Credibility of an Opinion Poll: The Case of the 2021 General Elections in Zambia

Dr. Oliver Magasu (Phd)

Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia

Abstract: **Zambia went to the polls on 12ᵗʰ August, 2021 to elect the president of the republic of Zambia. The Presidential race seemed tight between the two main political rivals, Dr. Edgar Chagwa Lungu popularly known as ECL of the ruling Patriotic Front (PF) and Mr. Hakainde Hichilema popularly known as HH of the main opposition political party United Party for National Development (UPND). To this effect, wildly different predictions were made for Zambia's elections. The Political Science Association of Zambia in collaboration with Faraline of the United Kingdom and Media Theory of USA showed that none of the candidates would get the outright 50+1 % of the vote but that ECL would get 40.4% and HH would get 30.33%. The research was done in five (5) provinces. A survey by Afrobarometre which was conducted in all the 10 provinces of Zambia, showed that the support for ECL had declined by 44.8% and that 25.2% said that they would vote for HH. 45.6% refused to answer and said they did not know. Another survey by Zambia Decides tipped ECL to win by 56% landslide over HH who would have 41% of the votes. However, the truth is that HH beat his rival ECL in this election amassing 59.02% of the electoral votes, while ECL managed 38.71% according to the results released by the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) on 16ᵗʰ August, 2021 from One hundred fifty-five (155) out of One hundred fifty-six (156) constituencies. In this article, it is argued that opinion polls add value to democracy when they are credible. Therefore, the aim of this paper is not to analyse these opinion polls but to give an in-depth understanding of what makes a credible opinion poll.**

Key Words: **Credible; Opinion Poll; Elections; President; Survey; Sample**

I. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A compelling question in this article is: Why is it that some opinion polls are not accurate? Essentially, the word credibility is used in this article to mean the accuracy of an opinion poll. According to Warren (2016), the modern opinion polls began in the United States of America (USA) in 1935 with the first publication of the Gullup polls. Since then, the industry has grown and opinion polls have mostly been accurate in presidential elections with a few exceptions.

Opinion polls, especially, those that are released in the run-up to elections stimulate anxiety among political players and electoral stakeholders. According to Macreadie (2011), opinion polls also lead to debate and speculations amongst the media, the public and politicians. Usually, opinion polls are conducted on voting intentions and leadership preferences. When conducted appropriately, opinion polls can add value to the national debate on topics of interest, including voting intentions. However, if opinion polls are simply used to predict in advance the outcome of elections, their main function is to entertain and increase viewing.

The opinion poll by Political Science Association of Zambia in Collaboration with Faraline of the United Kingdom and Media Theory of USA attracted experts such as Prof. Richard Elson from the United Kingdom, Dr. Masauso Chirwa, Principal Investigator Mr. Joe Nabwa and Mr. Aaron Siwale (*Lusakatimes.com, 4th July, 2021*). The results of this opinion poll showed that none of the candidates would get the outright 50+1 % of the vote but that ECL would get 40.4% and HH would get 30.33%. 'The poll they put together was too good to be true and that it was so bad that only the most committed government supporter could think it was genuine' wrote Cheeseman (2021), professor of democracy at the University of Birmingham, on Democracy in Africa website. Cheeseman observed that the so called international think-tanks were both public relations firms that specialised in reputation building and that the Political Science Association of Zambia was a new organisation with no track record of conducting surveys on a large scale. Furthermore, Cheesemen argued that the methodology was flawed and that the survey was only conducted in five out of the ten provinces.

Afrobarometer is renowned for conduct surveys on elections in Africa. It has done so from 1999 and at the time this study was done, it had conducted surveys in more than thirty African countries (Allison, 2021). Its findings have been used by the World Bank and other institutions such as South Africa's Institution for Justice and Reconciliation. In December 2020, Afrobarometre conducted its survey in Zambia in all the ten provinces with a representative sample of 1200 Zambians. The results of this opinion poll showed that the support for ECL had declined by 44.8% from 2017 and that 25.2% said that they would vote for HH. 45.6% refused to answer and said they did not know. According to Seekings and Siachiwena (2021) who examined the Afrobarometer survey data from late 2020 on Zambia, support for ECL had reduced in two predominantly urban provinces, Lusaka and Copperbelt. Further, Seekings and Siachiwena noted that there was an increase in the proportion of voters not declaring their intentions which appeared to be at the expense of the PF.

However, on the 16ᵗʰ of August, 2021, HH was declared president elect of Zambia by the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) from 155 out of 156 constituencies. HH of the

UPND got 2, 852, 348 (59.02%) votes while his closest rival ECL of the PF got 1, 870, 780 (38.71%). Figure 1 shows a map on how these two presidential candidates fared across the country. This study like indicated in the abstract, is not meant to analyse the opinion polls to the run-up to this election but to give an in-depth understanding of what makes a credible opinion poll.

Figure 1
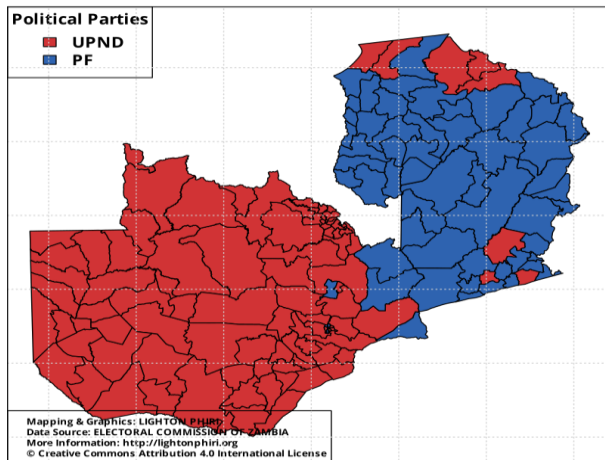
Source: ECZ (2021)

Though this study is exclusively on Zambia, similarly in the 1970 UK general elections three out of the four opinion polls indicated a clear Labour Party victory, but failed to detect a late swing to the Conservatives which won the elections. Additionally, the UK general elections of 1992 is regarded the worst in the history of opinion polls in UK where over 50 polls were conducted and errors were 'far in excess of expected sampling variations (Smith, 1996).' According to Bell (1997), four opinion polls published in the morning of the election were significantly out in their indications, with average support for the Conservatives indicated at 38% (actual result was 42%), Labour at 39% (34 % actual) and Liberal Democrats at 19% (actual at 18%). A study conducted by Bell to determine the credibility of the opinion polls, established that the Conservative voters were more reluctant to be interviewed or to say how they would vote than Labour voters. The other finding was that the sample of the people to be interviewed were skewed too much towards traditional Labour voters, and that Labour voters failed to go to the polls, and, there was a late swing to the Conservatives.

According to Kennedy, Blumenthal, Clement, Clinton, Durand, Franklin, McGreeney, Miringolff, Oslon, Rivers, Saad, Witt and Wlezien (2018), the 2016 presidential election was a jarring event for opinion polls in the United States. Predictions tipped Hillary Clinton as the likely candidate to win the presidency. The polls indicated that the likelihood of Clinton winning presidency was about 90%, with estimates ranging from 71% to over 99%. When Donald Trump was declared winner of the presidency, there was a widespread perception that the polls had failed. According to Byers (2016), the day after the election, there was a palpable mix of surprise and outrage directed towards the polling community as they felt that the industry had seriously misled the country about who would win. However, a thorough analysis of these opinion polls by Kennedy et al. (2018) established that there was a late swing in voter preference towards trump and a pervasive failure by pollsters to adjust for overrepresentation of college graduates (who favoured Clinton). In addition, there was clear evidence that voter turnout changed from 2012 to 2016 in ways that favoured Trump. Despite speculations that Trump had a hand in this poll error, there is little evidence to that effect.

a. What is an opinion poll?

An opinion poll is a survey of public opinion obtained by questioning a representative sample of individuals selected from a clearly defined target audience or population (Market Research Society (MARS), 2016). By conducting an opinion poll, researchers want to find out what people think. According to the European Society for Opinion and Market Research (ESOMAR) (2017), in a democracy, knowing public opinion provides a base for parties to campaign on, and gives government information on whether their policies are approved by the electorates. According to Warren (2016), the successful use of opinion polls data is not to promote programmes and policies that make the user more popular, but as a guide to public knowledge and attitudes that leaders will need to accept or modify in their policies. This means that opinion polls give access to politician's highly reliable information about the electorate's views. This entails that, regardless of who commissions the poll, all polls need to be done well, and otherwise they will give a distorted view of opinion.

b. How are samples selected?

Webster (1985) defined a sample as a finite part of a statistical population whose properties are studied to gain information about the whole population. This means that a sample is a subset of a population. Opinion polls are carried out among a subset of a given target audience or population. While the number included in the sample may differ, opinion poll samples are typically between 1000 and 2000 participants (MRS, 2016). However, according to Warren (2016), sample size is not the critical factor in public opinion poll because increasing the size of an unrepresentative list just compounds the bias of the sample. For instance, in 1936, Gallup predicted correctly the victory of Roosevelt over Landon in the US presidential election, using scientific sampling of a few thousand persons whereas the Literary Digest failed using 2.4 million answers to 10 million mailed questionnaire to automobile and telephone owners (Phillippou, 2021). This means that opinion polls should be as representative as possible of the target population. The extent to which samples are truly representative of a given target population is based upon the preparation of an opinion poll, and the care and

attention that has been placed on the sample design and selection. In short, a sample that is not truly representative of the target population cannot be considered credible.

There are a number of ways in which participants can be selected for an opinion poll. Broadly speaking, there are typically two types of sample selection used in opinion polls. Thus, probability and non-probability sampling procedures.

i. Probability sampling procedure

Probability sampling procedure is also known as 'random sampling procedure.' This is a method of selecting a sample where every member of a target population has an equal chance of being selected to the sample. Random sampling procedure draws on actual addresses, telephone numbers etc. This means that random opinion polls are normally conducted by an interviewer and requires the interviewer to randomly select an individual from a selected household, and only that specific individual may be interviewed. If the selected individual does not participate, no other individual in a household will be allowed to substitute them. According to ESOMAR (2017), true random sampling procedure is becoming more difficult to achieve in practice for many reasons, including the declining response rate, but pollsters can overcome this and make achieved sample of interviews resemble the population demographically and behaviourally. According to Macreadie (2019), excluding uncommitted and non-responses could result in a significant disparity between opinion polling results and actual election outcomes. It is also important to note that quantitative opinion polls often do not take into account the strength of opinion a person holds on a particular subject or candidate because the participants are only able to select one of two or more answers.

ii. Non-Probability Sampling Procedure

Non-probability opinion polls take the form of Quota sampling. Quotas are set to reflect the socio-demographic profile of those target audience and are usually determined on characteristics such as age, gender, geographic area residence and work status. This means that quota sampling involves setting controls and matching the sample to those characteristics. In this regard, only the sample population the researcher feels can give the information will be targeted. Although scientific pollsters from the mid-1930s through to the early 1950s used mostly face to face interviews combined with quota sampling, their failure to predict accurately the winner in 1948 election discredited quota sampling (Warren, 2016). Since then random sampling procedure has been adopted by many pollsters. However, it must be noted that each of the sampling procedures has advantages and disadvantages.

Apart from the representativeness of the sample, there are other factors that may affect the results of the opinion poll. According to Irwin and Holsteyn (2002), voters may base their decision in voting in elections not only on their own preference but on expectations of what other voters will do.

For instance, voters may vote for a candidate they believe is 'viable' or 'electable' rather than their preferred candidate who they may perceive will not receive enough support to be elected.

The other factor according to Stockwell (2005), people may also respond to polls strategically rather than truthfully. For instance, participants may express certain views in opinion polls to convey dissatisfaction with certain policies which may or may not reflect their true voting intentions.

Furthermore, some participants may be inclined to remain silent if they believed their opinion is in the minority. Such individuals have a fear of isolation, a fear of being rejected by society and in response, they are constantly observing the behaviours of those around them and seeing which ideas and behaviours gain approval and disapproval from society.

Essentially, good opinion polls are scientific surveys. By implication, participants are chosen by the research organisations according to explicit criteria to ensure representativeness, not by participants deciding to select themselves and participate. In addition, the questions that participants are to answer should be worded in an accurate, balanced and unambiguous way to ensure credibility of an opinion poll.

c. How are opinion polls conducted?

There are various ways in which opinion polls are conducted. According to MRS (2016), participants could be interviewed face to face, via a telephone or through an online or portal questionnaire. For decades, polls were typically conducted by telephone, using live interviews but today, internet surveys and interactive voice response polls are increasingly common (Phillippou, 2021). However, the most common ones are by telephone and face to face. Internet surveys are still in experimental stage in most developing counties. In whichever way these interviews are conducted, it is important that questions asked as part of opinion polls are credible and fit for the purpose intended.

According to ESOMAR (2017) most opinion polls in western countries are done by telephone or online. Opinion polls conducted by telephone select their samples using information about the distribution of telephone numbers in order to draw numbers that are representative of the whole telephone population. This could be done by using random sampling procedure. Online opinion polls are drawn from panel individuals who have agreed to be contacted by pollsters. The idea is to create a data base that represents the whole population. However, in most European countries, opinion polls conducted by telephone provide excellent coverage of the population when both landlines and mobile phones are included (ESOMAR, 2017). According to Pew Research Centre (2015), most telephone interviewing is conducted from central location where a group of interviewers are under close supervision so that interviewer quality is highly controlled. Instead of using paper questionnaires to record responses, the

interviewers use computer software where the answers can be recorded more easily.

In some parts of the world, opinion polls are still conducted face to face. In many developing democracies, where there is limited landline phones availability and no easy access to sampling mobile phones, the only way to conduct opinion polls that represent the population is through in person interviewing. Choosing locations based on population and then selecting individuals in random selected households in those locations. According to Warren (2016), some face to face polls are conducted in central locations such as shopping malls or recreation areas. When the population is intended to be users of such facilities, this can be a very efficient sampling method. Users of such facilities differ from the general population in many ways, however, and generalising from location samples is difficult even if the facilities have been selected using probability procedures (Dillman, Smyth and Christian, 2014).

d. Questions to determine credibility of opinion polls?

To determine the credibility of an opinion poll, we need to ask ourselves fundamental questions. These questions may help to understand why some predictions to the run-up to August, 12, 2021 general elections did not give accurate results on the presidential race. Better still, to check whether polling data has been manipulated to achieve a predetermined goal or worse still, the results are fabricated. From the examples and analysis by scholars in the current article, here are some of the factors that may make an opinion poll give a wrong prediction in an election:

i. Not adequately determining who will vote
ii. Not having the correct distribution of voting population
iii. Asking questions about voting intentions in a way that produce answers that misrepresent people's intentions
iv. Not being able to account for the last-minute events that can change voting intention
v. Non-response and possible political bias
vi. Non-random sampling

Figure 2 shows the fundamental questions as adopted from MRS (2016) and ESOMAR (2017) which should widen and give an in-depth understanding of what may make an opinion poll credible.

Table 1

Who conducted the poll and who sponsored the poll?	Was the opinion poll done by a known fame?
Was it paid for by anyone e.g. a political party which had interest in the outcome?	Who were the participants?
Were they registered voters or all adults?	Do they live in one region?
How many people were interviewed?	When were they interviewed?
How were the participants interviewed? – Face to face, phone or online?	Has anything happened since then that could change opinion?
What were the questions?	Is the sample representative?

It is important to know who has commissioned an opinion poll. This helps to check if pollsters have a particular interest in the outcome of the results and also, to make a judgement about the balance of the entire process. Checking the credentials of an organisation which has undertaken the opinion poll is important to determine whether the pollsters are suitably qualified. According to MRS (2016), for the results of an opinion poll to be credible, they must be representative of a clear defined target population. The questions being asked to the participants should be accurate, balanced and unambiguous. This is because responses can be quite unreliable if participants are asked questions about subjects they know little or nothing about, yet are asked to give their opinions. Scrutinising the technical details, the profile of samples and evaluating whether or not samples reflect demographic profiles of target population will also ensure credibility of an opinion poll.

II. CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to give an in-depth understanding of what makes a credible opinion poll. As this paper has shown, there are various factors that may influence the results of an opinion poll. These factors are in the range of human factors, psychological and social. Some of the factors highlighted in this paper are; not adequately determining who will vote, not having the correct distribution of voting population, the nature of questions, not accounting for the last – minute events that change the voting pattern and the reputation of pollsters. Furthermore, this paper has given out important questions that need to be considered in determining the credibility of an opinion poll. Pollsters should strictly adhere to ethics guiding how credible opinion polls should be conducted. It is hoped that alternative ways of measuring opinion polls will continue evolving and respond to ever-changing social, political and technological environment.

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