

Political Parties, Mass Media and Opinion Polls in Greece

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1. Introduction: Opinion polls as a political phenomenon – the triangular relationship

Opinion polls constitute a phenomenon of modern democracy and a component which is indivisible from the present form of politics and the political system. The post-war period has been characterised by their mass production and the rapid expansion of their use (Katzourakis 1985; Brudburn & Sudman 1988; Moon, 1999). Their emergence and – in effect – interposition between public opinion, the mass media and the political parties, creates a triangular relationship which has multiple effects on the operation not only of the media but also of political parties. Furthermore, opinion polls cause reconfigurations and transform the very relationship between the media and the parties (Lavrakas & Holley 1991; Kavanagh 1995; Lavrakas & Traugott 2000). Although the phenomena of voter volatility and party de-alignment are a hindrance and increase the possibility of error, opinion polls nevertheless remain the best available guide to public attitudes on political and social issues. Generally

speaking, there is a basic distinction between Public Opinion Polls, which relate to the mass media and Private Opinion Polls, which relate to political parties and other groups, agencies or organisations that influence politics. Today, opinion polls are conducted on behalf of a very wide range of clients, including the mass media, political parties, local authorities, pressure groups, think tanks, NGOs, advertising agencies, communication companies and even wealthy individuals. Most are conducted on behalf of the mass media and to a large extent made public. Internationally, the mass media are the best clients of opinion poll companies¹. In Greece, this trend is still in its infancy and furthermore, it is significantly constrained by the economic crisis which is conjuncturally affecting mass communication organisations.

The elevation of opinion polls to the position they hold today has been the result of a series of known transformations in politics, political parties and the form of democracy in the post-war period (Ferrajoli 1985; Panebianco 1988; Mair 1990, 1997; Katz & Mair 1994, 1995). The three main trends which have made this development possible are the following: *Firstly*, the changes within political parties which have led to their bureaucratisation and the strengthening of the role of the party leadership. The downgrading of the role of the mass organisation, as a belt for conveying the will of the people to political representation, brings about the professionalisation of politics, which in turn allows the transfer of political functions to private agencies. *Secondly*, the elevation of the mass media and the new broader role which they have assumed for the production and reproduction of politics, which results in the creation of a *new public sphere*. Politics is now mediated chiefly by the media. The action of political parties, which once consisted in formulating strategy and policy, is being increasingly

¹ According to the relevant data which are available for France, a total of 1,139 opinion polls were conducted in 1995, i.e. more than 95 public opinion surveys per month. Of these, 698 or 61.3% were conducted on behalf of radio/TV media and the Press.

Table: Published public opinion polls in France, 1992-95

	1995	1994	1993	1992
Opinion polls	113	105	102	979
Of which for the Mass Media	698	647	523	492
%	61.3	61.4	51.2	50.3
Per day	3	2.9	2.8	2.7
Per month	95	88	85	82

Source: Opiniomètre, Nos. 38, 54, 46, 62

confined to ‘communication techniques’, while the ‘duties’ of representing citizens are being informally ‘assigned’ to the media (Mavris 1994, 1996; Papathanasopoulos 1997; Raymond 1997; McNair 1998; Colin 1999). A partial consequence of this trend towards the strengthening of the media – which also has significant ramifications for opinion polls – is the predominant role assumed by television in the coverage of elections. Characteristic in this respect is the experience of US television networks, which has led, in the last two decades, to the development of new forms of election polls, *namely the canvassing of voters outside polling stations*. A method which has now become prevalent also in all European countries². *Thirdly*, the modern crisis of representative democracy, that is, the crisis of the traditional representative institutions, the political parties and the trade unions (Péllassy 1992; Klingemann & Fuchs 1995; Hayward & Page 1995; Mavris 1996). *The crisis of representation strengthens the position of opinion polls as an instrument for identifying the attitudes of society. Due to their increasing alienation from ‘those at the bottom’, opinion polls are becoming increasingly necessary to ‘those at the top’, i.e. to the political elite who take the decisions.*

2. The development of opinion polling in Greece

For historical reasons, the phenomenon was late to appear in Greece. The form of the post-civil war state and political system, the organisation of the political parties and the Press, as well as the underdevelopment of the social sciences and research, as an ideological consequence of the civil war, did not allow, nor made possible the development of opinion polling (Katzourakis 1985; Drymiotis & Nikolakopoulos 1989; Nikolakopoulos 1995; Mavris 1999). In effect, domestic opinion polling was initiated in the post-dictatorship period and more precisely, in its late subperiod (after 1989). The changes in the party and political system of the Third Hellenic Republic, since the early 90s, have led to the strengthening of their role and importance also in

² *Exit polls (sortie des urnes)* are sample surveys conducted on election day outside polling stations, while voting is still in progress, which are used to forecast the outcome of an election. The first experimental exit poll was conducted under the direction of Warren Mitofsky, by the US television network CBS in the Kentucky elections in November 1967 and in mayoral elections in New York in 1969. The use of the new method was subsequently adopted by other networks (NBC 1973, ABC 1980, et al.) but *only for analysing the election result*. From 1982 onwards, exit polls were also used as a *method for predicting the election result*. Regarding this, see Mitofsky, 1991; Levy, 1983: 54-67; Drymiotis & Nikolakopoulos, 1989; 16-29; Moon 1999: 134-170.

Greece. The 1996 parliamentary elections constituted a milestone in this process, not only regarding the firm establishment of pre-election opinion polls, but also the use of exit polls by private television networks and state television.

During the *pre-dictatorship period* in Greece, political and electoral opinion polling appears to have been extremely limited. The form of the post-civil war state and political system, the form of organisation of the political parties and the Press, as well as the (resulting) underdevelopment of the social sciences and research, as an ideological consequence of the civil war, did not allow, nor made possible the development of opinion polling (Mavris 1999). The systematic development of opinion polling in Greece began after 1974. Political opinion poll results were first published on the eve of parliamentary elections in 1977 (Katzourakis 1985; Nikolakopoulos 1995). In this period, opinion polls were conducted only sporadically, their political impact continued to be limited, as also was their exposure in the mass media. The climate was to change however in the 80s. In actual fact, this change became evident in the period 1989-90, when opinion polls began to become necessary, not only to political parties but also to the mass media. Among the factors which contributed to this development were changes in political parties which began in 1989, as well as in the mass media with the growth of private television and the ensuing intensity of competition among the electronic media. In the September 1996 elections, five television stations³ inaugurated the use of *exit polls* to predict the election result in a *parliamentary contest*, but not without certain side effects⁴. The method had already been used during the 1994 European elections, as well as during municipal elections held later the same year, in the three largest municipalities of the country (Athens, Piraeus, Thessaloniki). This marked a significant change, since it

³ VPRC/ERT, OPINION-BVA/MEGA, ALKO/ANT1, KAPPA RESEARCH/STAR, EURINCOM/SKY

⁴ Because of very intense competition, certain television networks announced estimates of the election result, based on the exit polls, shortly before voting ended. (This phenomenon was repeated in municipal elections in October 1998). The problem which arose from the unacceptable announcement of forecasts before voting had ended has, of course, nothing to do with the new method itself, which was generally acknowledged to have been successfully applied, but rather with its misuse by the mass media. In addition, the fact should not be overlooked that the political consequences of this breach (influencing the electorate) were rather limited: according to VPRC/ERT's exit poll data, in the parliamentary elections of 1996, between 18:00 and 19:00 only 2.3% of the electorate cast their votes, while after 19:00, when the breach was committed, just 0.2%. Consider also the opinion of Councillor of State Mr. F. Stergiopoulos to the Electoral Court, recommending that the Court reject the objection submitted by New Democracy deputy Mr. M. Kefalloyannis, who had requested the invalidation of the

completely overturned the traditional way of broadcasting and covering elections, while consolidating television's dominant position with respect to election coverage.

Political opinion polling – both public and private – has been steadily growing in Greece in the last ten years. In 1996, in the short election campaign period prior to parliamentary elections in September, a total of *six national Opinion Polls* were conducted, *five* prior to the 1999 Euroelections, while in the run-up to the most recent parliamentary elections in April 2000, *eleven* polls were published. In 2001, even though it was not an election year, *seventeen* national opinion polls were made public, while in 2002, a year of municipal and prefectural elections, the phenomenon took on an entirely new dimension. For the first time to such an extent, opinion polls were conducted (mainly private surveys) on behalf of political parties and candidates in most prefectures of the country and in nearly all large cities. Opinion polling is now extending to the local community level, virtually monopolising the interest of the local mass media and – to a lesser or greater degree – replacing candidate selection procedures within political parties. Similar phenomena had been observed also in the previous Municipal/Prefectural elections in 1998, but clearly to a lesser extent. According to European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research (ESOMAR) data for Greece, the total turnover generated by public opinion surveys, opinion polls and social surveys of the 23 companies/members of the Association of Greek Market and Opinion Research Companies (AGMORC) – tripled in a period of just three years, increasing from € 844,000 (GRD 287,500,000) in 1997, to € 2,424,000 (GRD 826,000,000) in 2000. However, as a percentage of the total turnover of the market research branch, it still represents only a very small share: from 2.5% in 1997 it rose to 5.1% in 2000 (ESOMAR 1998, 2001). Evidently, their political and ideological significance is far greater than their economic importance.

3. Opinion polls and the mass media: Linkage and effects

elections on the grounds that the announcement of the forecasts influenced voters who had not yet voted. (TA NEA, 24.3.1997).

The blossoming of political opinion polling is closely linked to the development of the mass media. *In most countries, the findings of public opinion surveys are published on a regular basis, more frequently (almost daily) in newspapers and magazines, less frequently on television* (Foundation for Information 1997: 5).

The Press uses opinion polls extensively, while now also in Greece, a number of newspapers have in recent years conducted relatively systematic pre-election opinion polls⁵. As far as the Press is concerned, the publication of opinion poll results is a very important means of promotion (Kavanagh 1995). The poll findings are usually featured on a newspaper's front page under arresting (and very often misleading) headlines. During elections, the polls will probably be reported by the main television news bulletins, which may be beneficial for the newspaper's circulation. Of course another factor which has contributed to the significant growth of opinion polling is the increase in the number of news programmes on television. The use of opinion polls by the media constitutes a trend which fully responds to their dual capacity: on the one hand, as news media and, on the other, as private companies exposed to competition. The media substantiate and even legitimise their news stories with the (scientific or not) prestige of opinion polls, while at the same time extending their sphere of influence. They use opinion polls extensively and public opinion surveys in general, not only in pre-election periods, but also when covering any issue which may arise in the context of current affairs. With opinion polls more than anything else, the media manage not only to cover the news, but also create it (Lavrakas & Traugott 2000). The qualitative element which goes some way to explaining the present-day prominence of opinion polls, one could say, is their *absorption by the media*. Their use by the media on a massive scale has led to their *linkage* with the media. In countries with a longer relevant tradition, steadfast and long-term co-operation has been established between television networks, as well as newspapers, on the one hand and opinion poll organisations on the other, such as the collaboration between CNN/Gallup in the USA, MORI/Times/BBC in the UK, Sofres/Le Monde/TF1 and CSA/Liberation in France, although similar collaboration has not yet crystallised in Greece.

⁵ The newspaper TA NEA was the first to inaugurate the systematic monitoring of trends in public opinion by establishing a political barometer in 1996, which is conducted by the company VPRC.

3.1 *The publication of opinion poll results by the mass media*

While the frequent publication of opinion polls has improved the capacity of many journalists and politicians to read survey findings more carefully and with greater discrimination, generally speaking the desired level of mature reporting of results by the mass media has not been attained. On the contrary, the way in which results are reported continues to pose a problem and is a source of constant controversy. Opinion polls are very often reported in a distorted or selective way. Research organisations cannot control how the media cover and present – let alone headline – their data (Kavanagh 1995: 114). The codes of practice for reporting polls, which have been implemented by associations of research companies (ESOMAR 1996; AGMORC 1996) are not as a rule binding on the media. In Greece, a similar code has been adopted only by the state broadcaster (ERT) along the lines of the BBC (BBC 1993), but so far it has not been applied in practice. The majority of the media confine their interest to predicting the election result. The excessive exposure and attention given by the media to the election ‘horse race’ (Kavanagh 1995: 114) leads to the impoverishment of public and political debate, the oversimplification and distortion of the electoral process and of the quality of democracy. It is often the case that quite interesting material, other than voting intentions or the rating of party leaders, is either neglected or presented in a deficient manner. Moreover, a standardisation and ‘convergence’ has been seen among pollsters to a handful of basic questions/variables (voting intention, popularity of party leaders, best prime minister, which party will win the next elections, etc.), which trace only schematically the complex and rapidly changing political and social reality.

3.2 *The effects of using opinion polls for the mass media*

The use of opinion polls has significant effects on the operation of the media, for it considerably increases their influence and strengthens their position vis-à-vis the political parties. The effects of using opinion polls for the media can be summarised in the following three points: 1) To begin with, it considerably strengthens their role in the pre-election campaign and, as noted previously, makes television a predominant factor in election coverage. Nowadays, in most countries, hardly a day passes during

the pre-election campaign when an opinion poll is not published. During the last week there is a deluge, while even on polling day, forecasts and analyses of results are made on the basis of exit polls (Lavrakas & Holley, 1991; Kavanagh 1995; Lavrakas & Traugott 2000). 2) A new dimension of opinion polls is that they influence and shape the judgements and comments of journalists and commentators, since they are generally regarded as the best indicators of how the electorate is responding to the campaign. 3) Through opinion polls, the mass media can today influence political agenda setting to a greater degree, either positively or negatively. By investigating the mood of public opinion, they often spotlight issues which have been neglected by the political elite, but which are of concern to voters and may constitute a criterion for the way they vote. Examples of such issues in various election battles have been immigration, crime, etc. But also conversely, by shifting – for political reasons – the focus of public interest to less important issues, downplaying or obscuring the more important ones.

4. Opinion polls and political parties

Similarly, the consequences of the emergence of opinion polls for political parties are of two types which, generally speaking, correspond to the distinction between public and private opinion polls described previously.

4.1 *The effects of public opinion polls on relationships between the mass media and political parties*

The use of opinion polls by the mass media also modifies their relationship with the political parties, strengthening their position vis-à-vis the latter. Dennis Kavanagh (1995) has concisely summarised these effects. 1) It is now becoming clear that opinion polls no longer simply reflect public opinion but are a major influence on the conduct and interpretation of the election campaigns of political parties (Kavanagh 1995: 120). The examples provided by England in 1992 are well known, when opinion polls gave an erroneous picture of the strength of the Labour Party, but also the recent French presidential elections, where – irrespective of the subjective intentions of opinion pollsters and researchers, they again gave an inaccurate picture

of the threat posed by Le Pen and strengthened – de facto – the complacency of a segment of the electorate and the propensity to abstain. 2) The effectiveness of parties' election campaigns is assessed by commentators and analysts on the basis of opinion polls. 3) Opinion polls influence the behaviour of 'markets', of economic players and of investors, who in any case are already nervous because of the political uncertainty induced by an election. 4) At press conferences and in media interviews, party managers and press spokesmen are expected to comment on opinion polls – whether good or bad – because the media cover them so intensively (Kavanagh 1995: 119). 5) There is no doubt that opinion polls decisively affect the morale and mood of politicians and party managers. There are plenty of examples. The significant lead of the conservative New Democracy party in post-election polls during the past two years (2000-2002) in Greece has engendered a sense of defeatism among many senior members of the ruling socialist party (PASOK) and conversely, has created a climate of euphoria among their counterparts in the main opposition party. 6) Opinion poll results are systematically discussed at the level of the highest steering bodies of the political parties, while very often the parties themselves give for publication (or leak) the results of polls which are favourable for them, a phenomenon which appears to be more intense in Greece. 7) Opinion polls that are negative for a party have side effects and often lead to crises within the party, challenges against the leadership, the leader, or against other party officials. There is a very recent and extreme example of a Greek political party which dissolved itself because of opinion polls⁶.

Consequently, the reporting of opinion polls has become an important factor and a decisive event of pre-election campaigns. In Greece particularly, this 'side effect' tends to become generalised and apply also in periods other than the pre-election period, something which is probably a Greek peculiarity. The publication of opinion polls has taken on a peculiarly inflated importance, each time being elevated to a major political event, often with catalytic results on the political scene and within parties. The examples from the political scene just this last year suffice to illustrate this point. It is quite common for an opinion poll commissioned by some newspaper to be reproduced intact – and to an even greater extent – by almost the entire daily, weekly and provincial Press, even with diametrically opposite interpretative

⁶ The Movement of Free Citizens (KEP) of Dimitris Avramopoulos.

comments, and also by the electronic mass media – television, radio and on the Internet.

Furthermore, new analytic ideological categories are being constructed with opinion polls: *The 'image' of the party, of the party leader, of senior party members, as quantitatively measurable magnitudes, which can be used to gauge and evaluate the parties and which are subject to conjunctural fluctuations.* Because many politicians insist, quite impulsively, on attributing any decline in their popularity or a worsening of their public image to opinion polls, and shifting the responsibility to them, they view the publication of poll results as a Sword of Damocles. This is the so-called 'tyranny' which opinion polls impose on politicians. The practitioners of modern-day politics increasingly determine their positions and actions on the basis of opinion polls, bowing to an empiricism which unfortunately tends to negate them as politicians. However, it is quite evident that the 'good' and 'bad' image of a politician, or of a party, of the government and of the opposition, of the prime minister and of party leaders is shaped elsewhere, not by opinion polls, which simply record the image in an empirical way. Because of the above, the reactions of politicians and parties to the publication of opinion polls are very often violent. Their wrath is sometimes directed against the polls themselves, but also the organisations which conducted them.

4.2 *The effects of private opinion polls*

Apart from the effects of public opinion polls, there are also consequences on the operation of political parties from their own use of surveys, within the framework of the changes and political transformations referred to previously. These are the private opinion polls, which parties commission on their own behalf (Kavanagh 1995: 126-147; Moon 1999: 171-184) and which as a rule are not made public, although this is not entirely true in Greece. Here, of course, a number of important issues arise which relate to the operation and hierarchy of the party, as well as the role of party members, and are connected with who receives the opinion poll results and to whom they are communicated. The widespread use of opinion polls by political parties and their organic incorporation in the party's strategic and communication planning inevitably strengthens the trend towards the professionalisation of politics, but also the further

bureaucratisation of the parties (strengthening of the leadership at the expense of the rank and file).

Private opinion polling has already grown considerably in the USA, while it has also been significantly developed in a number of European countries. Stan Greenberg, who served as polling advisor to President Bill Clinton, claimed to have spent over \$ 125 million on surveys and focus groups in 1992. In 1987 in the UK, the Labour Party and the Conservative Party spent approximately £ 120,000 on private opinion polls, while in 1992, the Conservatives spent £ 250,000 and Labour £ 200,000 (Kavanagh 1995: 134-135). In Greece, the corresponding amounts are of course much smaller, but it is clear that both PASOK and ND today use private opinion polls extensively.

Moreover, opinion polls (whether public or private) provide an extremely important source of information to parties when it comes to *choosing the most suitable election date*. It is clear, for example, that on the basis of results being recorded at the present time (9/2002) from surveys which are adverse for the ruling party, the possibility of early elections in Greece can more or less be ruled out.

Lastly, now that the use of opinion polls by the mass media has become established, the issue of the party's image has taken on enormous importance. And this image is not solely and exclusively the product of historical party identification (a matter pertaining to a country's political history) but also the result of communications. More than anything else it is a question of the changing perceptions of public opinion over time (Kavanagh 1995: 136). And opinion polls are perhaps the most important guide to these perceptions. Through opinion polls, the leadership of a party understands the reasons for its negative image, a fact which leads to changes in its communication strategy, or even its policy.

5. What form of institutional regulation

The late development of opinion polling in Greece and the reconfiguration of relations between the mass media and political parties which it has brought, has visible and very serious ramifications for the operation of the political system. However, it is clear from international but also Greek legislative practice that confronting the issue of opinion polling with a repressive or prohibitive rationale will not solve the problem; on the contrary it would only exacerbate it. On the other hand, the ‘side effects’ which have already appeared from the rampant growth of the phenomenon make state intervention in this matter absolutely imperative. However, the content and direction of any institutional regulation is neither given nor self-evident and it will most certainly require elaboration. In order to ensure democratic control of opinion polls by the political system, a system of guarantees must be created with a dual objective. On the one hand, the weakening of their use for the purpose of manipulation or questionable ‘communication’ and, on the other, the guaranteeing of the right of citizens to comprehensive information, which – under certain conditions – is provided through opinion polls. The responsibility is shared among the *three* main players, namely those which are directly involved in the production and dissemination of opinion poll results: *the mass media, the politicians and political parties, as well as the opinion poll companies. It is quite clear, however, that whatever institutional regulation is adopted, it will be unable to affect or stem the crisis of representative democracy and the weakening of political parties.*

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