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ALL ARTICLES, DEMOCRACY, FEATURED, GERMANY

Why governments want to learn about citizens' preferences

Democratic governments conduct extensive public opinion research, but we know little about how they use it. When and why do they seek to find out what the public thinks? Opening the black box of government polling in Germany, **Anja Durovic** and **Tinette Schnatterer** find governments exploit polls in a highly strategic way

An instinct for capturing the popular mood?

The media often credited Germany's former Chancellor, Angela Merkel, with having a **sixth sense** for capturing the political mood of her population. On the one hand, despite the multiple emergencies during her tenure – Eurozone crises, so-called refugee crises and Covid-19 pandemic – her government was extremely stable and long-lasting. Indeed, Merkel worked with four US presidents, five British prime ministers, and four French presidents.

At the same time, Merkel was responsible for some of the most significant political U-turns in postwar Germany, including the nuclear phase-out, the legal recognition of same-sex marriage and the end of compulsory military service. Most of the time, these policy changes were in line with public opinion. To ensure they were, during Germany's 19th legislative period (2013 – 2017) alone, the Chancellor's office conducted around 374 polls, which kept the government well informed on the popular mood.

Governments help shape public opinion

American presidents regularly commission polls; indeed, commissioning of opinion polls by political elites has also become widespread in most Western democracies **and beyond**, so Merkel was no exception. **French media** recently revealed that President Emmanuel Macron commissioned no less than 300 polls between June 2017 and March 2021.


opinion polls is exogenous to governments' behaviour. However, it is high time we also consider governments as actors in the *creation of* public opinion measured by polls.

Why we should study government polls

If public opinion, at least in its surveyed form, is itself a social construct, we can start by focusing on governments' polling activity. **Most research** on the relationship between public opinion and public policy seeks to determine how they influence each other. If that is so, we need to study and explain them in the first place. So, when and why do governments want to learn about what the public thinks?

To answer this question, we must find out which factors determine the number of survey questions governments commission at different points in the electoral cycle. We also need to identify the different logics of representation behind this polling activity.

New data on government polling

Until now, we could not answer fundamental questions about the functioning of contemporary representative democracies for want of access to data. Analysing the factors that determine the intensity and logic of government polls requires access to all questions asked by a government during a given period. **In our recent research**  , we present evidence from Germany, using a new database of all survey questions commissioned by the government between 2013 and 2021.

How many and what questions to poll – and why?

Polls can play a role in deciding which policies a government should focus on implementing and – more generally – to monitor those policy priorities. To adjust to new political landscapes, governments must also make compromises over the course of a legislative term. When governments try to anticipate voters' reactions, they must adapt to changing voter demands. Thus, the intensity of government polling fluctuates depending on the changing importance of policy issues, according to popular opinion. The government can, therefore, use polls in a reactive way, too.

months in office, she commissioned significantly more polls on salient issues.

Merkel commissioned significantly more polls on government priorities during her first three months in office and significantly more polls on salient issues in her final three months

The fact that German governments poll differently at different points in the electoral cycle suggests that governments use this method strategically, responding to different voting or policy incentives. This underlines the importance of understanding governments as active players, not merely as consumers of public opinion.

In addition, the German government asked fewer questions on policy issues that Merkel's party 'owned', ie issues on which voters give them a trust advantage over other parties. This could indicate that the government asks fewer questions when it already feels sufficiently informed on a particular topic.

Understanding modern democratic governments

We could interpret Merkel's intensive use of polls as a focus on elements of anticipatory representation. Indeed, she was known for a certain **flexibility regarding electoral promises**, including phasing out nuclear energy and abolishing compulsory military service. She was also known for her receptiveness to changing public opinion, especially regarding external crises.

Merkel's intensive use of polls – and receptiveness to public opinion – could account for the stability of her government

This could account, in part, for the stability of Merkel's government, because promissory representation works badly in periods of rapid change. Conversely, the results of our study could also help explain the conundrum of governments that succeed in keeping campaign promises, but quickly become unpopular. One such is the government of former **French President François Hollande**.

Lifting the veil on when and why governments commission opinion polls thus helps to better understand how representation in contemporary democracies works.

This article presents the views of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the ECPR or the Editors of *The Loop*.



Angela Merkel

Germany

government

Opinion polls

political representation

public opinion

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