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**TNS POLITICAL & SOCIAL**

# Public Opinion Polling in a Globalized World



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## **The Effects of Globalisation on the Perception of Democracy**

**Tony Cowling**

**Abstract** This chapter is based on the broad principle that democracy is “rule by the will of the majority”, a very slow changing concept, which is now confronted by a very fast changing, globalising world. It is shown how public opinion polling has developed as a part of the globalisation process and contributes to the democratic process. The article concludes that the concept and perception of democracy is challenged by globalisation and we need to reconsider how democracy should function in the globalised village.

### **1. Introduction**

The Greeks had a word for it – democracy comes from Demos (the people) and Kratia (power/rule). It is defined in the Oxford Shorter Dictionary as “a form of government in which the people have a voice in the exercise of power”. A sub-definition is “control of a group by the will of a majority of its members”. Whilst the concept is thousands of years old, it changed very little for over 2000 years, and only in the last 100 years or so has it started to go international, but it is not yet global. Freedom House claims that there was not a single liberal democracy with universal suffrage in the world in 1900, although today over 100 of the world’s nations claim to be democracies (not even a majority you note).

The concept of “universal suffrage” is of course even newer – in the United Kingdom women did not get the vote until the 1920’s, and my French mother-in-law did not have the right to vote until after the Second World War when she was over 50. Hence democracy as defined by the dictionary is still, like “clean water”, an aspiration for most people in the world.

Although claimed by over 100 countries, it means, and is, different things to different cultures. In some countries the right to vote does not imply a choice “between” candidates; in most countries nowadays, the right to vote does not give a voice in the choice “of” candidates; in much of the Arab world of course, whilst the will of the people is sounded, at village/city/regional level, this does not culminate in “a vote”. Even in Countries where people have votes, and a choice of candidate, they get elected on different bases – majority winner, proportional representation, transferable votes, et al.

Further, in a number of countries around the world, leaders still take the view expressed by General De Gaulle in the 1960’s “You have no need to ask the French voters their views, I know what the French want.....”

Or, as Patrick Chinamassa, Zimbabwe’s Justice Minister, said in August 2007, “Political reform is not necessary ... we are a democracy like any other in the world”.

Nevertheless, when TNS asks people around the world for their opinion of “democracy”, as we have done a number of times over the past few years, 80% on average still say it is the “Best option” and in the last poll, out of 60 countries monitored, only one (Russia with 41%), had a minority supporting it, and only five countries had less than two-thirds for it.

However, when TNS has asked questions about voters “satisfaction” with the system of democracy they have, opinions are much more divided, and in many countries there is a majority of people who are “not satisfied” with the democracy they live in.

Churchill’s remark that “democracy may not be the best system of government, but it is the best we have..... ”, still seems to hold true for most people around the world: but then this statement could also be said about the United Nations or global warming- and we know many people in the world are aware of the urgent need to address changes to both of these.

So, if we accept to the broad principle that democracy is “rule by the will of the majority”, then we have a very old, slow changing concept which is now confronted by a very fast changing, globalising world. Also, we have in most countries a very old, slow changing establishment (usually called our “leaders”), who owe their power and positions to the existing democratic system in their country, but as TNS surveys show, they increasingly lead a society in which a majority are increasingly aware of, and in many cases rapidly responding to, the effects of globalisation.

So, what are these global trends that are changing people’s view of democracy? In this short chapter it is impossible to discuss them all, so I focus on some aspects of survey research, communication and voter opinions, which as a worldwide market research company TNS is actively involved in monitoring.

## **2. Survey research and polling itself**

Surveys and polling, particularly in the political and social area, has expanded across the world almost hand in hand with the rise of universal suffrage and democratic voting. Dr George Gallup in the United States during the late 1930’s, and Mass Observation in the United Kingdom around the same time, were evolving methods which would tell governments what people felt on social issues, and their likely voting intentions. Surveys are of course the basis, and in a quantitative form, the only basis (short of an election or referendum) on which the views of the majority can be reliably measured.

TNS and the other market research companies now monitor on a regular and international basis attitudes to most political issues – hence opinion polling has become a key element of democracy. Opinion polling aims to measure the “will of the people”.

One of the effects of globalisation is that over the last 15 years (a very short time in the development of democracy) the market research industry and hence polling has gone global. TNS now has offices in well over 70 countries around the world, and monitors the attitudes and opinions of representative samples of votes on a regu-

lar basis in many more.

Further, the speed with which these views can be gathered and reported (thanks to telecommunications and more recently the internet) has dropped from a few months for Dr Gallup, to a few weeks in the 1980's, to a few days in the New Millennium. Hence, when a leading politician makes a statement or takes a decision nowadays the response of the people within his country can be measured within hours and the views of the world can be reported within days. This changes significantly the democratic environment and how it is perceived. In a perverse way we are getting back to the Greek tradition of being able to bring together the views of the people in real time, and hence have what approaches to a dialogue between leader and led.

Let us look at some examples of this. When Bush and Blair indicated their plans to attack Iraq in 2003, TNS and some of its worldwide partners were able to measure the views of people in 65 countries around the world within just 11 days. At that time, a majority of the electorate were “against” an invasion in over 60 countries (including USA and UK). This means the two leaders knew *before* taking the decision to invade that they were acting “against the will of the majority”.

TNS surveys have regularly monitored people's attitudes towards the various conflicts in the Middle East. In all cases over the past four years there has always been a majority, particularly in both Israel and Palestine, for the leaders to “seek a political solution for peace” – that is the will of a majority of the people.

As the issues which politicians have to address – drugs, terrorism, Third-World poverty, trade etc. become global issues and the world is aware of global opinion on them, so market research surveys are becoming the fastest and most reliable method of monitoring how people feel, and how their views are evolving on such issues. As the world globalises survey research is increasingly a key tool for actually applying the “democratic process”.

### **3. The growth of information and its availability**

There is no need for me to emphasise how the volumes of information the world produces on any subject has expanded over the past few decades, and there is no need for me to explain how the internet has transformed its instant availability. The world is awash with data. Such that it is now possible for almost anyone, and certainly and increasingly in many countries, the majority of voters to obtain many facts and figures on a given issue as rapidly as (so called) experts. Issue groups and involved individuals rapidly become as knowledgeable as and sometimes more knowledgeable than, the decision makers.

Added to this expansion of knowledge is the fact that more people are more “educated” - politicians across the world increasingly promote the benefits of better education. This growth in education, particularly in the developing world, means of course that people are better able to “make their own judgement on political issues”. This makes it harder for politicians to justify their decisions by claiming that the electorate cannot understand the complexities of a problem.

The Eurobarometer surveys that TNS regularly does for the European Commission continue to demonstrate that more people have knowledge of and definite views on the decision being taken at Brussels<sup>1</sup>. The growth of information also means that politicians can no longer claim not to be aware of their elector’s views or the media’s summary of them.

TNS Media Intelligence is one of the world’s largest gatherers and analysers of media content. In more than 40 countries around the world we provide, for both political and business leaders, regular and fast updates on media coverage of:

- Key issues they are currently facing
- Public reactions to these issues
- How these effect voters image and standing of politicians/leaders

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm)

Again the internet allows TNS to deliver this information far more rapidly than previously – typically on a daily basis and if desired, almost instantly.

TNS Cymphony, TNS' American internet company, now takes this to a new level - monitoring: blogs, individual websites and social network sites so that leaders can have real-time analysis of the key views and responses emerging from what has become known as Web 2.0.

Hence another mechanism is now in place for democracy – the opportunity for a dialogue, increasingly at a global level, between:

- Those who have to make decisions and
- The majority who have to live by them.

#### **4. The volume of legislation**

Estimates for the United Kingdom indicate that over the past 50 years the amount of legislation going through the British parliament has increased at least five-fold, whilst over the last 100 years it has gone up more than ten-fold. This is certainly part of a global trend that in part reflects the complexity of modern life and the number of issues requiring legislation. Yet in most democratic sovereign states there has been little or no change in the frequency with which the voters are given the right to exercise their “majority will”. Elections are typically still held with the same frequency as 100 years ago, and the period for which Presidents and Governments are allowed to rule remains typically four or five years and sometimes longer, but the volume and speed with which they legislate has increased dramatically.

Not surprising then that when TNS tries to measure and monitor involvement with the political process around the world, the general feeling of electors is one of decreased involvement in and disenfranchisement from political decisions. Our leaders now do, and

increasingly must, take decisions on issues that did not exist at the time of their election.

TNS monitors voter turn-out on a regular basis around the world. Results show that apart from those countries where one is obliged to vote, or pressured to vote, turn-outs are generally in decline - particularly amongst the young. Their views are frequently:

- Why vote, when you are not consulted on the issues that arise anyway (e.g. the current plans by European institutions and Member States' governments to have a "Reform Treaty" without having had one successful referendum of votes on the issue)
- With legislation on so many different issues how can I find one person, or one party, that reflects my views on all of them?

Allowing voters to put a tick in a box once every four to five years no longer seems to be democracy enough for an increasingly knowledgeable, educated and informed public.

## **5. The democracy index**

This declining trust in the concept of democracy is perhaps best demonstrated by the Democracy Index<sup>TM2</sup>. This Index is based on the following two questions which have been asked on a number of occasions in approximately 60-70 countries throughout the world.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.voice-of-the-people.net/>

<sup>3</sup> For further info, see [www.voice-of-the-people.net](http://www.voice-of-the-people.net)

**Table 1. The democracy paradox**

	<b>Elections are free and fair? YES</b>	<b>Ruled by the will of the people? No</b>
<b>West Europe</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>72%</b>
<b>Middle East (Israel – Turkey)</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>47%</b>
<b>North America</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>54%</b>
<b>The World</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>67%</b>
<b>Asia Pacific</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>69%</b>
<b>Latin America</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>68%</b>
<b>West Asia</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>60%</b>
<b>East &amp; Central Europe</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>86%</b>
<b>Africa</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>77%</b>

As one might expect a majority of people in the world (54%) consider that elections in their country are free and fair. Also as one might expect, the highest scores for elections being “free and fair” are typically in Western Europe (73%) and North America (61%) – in most other parts of the world the average falls below 50%.

However, when we asked people the question, “is your country ruled by the will of the people” we get an even larger majority saying “no”! This figure is high in Eastern Europe (86%) and Africa (77%) but perhaps most surprisingly it is also high (72%) in Western Europe.

Nowadays, in the 70 countries in which TNS last did this study<sup>4</sup>, there are nearly 40% who believe they live in a country “where the elections are not free and fair”, and so, “the country is not ruled by the will of the people”. The countries at the top of this “malcontents” group include, maybe not surprisingly, Ukraine, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Russia.

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<sup>4</sup> China was the only large country excluded from this study – because of the difficulty of asking such questions there.

However, India (62%), is also included: at first surprising until one looks at some of the other surveys done in India which show a country with dramatically rising ambitions and expectations for a more prosperous economic future, but where many people consider their country held back by a slow moving, over complicated, “democratic” system!

Perhaps surprisingly those countries most pleased with democracy are often ones where it is a comparatively new process.<sup>5</sup> In these countries one might consider the country to be still in the honeymoon period, and having free and comparatively fair elections seems to be a great step forward.

An interesting group consists of those countries that come high on both “having free and fair elections” but, at the same time, not being “ruled by the will of the people”. Whilst only about 25% of people in the world put themselves in this group, those countries with a very high score include: Germany (63%), Holland (59%), UK (51%), France (50%) and New Zealand (49%).

The Democracy Index™ for these countries indicates why these people might not bother to vote? These countries most clearly show the gap that is building up in the perceptions of electorates between:

- The system used for electing leaders in modern sovereign states, on the one hand, and
- The concept of democracy as people understand the word (i.e. “a form of government in which the people have a voice in the exercise of power”).

## 6. Concluding remarks

We have suggested that some of the main effects of globalisation are drivers for change in our democratic systems:

- better educated and knowledgeable electorates

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<sup>5</sup> E.g. Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Kenya.

- faster and almost immediate access to massive amounts of facts, figures on key political issues happening in the world
- increasing awareness of the opinions and attitudes of fellow electors, i.e. the public
- the rapid turnaround of opinion polls – hence politicians and their electors being aware of “the will of the majority”.

All these factors contribute to changing people’s expectations of what democracy is and *should* be! Hence when we monitor people’s “satisfaction” with the democratic process, TNS increasingly finds larger number of electors dissatisfied with the “democracy they live under”.

TNS found last year that less in one in ten Canadians could agree “we are satisfied with the democratic process in our country”. At the same time, a recent review of polls in the USA concluded that on a number of international issues a majority of Americans were dissatisfied with their government’s stance.<sup>6</sup>

In ancient Rome and ancient Greece it was difficult for the leaders to go forward with their proposed actions and decisions unless they had the support of the people. In a globalised world where we are moving towards the globalised village with survey research and information systems delivering the possibility of real time dialogues between the people of the world and it's leaders, the concept of democracy appears to be in need of a serious make-over.

This, of course, begs the question: Do the leaders who have achieved power through the old system have the desire or will to move us closer to a democratic concept as defined by the ancient Greeks?

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<sup>6</sup> For further info, see <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org>

