



**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 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.