	5.04
PD	6.4	0.63	7.6	0.57	6.6	0.43	7.03
ApR	3.5	0.57	4.3	0.23	3.8	0.27	4.07
Hierarchy		OK¹		OK		OK¹	
Average deviation		1.63		1.40		1.68	
Maximum deviation		3.61		2.72		3.89	
<i>Senate</i>	<i>INSOMAR</i>	<i>deviation</i>	<i>CURS/CSOP</i>	<i>deviation</i>	<i>IMAS</i>	<i>deviation</i>	<i>Official elections outcome</i>
PDSR	36.8	0.29	39.2	2.11	40.5	3.41	37.09
PRM	22.9	1.89	22.5	1.49	22.1	1.09	21.01

¹ Even though the order for some candidates and parties was different in the case of INSOMAR (PD < UDMR and CDR) and IMAS (UDMR) – the figures are still within the margin of error.

PNL*	10.7	3.22	9.6	2.12	10.1	2.62	7.48
UDMR	6.7	0.2	6.7	0.2	7.5	0.6	6.9
CDR	6.6	1.01	6.4	0.81	5.8	0.21	5.59
PD	6.9	0.68	7.6	0.02	6.7	0.88	7.58
ApR	3.7	0.57	4	0.27	4.1	0.17	4.27
Hierarchy		OK¹		OK		OK¹	
Average deviation		1.12		1.00		1.28	
Maximum deviation		3.22		2.12		3.41	
<i>President</i>	<i>INSOM-1R</i>	<i>deviation</i>	<i>CURS/CSOP</i>	<i>deviation</i>	<i>IMAS</i>	<i>deviation</i>	<i>Official elections outcome</i>
Ion Iliescu	36.5	0.15	36.9	0.55	37.9	1.55	36.35
CV Tudor	27.5	0.84	27.3	1.04	27.3	1.04	28.34
Th. Stolojan	13.4	1.62	13	1.22	12	0.22	11.78
M.Isarescu	10.7	1.16	10.5	0.96	10	0.46	9.54
G.Frundea	5.8	0.42	5.7	0.52	6.5	0.28	6.22
P.Roman	2.6	0.39	2.7	0.29	2.2	0.79	2.99
T.Melescanu	2	0.09	1.9	0.01	1.8	0.11	1.91
Hierarchy		OK		OK		OK	
Average deviation		0.67		0.66		0.64	
Maximum deviation		1.62		1.22		1.55	

Source: TVR1, ProTV, Antena1

- *PNL outcome was distorted by the confusion of the electoral logos with PNL_C (ballots actually cast for PNL or canceled ballots because two parties were marked by the voter)*

Do opinion polls influence public opinion?

All debates around this issue are actually based on one assumption: **polls are really able to change final preferences of the voters.** This is a critical assumption and it deserves serious testing. But testing such a hypothesis needs a dedicated study to simulate the real context and conditions within which such influence is possible. To our knowledge there has been no dedicated study in Romania to test this hypothesis. We merely base our intuition on similar studies conducted in other countries, having an elaborated experimental design (see Lavrakas&Holley, 1991; Mehrabian, 1998). The conclusions evidenced the “bandwagon” and “underdog” effects, as well as categories most vulnerable to these influences.

However, one should not ignore an important risk in extrapolating results tested in a different cultural space, all the more so the differences in terms of media consumption, media coverage and electoral systems or other institutional variety cannot be denied. That is why we attempted our own assessment of polls influence on political preferences in Romania. In the following paragraphs disparate data are analyzed in order to study the above mentioned phenomenon, even though no dedicated design was performed, therefore conclusions should not be considered final.

Who cares about polls?

In order to discuss about the influence of polls on public preferences one should first answer this question: who are those paying attention to the polls? Table 2 below shows that about 56% of the adult Romanian population reported in October 2001 following media release of polls. Those who declared following polls are statistically more males, average age, graduated at least vocational school (however, one must notice high discrepancies between this category and higher education graduates – 90% following polls' results), with residence in small and average urban settlements (above 30.000 inhabitants). This is actually the classical profile of people motivated to acquire information during the electoral campaign and also people with a high interest for the political life. By all means if any influence of polls on public opinion, this should be confined to the group of people who follow opinion polls.

Table 2: Profile of voters who follow opinion polls

-Row percents-

Do you usually follow opinion polls released by TV, radio or newspapers?		Yes	No
Gender	Male	61,6	37,4
	Female	50,2	47,4
Last school graduated	Less than gymnasium	19,3	77,6
	Gymnasium	43,2	53,8
	Less than high school	43,2	55,6
	Vocational school after gymnasium	67,9	30,6
	Vocational school after 10 forms	64,0	34,9
	High school	67,7	31,7
	Foreman school	81,3	15,6
	College	70,8	29,2

	University	90,9	9,1
Age	18-30 y.o	54,3	43,9
	31-55 y.o.	63,9	35,0
	56 y.o. and above	45,9	51,6
Residence	Under 30k inh.	44,6	54,5
	30-100 k inh.	69,1	29,3
	100-200 k inh.	64,6	35,4
	Over 200 k inh.	66,4	32,5
	Village	46,0	51,4
Total		55,8	42,5

Source: CURS, October 2000

Given that the categories of people who reported following polls are concentrated within certain socio-demographic groups, we can assume that these people have a greater chance to be influenced by opinion polls: males, average age, relatively high educated, residing in urban area. By contrast, one can presume that other categories, less exposed to polls release are less likely to be influenced by polls in their voting decision.

Only 38.5% of the people that reported following opinion polls declared that they consider polls results when making the voting decision. But out of the total adult population **this segment accounts for 21%**. One should of course consider careful this figure, as the answers could be simply desirable: some people might be influenced by polls but they are just not conscious of this fact, while other people might acknowledge this but not facing the interviewer. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that the 21% is an underestimate of the real figure. People who take into account opinion polls do not really adjust their decision to vote in a strategic way. It is enough to mention here that **only 5%** of the voters reported taking into account opinion polls **to a great extent**. It is reasonable to assume that only those 5% have a high probability to adjust their vote according to winners and losers conditions as shown by the polls.

Table 3: Profile of voters who reported taking into account polls

To what extent do you take into account polls when deciding to vote?

-row percent out of the total people reported following polls-

		To very less extent	To less extent	To great extent	To very great extent
Gender	Male	23,2	34,6	33,5	8,1
	Female	30,7	32,9	27,2	7,6
Last school graduated	Less than gymnasium	35,1	27,0	27,0	8,1
	Gymnasium	22,8	30,7	29,7	13,9
	Less than high school	34,3	34,3	20,0	11,4
	Vocational school after gymnasium	16,5	34,1	35,2	14,3
	Vocational school after 10 forms	20,0	40,0	34,5	5,5
	High school	30,7	31,7	32,7	3,9
	Foreman school	19,2	30,8	38,5	7,7
College	College	28,3	32,6	34,8	4,3
	University	31,1	42,2	21,1	5,6
	University	31,1	42,2	21,1	5,6
Age	18-30 y.o	24,8	38,2	31,2	5,1
	31-55 y.o.	27,0	35,9	26,7	9,3
	56 y.o. and above	27,7	26,1	37,5	7,6
Residence	Under 30k inh.	32,0	34,0	26,0	8,0
	30-100 k inh.	23,1	39,2	23,8	10,8
	100-200 k inh.	15,6	48,4	28,1	7,8
	Over 200 k inh.	38,1	28,4	27,3	5,2
	Village	21,4	31,5	38,3	8,5
TOTAL		26,7	33,8	30,6	7,9

Source CURS, October 2000:

It is worth noticing here the contrasting profile of people reported taking into account polls in the decision to vote as compared with those reported only following polls. As table 3 above evidences, even though polls are followed by relatively educated people, those reported influence to a very great extent are less educated within the same category of followers, average age, residing in small towns (30-100 K inh.). The same contrast holds when considering only people reported influence to a great extent. Therefore those reported influence are not necessary the same who reported high awareness of polls (well-educated voters), but of course are people above the average education.

The same is true when one takes into account age factor. Even though fewer elders (above 55 y.o.) follow opinion polls as compared with average age voters, they reported to a greater extent having been influenced by polls in their decision to vote. The same contrast is apparent when taking into account residence, especially for adult people between 30-50 y.o. in rural area. Even if less exposed to polls, these respondents reported to a greater extent polls influence on their decision to vote.

Then initial assumptions proved to be false, as the first empirical observation suggests that: **it is not the polls exposure increasing the probability of being influenced by the polls in the decision to vote, but rather the socio-demographic characteristics of (mostly education) the groups exposed.** For example: if one lives in rural area, where poll release is likely to have a small coverage (due to low incidence of media), then one has a greater chance to be influenced by polls in the decision to vote. The explanation might be related to the way information is used in a space of information scarcity². But explaining only through scarcity of information is not enough. The data rather suggest that the education is the most important factor accounting for influence of opinion polls. It is also known that there education is negatively correlated with age and also that people in rural area are on the average less educated than people living in cities.

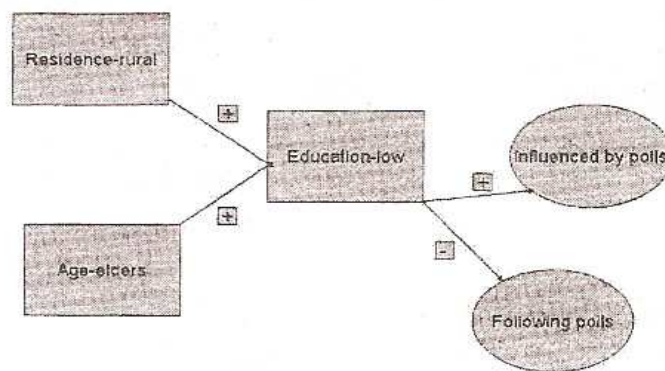


Figure 1. Factors determining polls influence

Why does education play such an important role in this model? Intuitive reasoning advocates for the way people chose among different

² Some scarce goods or information might have a greater influence on individuals in a given space simply because others do not have that good.

objects. It is likely that more educated people are a bit more sophisticated when choosing one thing over another and use a greater amount of information in order to make an option for a party or candidate. Ideological preferences or comparing agendas could be more important criteria to decide between alternatives than the chances of a party to form the government. The desire to have their own preferences represented could be more intense for those more educated.

On the other hand, less educated people operate with a poorer set of criteria, and the way they identify themselves with a party or candidate could be more opportunistic when other criteria to choose lack (it is more like a bet, than a confrontation of preferences). By any means we should conclude that **one has to be enough educated to follow opinion polls (access to information), but not so educated in order to report influence of polls (less variety of choosing criteria).**

There are of course other factors that could determine the influence of opinion polls on voting behavior, like: the existence of a firm political view, some psychological inclination to conform to rules of the game (“voting the winner”), individual or group interests, etc.

How would a no-polls world be like?³

Our data allow us to simulate three scenarios. Suppose we live in a world where people are ignorant of any sampling or polling techniques (say we are 100 years younger). The other conditions remain constant: there is political competition, there are parties, media, but nobody could have an estimate of voting before ballots are counted and nobody could have any idea about party order or people preferences over candidates. Which is then the most likely distribution of political options for general and presidential elections? Let’s now imagine another scenario, at the opposite extreme of the continuum: a world where each and every voter takes into account polls when deciding for whom to cast the ballot, liking betting on a candidate according to chances polls are suggesting for him/her. This does not restrict our model to voters betting on everything. It still leaves room for other criteria to make the decision, including the chances estimated by polls. Which would have been the distribution of votes, had such a world given? Obviously the third scenario, which we should be used for the sake of comparison is the real

³ This paragraph is trying to answer to the most hidden wishes of some politicians and journalists who were willing to live in such a world during the 2000 campaign for general elections.

world. This is described above as a world where 56% of the voters follow the polls, and some of them take them into account (5% to a great extent).

We can answer all these questions by analyzing data from a survey conducted at the very beginning of the electoral campaign, so that the role of the campaign is considerably reduced in our model.

Table 4: Voting scenarios for polls ignorance, polls addiction and real world⁴

-percentages for president-

	No-polls world	Gambling world*	Real world
Teodor Melescanu	4,2	3,4	3,7
Mugur Isarescu	9,5	14,3	15,2
Ion Iliescu	59,8	46,8	47,5
C.V.Tudor	9,5	10,5	11,4
Nicolae Cerveni	0,0	0,0	0,1
Theodor Stolojan	8,2	16,0	13,0
Marian Munteanu	0	1,3	0,4
Petre Roman	5,2	4,6	3,8
Gyorgy Frunda	3,6	3,0	4,0
Total	100	100,0	100,0
DK/undecided	24,7	15,7	17,2
Do not vote	15,9	4,0	6,6
NA	1,0	1,3	2,7

Source: CURS, October 2000

* "gambling world" is just a label for a ideological free environment, when elections are very similar to horse races. Everybody will value a prior information or estimation in order to make a bet.

We can see that Table 4 shows small differences between a world where everybody is taking into account polls in the voting decision and the real world (where we have seen that only 21% of the voters reported taking into account polls). An exception is T. Stolojan, who should have probably got a bit more than he really got. Significant differences are evidenced in the same table between the no-polls world and the real world. In this case Iliescu would have got 10-12% more percentage points than he really obtained and M. Isarescu and T. Stolojan would have achieved a 5-6% worse performance as compared to their real scores. Candidates with very low notoriety, as N.

⁴ The figures in the last column are actually estimates for that specific period of time. As we know the elections' outcome considerably changed after the campaign.

Cerveni and M. Munteanu (still competing at that time) would have probably got not more than their relatives and friends votes.

Also the number of undecided people and people who had not voted would have been significantly lower than in the real world.

Table 5: Voting scenarios for polls ignorance, polls addiction and real world ⁵-percentages for parties-

	No-polls world	Gambling world	Real world
ApR	3,8	5,3	5,5
AN (Alianta Nationala)	0,3	0,4	0,7
CDR 2000	6,0	7,8	7,4
PNL	8,5	15,9	10,6
PDSR	62,3	49,0	51,6
UDMR	6,3	3,7	5,8
PD	4,1	7,8	6,3
PRM	8,5	10,2	11,2
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0

⁵Source: CURS, October 2000

The same conclusions could be depicted from reading table 5 above. PNL would have got its best score in a world of opportunistic voters, more inclined to gamble than to choose ideologies. PDSR would have scored 10-12% more than in the real world if no polls had been conducted. And also ApR would have got less than in the real world if people had been totally ignorant of polls.⁶ Even PD would have been fortunate to live in a gambling world than a no-polls world.

Therefore, based on data above we are now able to challenge the myth, adopted so easily by many politicians and journalists, according to which “the giant PDSR” was in fact the product of opinion polls. Being so much willing to believe the bandwagon effect (people inclination to vote for the likely winner), which has never been proved in Romania so far, most of the people were convinced that polls’ score for PDSR would reinforce its leading

⁵ See previous footnote

⁶ We are going to get back to this case. Ironically, ApR strongly contested opinion polls after local elections, no matter the source of the polls, as its leaders found themselves in a critical situation: likely not to be represented in the Parliament (5% threshold). ApR campaign staff had fostered the most imaginative ways to counter-attack the would-be effects of polls on voting behavior. Eventually ApR failed to pass the 5% threshold and was not represented in the Parliament. The data above suggest that had people been more aware of the polls, ApR would have improved the chance to be represented in the Parliament.

position, if not improving by more opportunists joining the club. The complex relationship between polls' influence and the characteristics of the voters clearly contradicts this assertion. Moreover, it confirms the opposite statement: **polls release actually diminished the score that PDSR could have got, had no polls been released.** This is not to deny the existence of bandwagon effect, but just to state that if any bandwagon effect at all, then other factors have seriously counterbalanced it.

As most of the specialists know, the classical PDSR voter belongs to a high age category, rural area and has a low education degree. We have just seen that this is a category with low exposure to polls. Naturally, a no-polls world is equivalent with a world with PDSR type of voters, favoring of course a left political solution. That is way no polls would have favored PDSR more than any other party.

Moreover, opinion polls have the simple advantage in a democracy to show people that there is more than one party and candidate having a chance to represent them, which for sure do not favor high visibility parties, with strong campaigning machines and large number of militants. As other studies showed that *“the direct contact between politicians and voters substantially increases the persuasion effect. Less educated people are also less informed and not so interested in political competition. This kind of persons could be found in the rural area. That is why here the option for high visibility parties is more frequent. High visibility parties are like brands with high awareness, because their actions are more covered in media and they are involved in public debates and issues. They tend to be well-organized all over the country and have more financial sources because they have privileged positions in real or estimated hierarchies. In big cities, where people are more active from a political point of view and media has a significant incidence, options are more diversified and consequently small parties have a high score”* (Lazaroiu, 1999)

This is how we can explain a greater number of undecided people in a no-polls world. It is likely that most of these undecided people would eventually not going to vote, which means that voting turnout would be lower in a no-polls world. In fact table 7 below supports this statement. We can see that people that do not follow opinion polls have a small chance to cast a ballot.

Table 6: Voter turnout and reported taking into account polls
-percentages-

Are you going to vote?	Taking into account polls	Total sample
Very sure	66,4	57,3
Quite sure	22,8	23,3
Not so sure	6,2	7,6
Sure not	3,9	6,5
DK/NA	0,7	2,0

Source: CURS, October 2000

Table 6 above shows that in world where everybody follows polls and takes them into account when deciding whom to vote for, the percentage of people declaring that they are very surely going to vote is significantly higher than in the real world. All these statements confirm that **polls increase voting turnout**. In this sense one can talk about polls' influence, but it has nothing to do with manipulation of preferences. One can imagine a simple mechanism for this relationship. Released polls are presented in media as "horse races", as Americans called them. By periodically assessing parties and candidates' chances in the competition, potential voters feel themselves more and more involved in the competition. Therefore more people become interested in the election outcome and political offers, which eventually is going to increase the voting turnout.

Table 7: Voting turnout and reported following polls
-percentages-

Are you going to vote?	Do not follow polls	Total sample
Very sure	38,6	57,3
Quite sure	32,9	23,3
Not so sure	11,9	7,6
Sure not	15,9	6,5
DK/NA	0,8	2,0

Source: CURS, October 2000

Perceptions on political competition

Beyond simple facts related to voters' interest in following polls, there is something more important, namely the perceptions on the political competition. It is no doubt that people paying attention to polls is a crucial element, but perceptions are usually influenced by some expectations, public speeches, discussions with friends and relatives. Let's first observe the estimates given by voters themselves at the beginning of the 2000 general elections' campaign. Then what we need to do is comparing these perceived estimates with the polls estimates (which actually do not differ much from previous released polls).

In table 8 below one can notice that voters' expectations regarding parties' scores are quite similar to polls estimates, at least for the modal values. These should not be judged as real estimates given by voters for the certain parties at that specific moment, since the figures are indeed influenced by expectations of increasing or decreasing tendencies until the election day. PDSR is perceived somewhere between 30%-50%. Considering that there were polls rating PDSR with 34-36% along with other polls showing a 50% for PDSR, it appears normal to have a large range of perceptions for this party. CDR 2000 was perceived by most of the voters within 5-20% interval (the same situation as for PDSR: some polls rated CDR2K with less than 10%, while others with more than 10%), PNL was perceived in the same 5-20% interval and the same is true for PRM and PD. ApR was perceived within 5-10% interval. So in terms of the highest frequency the perceived estimates are quite consistent with polls estimates.

Table 8: Expectations for parties' scores
-column percents-

What score do you think the following parties will get in the elections...?	PDSR	CDR2000	PNL	PD	PRM	ApR
Under 5%	0,2	6,0	3,3	5,6	11,3	16,2
5% - 10%	0,7	17,8	16,6	22,0	21,1	23,0
10% - 20%	2,6	20,7	23,1	18,6	17,2	14,1
20% - 30%	8,5	12,3	13,6	10,9	8,5	5,3
30% - 40%	19,2	5,5	5,4	3,4	3,8	2,4
40% - 50%	19,9	1,9	1,5	2,1	1,1	1,0
Over 50%	19,9	0,4	0,7	0,2	1,0	0,3
NS/NR	28,9	35,4	35,9	37,2	36,1	37,8

Source: CURS, October 2000

Let's notice a high percentage of respondents declaring that they are not able to estimate, which is between 29-38%. One would say it is a natural fact, as not all the people follow the polls and also even those who are aware of the polls do not feel themselves able to predict the election outcome based on these polls. All the above statements are true for the presidency candidates. Therefore, being asked to predict the elections outcome, it is likely that the respondents based their own guesses on polls' results, although not being totally free of their own passions (for instance, there are some people who consider that PDSR is going to get somewhere between 5-10% in general elections, even though they declared they pay attention to polls results (PDSR 40-50%), which is probably more a wishful thinking than a rational judgement).

In fact table 9 shows that those who opt for a specific party are more optimistic about that party performance than the sample average and have a lower uncertainty as regarding the final outcome, which actually suggests an important statement: **the bandwagon and underdog effects are counterbalanced by the voters' expectations regarding the score of their favorite party.** Put it in different words it means that one could be so attached to a party or candidate, that even when exposed to pesimistic polling estimates, one will be more willing to distrust the poll and believe that changes are possible. Is it not really the behavior of many Romanian politicians by self-deceiving that miracles can happen during the electoral campaign?⁷

One might expect that these perceptions/expectations have an important role in determining bandwagon and underdog effects. In other words it is more important to take into account perceptions and expectations than a simple estimate at a given moment over the elections outcome (which is also a perception *per se*). Suppose one perceives that PDSR has a very high score (say 50%) at a given moment of the electoral campaign, but she has a theory that PDSR is not going to get more than 25% in elections (either because she does not trust polls or trusts more other alternative information or just fancies a different dynamics of voting behavior).

⁷ Unfortunately this self-deceiving behavior easily transformed into a campaign strategy to persuade political followers not to trust polls in order to keep them mobilized for the elections. There are also side-effects of this strategy in the long term. It is usually said that polls are also a "credible guard of the ballots". Suppose once a powerful group is ready to fake the elections outcome (which will produce a contrast with pre-electoral polls). Then the polls could not be invoked as benchmarks for proving the fraud. It is exactly the opposite of Vadim Tudor assertion: polls are instruments to prepare a major election fraud.

Then we should expect that she is not willing to adopt a bandwagon opportunistic behavior, even though that person has a tendency to vote for the winner.⁸

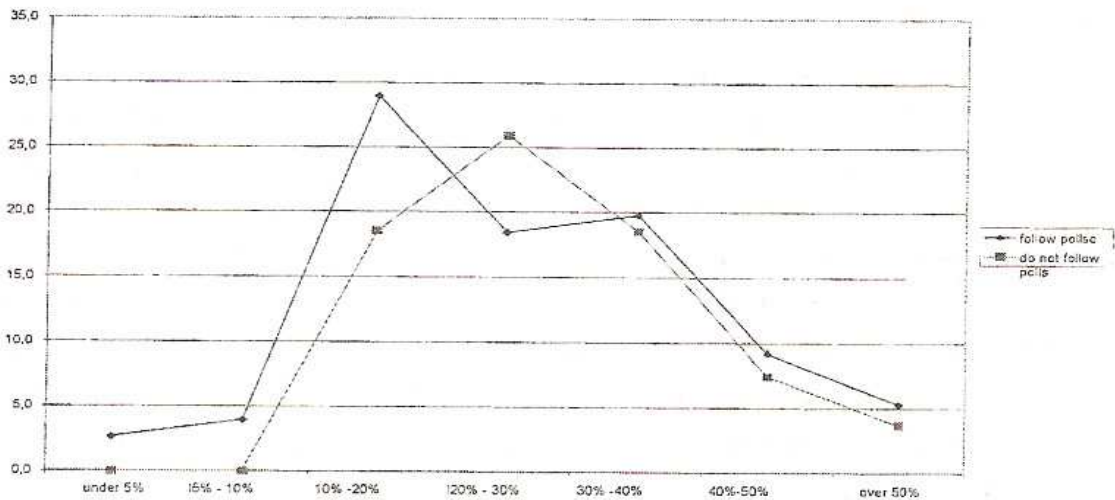
Table 8: Voters expectations on different party preference
-column percent-

	Vote for	All voters	Vote for	All voters	Vote for	All voters	Vote for	All voters	Vote for	All voters	Vote for	All voters
	PDS R	PDS R	CDR 2000	CDR 2000	PNL	PNL	PD	PD	PRM	PRM	ApR	ApR
Under 5%	0,0	0,2	0,0	6,0	1,9	3,3	2,0	5,6	1,1	11,3	2,2	16,2
5% - 10%	0,0	0,7	1,6	17,8	2,9	16,6	7,8	22,0	7,9	21,1	6,7	23,0
10% - 20%	0,2	2,6	14,8	20,7	26,2	23,1	<u>23,5</u>	18,6	18,0	17,2	<u>22,2</u>	14,1
20% - 30%	3,4	8,5	<u>36,1</u>	12,3	<u>20,4</u>	13,6	<u>27,5</u>	10,9	<u>27,0</u>	8,5	<u>26,7</u>	5,3
30% - 40%	14,6	19,2	<u>19,7</u>	5,5	<u>19,4</u>	5,4	<u>15,7</u>	3,4	<u>16,9</u>	3,8	<u>15,6</u>	2,4
40% - 50%	<u>23,3</u>	19,9	<u>9,8</u>	1,9	<u>8,7</u>	1,5	<u>9,8</u>	2,1	<u>3,4</u>	1,1	2,2	1,0
Over 50%	<u>38,1</u>	19,9	<u>3,3</u>	0,4	<u>4,9</u>	0,7	<u>2,0</u>	0,2	<u>7,9</u>	1,0	2,2	0,3
DK/NA	<u>20,4</u>	28,9	14,8	35,4	<u>15,5</u>	35,9	<u>11,8</u>	37,2	<u>18,0</u>	36,1	<u>22,2</u>	37,8

Source: CURS, October 2000

It would be very relevant from this point on to break down perceptions/expectations of voters on their reported interest to polls' results. Some of these voters follow polls, while others do not. Checking for different parties' followers we discovered that there no significant differences between the two distributions of perceptions.

⁸ It could be that in stable democracies, when polls have a long tradition, voters are able to assess possible changes between sample estimates and final outcomes. In Romania such a pace could not be perceived, especially because few elections have been held so far, none of them being similar to another one. For instance, not even specialists were able to predict that Vadim Tudor would have such a fast ascending in the last elections.

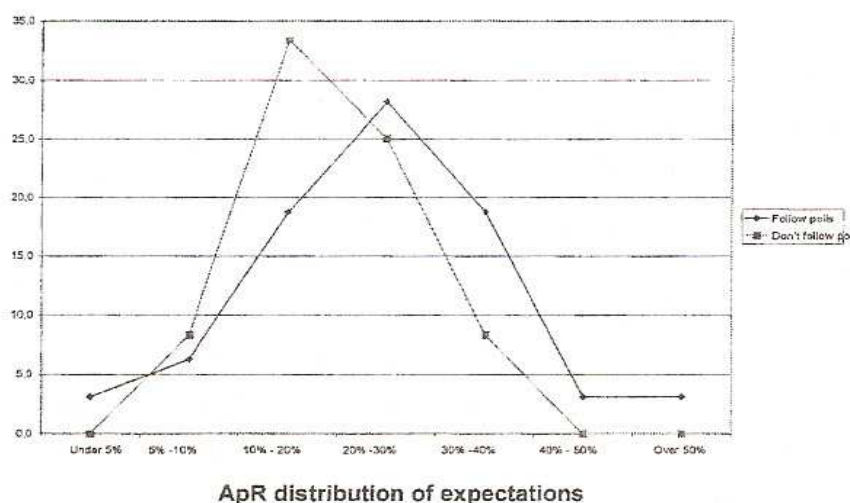


PNL distribution of expectations

In other words, either following or not following polls, voters of a specific party give the same estimates. There are only two exceptions: PNL and ApR. The contrast for these two cases is in the opposite directions. As the chart above shows PNL voters who follow polls are generally more pessimistic (or realistic, as they are closer to that moment polls estimates) than PNL voters who do not follow polls, that seem to be more optimistic. This effect is easy to understand and does not require more comments. It is clear that not having an objective estimate makes people relying on their own expectations and hopes when asked to give their own estimates, while access to objective estimates gives a greater chance to voters to confine within the polls limits. They are a bit more realistic and use polls information not only their own wishes in their predictions.

For ApR the effect is different. In the chart below one can see that ApR voters who follow polls are more optimistic than ApR voters who do not follow polls. This fact seems to be little bit counter-intuitive. While almost all the polls in September-October 2000 rated ApR around 5-10% it is expected that ApR voters who followed polls were more pessimistic than those who do not. In order to understand this relationship one should remember some specific events before and during the electoral campaign. Worry about the decline of the party after the local elections, ApR leaders have had the most aggressive campaign against opinion polls. From releasing fake polls within advertising space in newspapers, that favored their own party to threatening pollsters with a special law to regulate who has the right to conduct and

publish polls, ApR leaders use almost all imaginable tricks to discredit polls and keep their few followers mobilized for elections day. It is clear that those ApR voters who followed polls were directly involved in this debate started by their favorites. In fact, it is likely that those were really mobilized by optimistic encouragements and tricks to believe in the party chances. One cannot exclude an underdog effect (which we will prove below), that means compassion and solidarity with a so-called victim of the polls. Therefore a number of voters, worry about a possible failure of ApR as well as stimulated by triumphant discourses of their favorites, could have come to support ApR during the campaign. ApR voters who did not follow polls and consequently, neither the debate on polls' victimization, had no reasons to be more optimistic, but not pessimistic either.



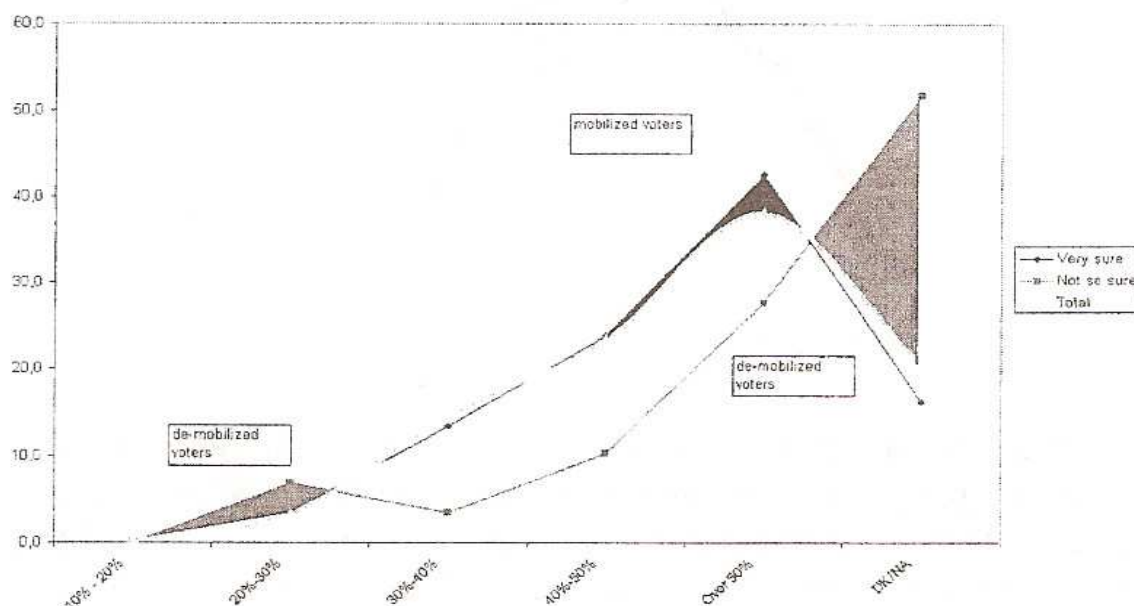
Let's see that they rate party score within 5-10% or 10-20%, which means probably something close to ApR score in local elections (about 10%). All of these prove that in fact ApR campaign against opinion polls was a two-edge sword and also a contradictory strategy, as the discourse tried to keep voters mobilized but also to attract compassionate voters. Either the polls were wrong and there was no need for compassion, or the polls were right and some of the voters could have been demobilized.

Perceptions on political competition and voting turnout

Let's stay for a while in the same area of perceptions and expectations, as another hypothesis related to polls influence could be tested. It commonly

said that beyond underdog and bandwagon effects, opinion polls might dramatically mobilize or de-mobilize voters. Small parties as well as big parties could be affected by this kind of effect. For instance small scores of certain parties, as reported by the polls, might determine the few followers, who could be really attached to the party from an ideological point of view, to stay home in the elections day (here come some slogans like: “stay with us not only with words but with deeds too”). On the other hand some lazy followers of big parties might conclude that their own contribution to the final victory is insignificant so why bother go voting? The side-effect is that when more followers reasoned the same way, the big party would eventually ended up as not such a big party (a danger that PDSR anticipated during the electoral campaign and tried to promote more moderate scores – around 40%, which was not enough to avoid coalitions⁹).

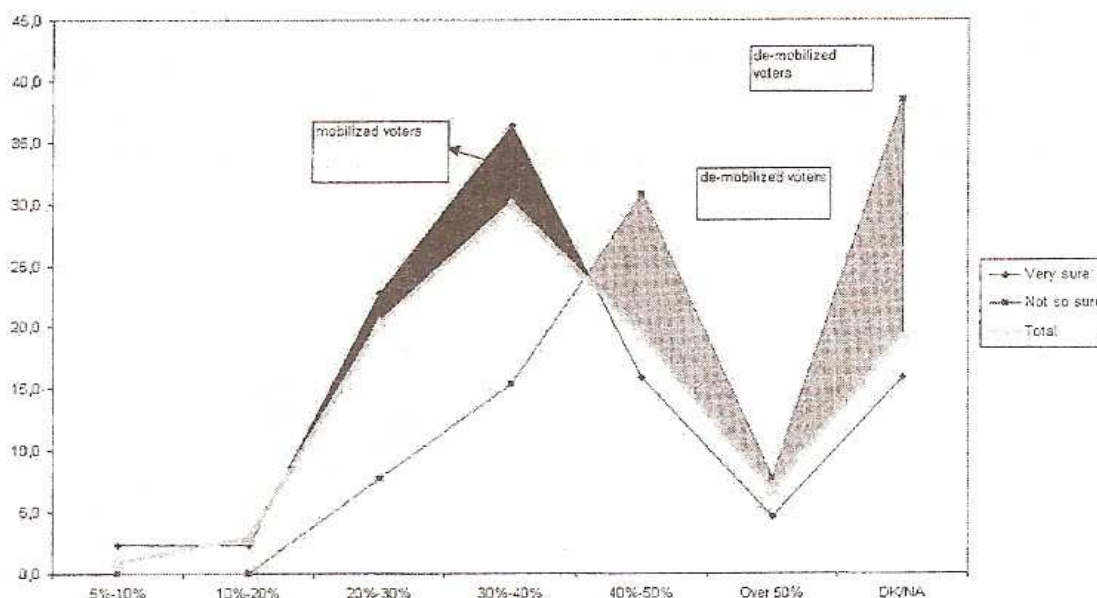
Let’s examine some real data from the 2000 electoral campaign, as to test these mobilization/de-mobilization effects. We chose only PDSR and PNL as examples, since the first party could be affected by “self-sufficient” de-mobilization, while the second one evidenced some contrasting elements.



⁹ This is another illustration of how both more favored and less favored actors in the polls have strong incentives to discredit polls, according to what they imagine about the effects on the electors. When PDSR was 50% rated in the polls, its leaders launched the story about “the polls conspiracy”.

In the chart above grey zones¹⁰ represent de-mobilization areas, while black zones represent mobilization areas. In the case of the PDSR the self-sufficient de-mobilization effect is partially proved, even though it was a high score party in the polls. De-mobilization emerges where perceptions are pessimistic as well as under uncertainty. Mobilization comes up where perceptions are rather optimistic or realistic as compared to polls estimates. However, de-mobilization under pessimistic expectations and uncertainty is apparent for all other parties, except for PNL.

PNL was not a big party in the polls as its score has been around 10-11% during the electoral campaign. Despite of this fact, it seems that PNL was affected but self-sufficient de-mobilization which is, as we have seen, specific for big political parties.



The chart above shows that PNL voters having optimistic perceptions on their favorite party place themselves within the demobilization area. The same is true for voters under uncertainty over the party score. We already saw that optimistic voters do not follow opinion polls. It is a proof how ignorance could lead to demobilization. In the case of PNL there is a joint effect. It was generally ascertained that people who do not follow polls have a low likelihood to vote. When the same people are optimistic over the party

¹⁰ Grey zones mark the area between percentages of those declaring that they are not surely going to vote when those are superior to the sample average. Black zones mark the area between percentages of those declaring that they are surely going to vote when those are superior to the sample average, which shows more mobilization.

performance then their mobilization degree is going to lower. This a special category we identified, since by and large those who do not follow polls are more vague over the final score of the candidate or party. Their going to vote is also unsure. We should probably consider another variable behind the other two (polls ignorance and uncertainty over the party performance) namely: **the interest in the elections**. It is already known that the interests in the elections is highly correlated with casting a ballot (in fact this is sometimes used as proxy to estimate voting turnout). Low interest in elections and political competition yields low interest in polls results and own predictions of party scores (undefined expectations). All of these will be found within low voting turnout area.

As regard the above discussed effects: pessimistic de-mobilization and self-sufficient demobilization, the data show that they both have a high probability of occurrence and they are linked to personal expectations rather than the perception over the real score in the polls. The first effect might theoretically affect any party, no matter if big or small, since in fact there are expectations that account for this effect rather than a rational calculus based on polls. The second effect does not seem to impinge on big parties, but might appear for average/small parties (as PNL), when voters are optimistic ignorant regarding the performance of the party.

Bandwagon and underdog

In order to test the two famous effects one should need a dynamic set of data (CURS-SAR poll October-November 2000). It is worth to remind that bandwagon refers to opportunistic changing of voting preference in favor of the best rated in polls, while underdog refers to changing the preference in favor of the weakest candidate. The study below give us an idea not only upon changing preferences during the electoral campaign, but also on voters expectations over parties' performances.

Table 9: Migrations to and from PDSR on expectations over the party score

-Row percent-

		Which score you think is likely that PDSR will get in elections?					
Flows		10%- 20%	20%- 30%	30%- 40%	40%- 50%	Over 50%	DK/NA
PDSR	Loyal	0,5	2,7	14,6	25,4	35,7	21,1
	Out	0	7,1	15,7	22,9	35,7	18,6
	In	2,8	13,9	22,2	30,6	8,3	22,2
Total		0,7	5,2	15,8	25,4	32,3	20,6

Source: CURS-SAR, Oct-Nov2000

There is a slight visible effect of *bandwagon* effect in the case of PDSR, as table 9 above evidences. Thus voters coming in have a greater chance to perceive the party score between 20-30% or 30-40%. No other effect is apparent. On the other hand even the bandwagon effect is debatable since only 8% of coming in voters perceive an over 50% score for PDSR. We should be careful in interpreting this data. Or we should rather be more nuance: **the bigger a party is perceived, the more opportunistic voters will attract, but there is an upper threshold, from which the opportunism is counter-balanced through the self-sufficiency effect (this party is too big to need my vote).**

A strong underdog effect is visible in the case of ApR. In fact more than a half of the people coming in toward ApR by the end of the campaign perceived the party performance either under 5% (no representation in the Parliament) or between 5-10%.¹¹

¹¹ This actually suggests that, surprisingly, it would have been more productive for ApR leaders not to deny polls results, but to confirm them in order to call for voters compassion. ApR was a kind of revelation after 1997 in the Romanian political life. It has got a honourable score in local elections which proved that it benefited from a large capital of sympathy. The following decline after local elections could have stimulated worries and compassion. It is not known for sure whether such a strategy would have worked better. Of course, accepting the serious condition of a hopeless party, it could have lost the optimistic group of voters.

Tabel 10: Migrations from and to ApR on expectations over party performance
-row percent-

		Which score you think is likely that PDSR will get in elections?						
Flows		Under 5%	5%-10%	10%-20%	20%-30%	30%-40%	40%-50%	DK /NA
APR	Loyal	0,0	7,7	23,1	30,8	15,4	7,7	15,4
	Out	0,0	7,1	28,6	14,3	14,3	0,0	35,7
	In 0	42,9	14,3	0,0	14,3	0,0	0,0	28,6
Total		8,8	8,8	20,6	20,6	11,8	2,9	26,5

Source: CURS-SAR, Oct-Nov200

In table 10 one can see that loyal voters perceive party chances within 20-30% area, which means very optimistic voters. De-mobilization is not entirely confirmed. It is true that 29% of those rating the party within 10-20% by the end of the campaign, but this was a figure superior to what ApR rated in polls (4-5%).

In the case of other parties, the two effects cannot be confirmed or infirmed from a statistical point of view. By any means it seems that there is an influence of polls on voting preferences in Romania. Even though the conclusions are not drawn from a dedicated designed study, we observed that for small parties (as ApR), the underdog effect is more visible than bandwagon. Other studies proved that bandwagon effect is more prominent than underdog (Mahrebian, 1998). These findings suggest that differences could come from the methodological design, but also differences occur from the specific context the study was conducted.

As we noticed, narrow views and stereotypes are mostly rejected by our studies. This is the case for statements like: PDSR would have get a lower score, had no polls been existent or ApR was affected by de-mobilization because of the polls.

Abbreviations

ApR: The Alliance for Romania
PDSR: The Social Democratic Party from Romania
PD: The Democratic Party
PRM: The Great Romania Party
PNL: The National Liberal Party
UDMR: The Democratic Union of Hungarians from Romania
CURS: Center for Urban and Regional Sociology
SAR: The Romanian Academic Society
IMAS: The Institute for Marketing Studies and Polls

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