

Why opinion polls still matter



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

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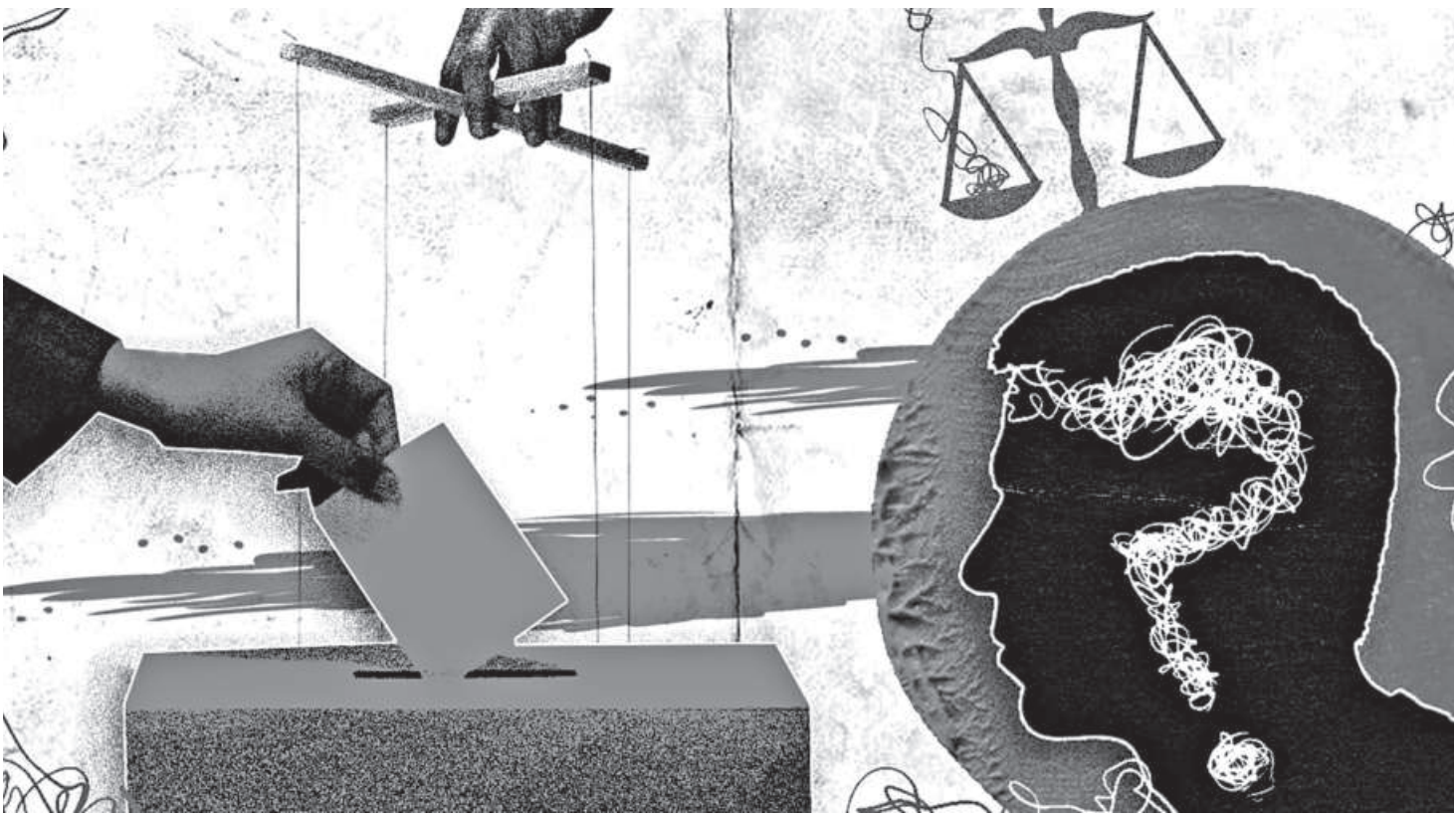
ABDULLAH SHIBLI

A recent opinion poll capturing the views of young Bangladeshis aged 15-35 years has attracted attention both at home and abroad. One of the key findings of the survey, conducted by the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM) and ActionAid Bangladesh, was that the youth have very little interest in political participation. I mentioned this disinterest in my column last month and received some pushback from readers. One of them, a physician working in Bangladesh, wrote to me, “Can you please explain to me how you reconcile the disinclination of the youth population to participate in political activities with the fervour they showed during the Monsoon Revolution of 2024?”

We are aware that the results of opinion polls need to be taken with a grain of salt. Most polls have some bias if you dig deeper into the sampling frame, sample size, and statistical tools of a survey. The SANEM survey was taken to task on the pages of this daily by Md Rubaiyath Sarwar, managing director of Innovision, a research and consulting organisation, on technical grounds. In his column, appropriately titled “What the SANEM poll reveals and what it does not,” Sarwar pointed out certain weak points of the survey, including a small sample size and the bias introduced by a large percentage of non-respondents.

Incidentally, Innovision is among the research organisations that are in the “opinion survey” market. Earlier in March, it released the results of a survey of citizens’ election-related perceptions using a larger sample size of 10,696 respondents across eight divisions and 64 districts.

Opinion polls are, in a sense, a necessary evil. They can often incur the wrath of those in power, or of individuals whose views are not corroborated by, or match, the information provided by a survey. Even in a country like the US, which prides itself on being the most open society in the world, polls are often dismissed as “fake.” Recently, US President Donald Trump fired his chief of the Bureau of Labour Statistics (BLS) after the



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

BLS published a job report that did not show the current administration in a favourable light. Trump even accused the former BLS commissioner of manipulating the data. I recall when Matia Chowdhury, an Awami League minister in 2013, characterised an opinion survey on voter preference for political parties by *The Daily Star* as “a waste of time and money.”

As a social scientist, I usually find opinion polls useful. However, they are based on sample surveys and may not be suitable for everyone’s consumption. Public opinion and economic surveys, nonetheless, are a critical part of the economic, social and political landscape of a country. While some polls, such as the inflation survey, are vital

data on unemployment, market conditions, and the incidence of poverty are hard to obtain in Bangladesh. At this critical time for our country, better statistics can help the government control inflation and enable the central bank to manage monetary policy more effectively.

On a scale of 0 to 10, opinion polls conducted by many of our pollsters would rate 3 or 4 at best, while those carried out by market research experts would score a 9. The Federal Reserve of the US, the country’s central bank, whose mission includes correctly measuring and forecasting inflation from different angles, relies on sample surveys to make many decisions on interest rates and monetary policy—

decisions that affect the global economy.

Politicians generally dislike opinion polls. Some Bangladeshi leaders often say, “Do not spread rumours; they are a criminal offence.” After the recent opinion poll results by various institutions were published, some sceptics were heard saying, “Oh, forget about the opinion polls, how much do they reflect reality?” Others label poll results as conjecture, hypotheses, or even phoney.

asked why they lost the mayoral elections that year, it might have spared the country the decade of trauma that followed.

Public opinion polls, especially those related to elections, have faced increasing scrutiny and scepticism in recent years. While they remain a valuable tool for gauging public sentiment, several challenges and factors can affect their accuracy and lead some to question their credibility:

Declining response rates: It has become harder for pollsters to reach a representative sample of the population as fewer people answer calls or participate in surveys. This means that those who do respond may not accurately reflect the broader public, introducing potential bias into the results.

Challenges in identifying and reaching target audiences: Mobile phone users often do not respond to anonymous or “spam” calls. Additionally, some demographics, such as younger voters, may be less likely to participate in polls.

The increasing influence of social media: While social media can provide insights into public sentiment, it also poses challenges. Influencers can spread misinformation and disinformation, potentially affecting voter opinions and distorting the broader political landscape. This can make it difficult to disentangle genuine public opinion from the effects of social media trends and biases.

Question wording and order effects: The way questions are phrased and their order can subtly influence responses, leading to skewed results.

Social desirability bias: Some respondents may give answers they believe are socially acceptable rather than their true opinions.

Difficulty predicting voter turnout: Accurately predicting who will actually vote is a major challenge in election polling, and misjudging turnout can significantly impact the accuracy of predictions.

However, it is important to note that many reputable polling organisations are aware of these challenges and strive to employ rigorous methodologies.

While opinion polls face genuine challenges, it is crucial to evaluate individual polls with a critical eye, considering their methodology and potential biases, according to Brookings. It is also important to consider the overall landscape of available polling data, rather than focusing solely on individual polls. Responsible and transparent polling practices, coupled with a nuanced understanding of their limitations, can help build an ecosystem that sustains youth participation in political activism and provides reliable feedback to policymakers.

Challenges for critical journalism

LETTERS FROM THE UK

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GEOF WOOD



I have been silent for a while, but not asleep. The silence has been for complicated reasons, a little bit due to health distractions, but also other writing commitments as well as bureaucratic entanglements associated with approaching 80 years! But these are not the main reasons, which are to do with meaningful “journalism” in a rapidly moving global scenario.

I subscribe to *The Guardian* in the UK—which could be described as a sibling to *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*—seeking truth from a liberal, inclusive and socially progressive perspective. But the challenge for such a daily is how to offer informed insight and reflective commentary when the picture might have changed significantly between composition and publication. I have witnessed this problem with well-established *Guardian* writers, struggling to avoid banality but stating the obvious for any mildly informed and concerned reader, with their efforts easily dismissed as “yesterday’s news.” One way to cope with this trap is to “stand back” from immediate events and offer long-range speculation—from “on high,” as it were. But these pieces are themselves quickly undermined by pomposity and hollowness,

and mostly no different from conversations around evening meals in homes across the country. So they become arid too, and indeed open to ridicule.

Personally, nearing 80, I have not witnessed such a period of paralysis among the chattering classes. They simply cannot find a way to write anything interesting in a period of extreme volatility and threat to the lives and livelihoods of so many people across the world. In the UK, we demonstrate against genocide in Gaza among a bemused local population inured to the repeated news of atrocities as if our demonstrations are themselves out of date, and yet perceived by the UK state to be sufficiently dangerous as to ban more of the participating organisations. The bombing of Iran or Ukraine resembles a disaster movie on TV, explosions lighting up the night sky almost as a piece of art, followed the next day by a photo montage of wreckage and fatality numbers.

Aside from war upon us (in which I include the colonisation of the West Bank), there is other rapidly moving political news which also shares livelihood destruction in common: e.g. just last week, a Labour government sought to remove essential support to the

disabled in the UK to keep bond yields down (i.e. interest rates on government debt); further cuts to overseas aid in both the UK and US to satisfy nationalistic populism and boost defence spending; crackdowns on immigrants, even if they are long-standing, tax-paying, and providing essential public services; an acceptance of uber inequality revealed through unwillingness to tax wealth gained through wage suppression, pervasive rent-seeking through quasi-monopolies, corruption and financial manipulation; arbitrary sacking of research staff within medicine and science (i.e. not just the “woke” humanities and social sciences) in the US, leaving professional career staff and their families without health insurance cover, without livelihoods, and with crucial knowledge lost; the recently Venice-married Bezos also celebrating his one millionth warehouse robot—displacing more labour; and news of an equity company acquiring a small estate with a country house in Dorset, England, evicting long-standing tenants in the estate village and closing public pathways for “health and safety” reasons.

Any of us can pile on versions of the gloom. But can we write sensibly about it? A common thread in this gloom is, naturally, uncertainty and insecurity, and we should definitely think about both their origins and consequences. Origins clearly require a political economy analysis which combines the technological displacement of labour (not necessarily a bad thing) with increasing concentration of profits and/or economic rents in fewer hands and classes—a socially alienating path of economic progression. So let us focus on how to combat what Yanis Varoufakis refers

to as Technofeudalism (2024) or, in a recent piece for *The Guardian*, “feudo-capitalism,” which is clearly a route to destruction for all of us and our descendants who have not managed to migrate to Mars along with Elon Musk and his descendants. (It puzzles me why no one pays attention these days to Rosa Luxemburg’s underconsumption thesis. Who will buy the cars if robots displace the labour manufacturing them?)

When asked recently on a UK TV discussion show, titled *Peston*, about how to deal with the threats of AI, Geoff Hinton, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist, replied in one word, “Socialism!” Anna Coote of the New Economics Foundation in the UK has been promoting the argument that labour, or paid work, is not the necessary or sufficient precondition of well-being—in contrast to the Labour Party’s obsession with dignity through labour. There are many other routes to dignity via “social contribution,” as noted by Guy Standing’s recording of unpaid, or unvalorised, care work, which of course is mainly done by women. George Monbiot, a contributing writer to *The Guardian*, and separately James Ferguson, famously known for his book *The Anti-Politics Machine*, promote the notion of a citizen’s income which separates the principle of income from work to enable all citizens to enjoy the fruits of a nation’s resources (e.g. minerals, oil, forestry, hydro power, political stability) instead of just the few. So, there is another discourse out there. Let’s hear it.

The consequences of this era of mass insecurity are people having to work harder for less, often several different jobs in a day or week, without weekly or regular leisure, to

make ends meet. Part of the socioeconomic condition of ordinary folk is not having the time to reflect and think of how they are oppressed and alienated by feudo-capitalism, even though they feel it. Their horizons are necessarily short. They are therefore *structurally* politically apathetic, and they are also highly vulnerable to snake oil—easy millenarian solutions and populism, which usually entails scapegoats and othering. Recall Jews in 1930s post-Weimar Germany, or immigrants in Farage’s UK or Trump’s America. The present widespread success of such populism pulls in the whole political discourse—for example, a scared governing Labour Party in the UK being heavily tempted to adopt Farage’s Reform Party stance. These are the consequences of feudo-capitalism and it can only be confronted by a progressive regime using the power of the state to separate the narrow class of rent-seekers from their rents to redistribute as citizens’ incomes—as a right, not state charity—as the way to manage contemporary forms of capitalism and avoid the mass psychology arising from insecurity, which is the fallout from unprincipled capitalism that now serves the few, not the many, and threatens us all.

For me, that is how we should be writing about present conjunctural crises dominated at present by demagogic nationalism and racial othering, dominated by the metaphor of the commercial deal and real estate mentality. And not just writing for the chattering few but communicating such analysis to the many; journalists not just gathering information for their writing careers but promulgating too. My recent silence is over. The Western social crisis deepens. No retirement for me!

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

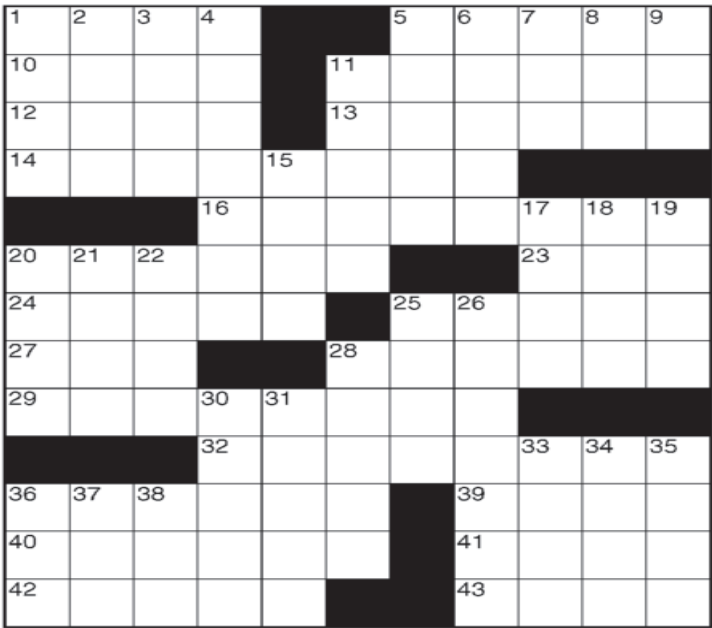
- 1 Alveoli setting
- 5 Psychoanalysis pioneer
- 10 Seoul setting
- 11 Rugged range
- 12 Hat material
- 13 Jewelry buy
- 14 Philosophy topic
- 16 Don Quixote target
- 20 So far
- 23 Stage prompt
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- 25 Boat’s back
- 27 Bruin Bobby
- 28 Rich
- 29 Dumping site
- 32 Animal on the shoulder
- 36 Show up
- 39 Sky shade
- 40 Defeats decisively
- 41 Cruise stop
- 42 Sycophant
- 43 Guys’ dates

DOWN

- 1 Guffaw, informally
- 2 Manual reader

3 Cairo’s river

- 4 Entrance
- 5 Game site
- 6 Empire
- 7 Go astray
- 8 Online address
- 9 German article
- 11 Book part
- 15 Funny folks
- 17 Like cupcakes
- 18 Entice
- 19 Give for a bit
- 20 Square or plane
- 21 Gumbo base
- 22 “Nuts!”
- 25 Auction cry
- 26 Boast
- 28 Tale tellers
- 30 Intense fear
- 31 Like hair mousse
- 33 “Casablanca” role
- 34 Temporary calm
- 35 Directors Spike and Ang
- 36 Play a part
- 37 Favoring
- 38 Stew sphere



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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS



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