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# A New Global Common: Does Global Public Opinion Exist?

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Kancho Stoychev

# About the Author

**Kancho Stoychev**

President of Gallup International Association (GIA)

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42 Bolshaya Tatarskaya st., Moscow, 115184, Russia

It is far from certain whether global public opinion exists, but there is hardly any doubt that the struggle to dominate it is in existence – struggle getting ever fiercer. This is no paradox. In human history, non-existent things have quite often both caused enormous tragedies and produced mass outbursts of happiness. That is the way human mentality works – with illusion and reality intricately intermingled, and the difference between the two – as Mark Twain said – is like the difference between mermaid and a seal.

In classical works of social science, public opinion is usually conceived as a collective property, an expression of the collective's conception of itself and its role in history. Individuals could have a more or less correct interpretation of this *volonte generale*, to use Jean-Jacques Rousseau's term. If their interpretations were too deviant, they became viewed as being stupid, unaware, false, insane, or, at worst, criminal and a danger to society. But Rousseau assigns another meaning to public opinion: *volonte de tous*, the will of all. In this case, opinion is an attribute of individuals, not of the collective. It can be questioned and discussed, and it may be summarized as majorities and minorities (Marita Carballo). Jürgen Habermas explains that the idea of public opinion was the result of the appearance in the 18th century, within a delicate balance of social and institutional conditions, of a new social actor – the urban bourgeoisie standing between state and society. During the 1930s and 1940s, the idea of public opinion as a measurable quantity started to spread and was soon installed as a symbol of democratic life.

Although the roots of the survey method can be traced back to the 19th century, Dr George Gallup is usually credited for starting systematic public opinion research. In 1932, he did some polling for his mother-in-law Ola Babcock Miller in Iowa. Then in 1935, he successfully predicted Franklin Roosevelt's victory in the 1936 US presidential election with 60.8% of the vote as against his Republican opponent Alf Landon's 36.5%. The magazine *Literary Digest*, which had forecast Landon's victory against Roosevelt, employed a non-representative sample. The key features of survey research established by Gallup were the use

of random samples from a defined population, the use of standardized closed questions to measure attitudes and demographic characteristics of respondents, the administration of face-to-face surveys by trained interviewers, and the quantitative analysis of the results. Shortly afterwards George Gallup exported his approach to Great Britain in 1937 and France in 1938. Then just after World War II in 1947, he founded the first global body in that field – Gallup International Association, registered in Zurich, Switzerland.

Opinion polling is the child of the newspaper world, and the academic world later entered as a stepfather. A newspaper stands on two legs, journalism and advertising. So did polling, by extension (Hans Zetterberg). Dr Gallup was convinced that this process of influencing governments through opinion polls was more beneficial to democracy than the influence exerted by organized interest groups.

Critics repeatedly accused Dr Gallup and other polltakers of reprehensibly influencing officials, candidates, and political campaigns. Winston Churchill once contended that ‘nothing is more dangerous than to live in the temperamental atmosphere of a Gallup Poll, always taking one’s temperature.’ Churchill went on to say, ‘There is only one duty, only one safe course, and that is to try to be right.’ For his part, Dr Gallup argued in one of his six books, *The Sophisticated Poll Watcher’s Guide*, which came out in 1972: ‘Polling is merely an instrument for gauging public opinion. When a President, or any other leader, pays attention to poll results, he is, in effect, paying attention to the views of the people. Any other interpretation is nonsense.’ After all, he did not invent public opinion in 1935 when the first poll was published in the newspapers. There were a few thousand years before that, when people had been thinking about those matters, and there is also the tremendous tradition in thinking about public opinion in social philosophy, political science, etc., so that the young technique of polling in empirical research is really an outstanding task (Paul F. Lazarsfeld).

We live in a world where global trends affect us all and public opinion seems to be among the key elements shaping our democracies. Already back in 1922 Walter Lippmann stated,

Representative government, either in what is ordinarily called politics, or in industry, cannot be worked successfully, no matter what the basis of election, unless there is an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions.

Lippmann, in particular, referred to the free press as the key institution for the articulation of public opinion and today, more than 80 years later, this seems to be as true as ever.

For the first time in history, it can be successfully argued that global public opinion exists in sufficient measure to be called a singular entity, mainly due to the high penetration of global news coverage and the internet creating a common agenda. However, the research industry needs to continue working to fill out its representation of the planet's over seven billion inhabitants, noted Doug Miller from GlobeScan (a public opinion research consultancy). But he also warns,

Reliably measuring the views of what could be called the 'global body politic' is a significant feat for the survey research profession. At the same time, it must be admitted even by those of us who conduct this international research that global surveys systematically exclude significant numbers of countries as well as the poor and ultra-poor within participating countries.

Much more reserved on the supranational existence of global public opinion is Richard Wike from Pew Research Center:

As long as the nation-state remains the fundamental unit of international politics, comparing and contrasting public opinion at the national level will continue to have a great deal of value for debates about key global issues. However, this should not preclude researchers from using cross-national data to identify global trends, make regional comparisons, or develop non-regional categorizations based on economics, religion, culture, or other factors.

The will of the people is a global common in the framework of democracy. And, as Dr George Gallup noted, 'if democracy is supposed to be based on the will of the people, then somebody should go out and find out what that will is.' Free measurement and free publishing of the results from public opinion research became a defining synthetic characteristic of a democratic society to the extent to represent differentia specific of democracy. Nevertheless, how do we assess the quality of democracy in a given country? The fact today is that more than two thirds of the global population live in a political system which does not repress polling and publication of results from it. Moreover, via telephone, mobile, or internet connections about 90% of the global citizens are assessable for opinion research. Therefore, this assessment is impossible to be practically blocked by the respective authorities.

Global media coverage and connectivity penetration are *conditio sine qua non* but are not enough for the emergence of a global public opinion – a global awareness and global relevance of a specific problem, issue, or fact are needed. If a given problem is a global one, it does not automatically predetermine the existence of a global public opinion reflecting it. Public opinion is always an objective phenomenon nevertheless it consists of subjective views. If even public opinion reflects a non-existing reality, it is a separate reality of its own and lives its own life affecting the society.

For decades, the study of global public opinion has been conceived as simultaneous polling, conducted using a common questionnaire in as many as possible individual countries. Meanwhile, the world has definitely and inexorably become something much more complex than simple conglomerate of nations. In the age of instant global communications, new regional (not in the mere geographical sense) constellations are forming around almost every major internationally meaningful event. Let us consider the most recent case of Ukraine. Some have hastened to postulate that this is in fact the beginning of a new Cold War, new total East–West confrontation. In the realm of public opinion, however, nothing of the kind has happened – no such phenomenon has been registered on the geographic regional level in human perceptions. In Europe itself something non-trivial has occurred – one set of opinions emerges in Poland and the Baltic states, another quite different one in Southern Europe and the Balkans, a third – in France and Germany. In fact, on this issue, the geography of perceptions gets together in the same region countries, like Canada, Lithuania, Australia, Great Britain, the United States, and Poland. And in another, separate region – Venezuela, China, Hungary, Serbia, Cyprus appear together... Contemplating the world through the prism of national states – the conventional approach that still predominates – is turning increasingly unproductive and misleading.

The reason for this phenomenon, in my view, is the central contradiction of our time – the contradiction between the global economy and local political regulation. Overcoming this contradiction will be a slow, difficult (and hopefully – peaceful) process. And the path towards globalization of politics will inevitably – for the moment – lead through regionalization. Instead of an aggregate of nations, mankind will see a complex balance between regions. Substantive political discourse will be conducted between regions, major conflicts will be regional, natural and ‘imposed’ alliances will be regional, too. Political processes can no longer be understood unless we start seeing them in regional terms and learn to analyse the bloody conflicts throughout the world through the prism of struggle for the consolidation of regions or for leadership

within regions. That is why, while I am in doubt about the existence of a global public opinion, I am firmly convinced that genuine regional public opinions are emerging, and they shape those opinions that we mistakenly continue to see and refer to as 'national' opinions.

The manifestations of a genuinely global public opinion are rare, often fraught with danger or illusion, and carry strong implications – 'bird' flu, prohibition of smoking, terrorism, 'The Millennium Bug 2000', etc. The manifestations of regional public opinion occur daily and have major practical consequences. I am convinced that the path to self-awareness of mankind as a single entity passes through the regionalization of human awareness, and that the task of the conscientious researcher of world public opinion is a correct measurement and reflection of the self-awareness of regions. The biggest difficulty of this endeavour is that depending on the specific object of investigation, the configuration of a region is fluid and subject to change in each individual case.

They say that nothing is more volatile than time and public opinion. This is true as long as time and public opinion relate to transient processes. However, if we analyse what Fernand Braudel called 'slow processes', we can see that public opinion plays a central role in our fractured world today. Public opinion polls have developed key mechanisms of democratic societies ('What presidential candidate should I vote for?') and as well as market economies ('Which product should I buy?'). In an irreversibly globalized world, public opinion is steadily transcending state boundaries. We do not need sophisticated research techniques to prove this – we need to explore the world as it evolves around us. All major conflicts of the last decades were preceded by a decisive battle to win world public opinion. Likewise, these conflicts were reconciled on the same terrain.

Did public opinion take this new role when the world was coming out of the Cold War? It is hard to say because we have not yet had sufficient time to understand fully this sui generis episode in the history of humanity. One hundred years from now, every school learner will know the answer. Until then, we will have to learn to better understand this major new player in our lives – the opinion of people across the world. In the meantime, here are some practical observations which might serve as 'biblical commandments' in polling:

- Governance based on the constant obedience of public opinion is possible. But such governance never comes to a happy end.
- Always hear public opinion, but never listen to it.
- There is no clever answer to a dull question.

- Whatever you ask people, they will always give an answer. But that does not mean that they are answering what you are asking them.
- Even the most unsolvable problem reflected through the prism of public opinion looks fully solvable.
- If as a pollster you are in doubt between intuition and people's answers, better follow people's answers.
- There is no politician who won a battle with the pollsters. Not because the pollsters are very strong, but because only a weak politician would fight with them.
- It is said that public opinion is repressive, leftist, and conservative. There are no arguments against that.
- In the study of public opinion the facts of the moment are nothing, but the trends are everything.
- When public opinion becomes progressive, the government is perverted. That is why in the absence of public wisdom it is public opinion that governs.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All citations are from 'Voice of the People – What the World Thinks' (2015) and 'Polling around the World: 70 years Gallup International Association' (2017), editing by K. Stoychev and publishing by GIA.





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[valdai@valdaiclub.com](mailto:valdai@valdaiclub.com)