Joint EC-UNDP Thematic Workshop on Sustainability in Electoral Administration: Adequate Resourcing for Credible Elections
Public opinion: A necessary institution for sustainability?

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Why bringing public opinion into this forum on sustainability of electoral administration?

- Jointly with the **electoral system** and **political parties**, **public opinion** constitutes a key foundation of democratic government, and therefore of the arbiter of elections the EMB.

- Wherever the three elements are robust and well connected, credible elections help consolidating the democratic system. The system becomes politically sustainable and the EMB may act as a neutral credible arbiter.
What public opinion is not about

• The results by opinion polls
• What some people casually talk about on a given topic
• Media news by themselves
• Speeches by politicians
• Sudden occasional public outbursts
• Popular revolt even with revolutionary consequences. These are just states or moods of the public.
Conceptual and operational definition of public opinion

• The opinion of a public (several publics may exist subjects of opinion) regarding an issue on which an authoritative decision is already being expected or can be demanded in the near future.

• Public opinion is an institution of democracy, which grows and consolidates with time and democratic experience of the populace.
What is an institution

• A patterned or **consistent response to a recurrent problem** (examples: marriage, tax system, prison system).

• To which recurrent problem does public opinion respond? The imperative for **well-informed authoritative decisions** by public authorities, which **respond and match with the real needs** of the people.
Opinion formation and consolidation

• Growing progressively with time and democratic experience through feeding and maintenance efforts by the elites (not only political) and the public

• Credible leadership at all levels

• Professional/independent media from undue interferences

• Well informed/responsible public
Evolving trends and shapes of stof
states of opinion

- Timing of two kinds (chronological and political)
- Patterns of growth: Linear or curvilinear
- Steps forwards and steps backwards (time of populism and weakness of representation?)
- Shapes of opinion states: unipolar (consensus), bi-polar (confrontational), multi-polar (varying directions)
Evolving trends (2) per stage of democracy

- Post-conflict scenarios: no public opinion proper
- Emerging/transitional democracies: growing institutional challenge
- Stagnant weak democracies: one among other weakly-run institution
- Stagnant well-established democracies: challenges of public confidence and credibility while the institutional framework survives as main safeguard of democratic elections and
Opinion patterns on the EMB

Opinion polls from the 1990’s:

- Australia, Ghana, India, Spain: Massive public support (Morling, McCarthy, De Souza, Lopez-Pintor).
- Latin America: split opinion or negative, except majoritarian support in Uruguay, Chile, and Costa Rica (Latinobarometro, McCoy).
- Russia, Ukraine: split opinion (IFES).
- Central Asia: EMB little known with public support in Uzbekistan and critical opinion in Tayikistan (IFES).

Corollary: a unipolar positive opinion state, ideal for an EMB.
How to help growing a robust public opinion?

- Working with **the public mind**, the residence of public opinion as an institution.
- More specifically, a responsive government and parliament that deliver;
- Neutral professional judiciaries;
- Political parties which are genuine democratic, non-corrupt and transparent;
- Professional/independent media;
- Responsive and transparent trade union, professional and business organization, civil society organizations;
- The educational system;
In conclusion

How the common citizen can help:

• Impact on the role of opinion leaders

• The two-step-flow of communication

• In the overall, it is the democratic quality of the system of government that matters.