

The Role of Opinion Polling Data in Electoral Campaigns in Malawi: Rethinking Political Strategy in Data-Poor Electoral Contexts

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how weak or absent opinion polling systems undermine electoral competitiveness and strategic decision-making among political parties in Malawi. Using the 2025 general elections as a case study, the analysis explores how the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and other political actors relied on anecdotal evidence and informal networks rather than systematic voter data to guide campaign strategy. Drawing on interviews, campaign documents, and comparative experiences from data-rich electoral environments, the paper argues that the absence of credible, frequent, and scientifically grounded opinion polling limited parties' ability to identify swing constituencies, adapt messages, and respond to shifting voter sentiments. The analysis situates this challenge within broader debates on the role of information in democratic competition, showing that data-poor contexts constrain both campaign efficiency and democratic responsiveness. It concludes that strengthening independent polling institutions and fostering a culture of evidence-based political communication are essential for parties seeking electoral success and for the consolidation of democracy in Malawi and similar emerging democracies.

Keywords: Malawi, elections, opinion poll, data quality, democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Malawi, a country in Southern Africa, has been independent from British Colonial rule since 1964. While Malawi was a one-party state from 1964 to 1994, it adopted a successful multi-party system since 1994. Elections are held five years. Unlike similar countries in Africa, Malawi has held peaceful elections every five years. There have been peaceful transfers of power between the ruling governments and opposition parties. In 2014, the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won elections against the ruling People's Party (PP). In 2020, the opposition Malawi Congress Party (MCP) won elections against the ruling DPP, and power changed peacefully. The most recent Presidential elections were on 16 September 2025, where the opposition DPP won the Presidential elections with a majority of 56% of the vote, to the surprise of most Malawians. Prior to the elections, there were no known opinion polls which predicted such a massive win.

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WEAK INSTITUTIONS AND DATA SYSTEMS FOR OPINION POLLS IN MALAWI

There are very few institutions that conduct regular opinion polls in Malawi. The best known is the Institute of Public Opinion and Research (IPOR). Domiciled in the old capita city of Zomba in Malawi, it is an independent institution founded in 2014 by academics from the University of Malawi. It specializes in surveys and social science research, advisory and consulting services.

Less known is the International Institute for Research and Development Africa (IIRD Africa) based in the capital city Lilongwe. Founded in 2003, IIRD is an independent research, training, and development organization dedicated to advancing sustainable solutions across Africa and beyond.

Malawi has a national broadcaster, the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC). It has not conducted any opinion polls since its founding in 1964. There are two major new papers, Malawi Nation (founded in 1993), and Daily Times (founded in 1893, over 130 years ago), none of which has ever conducted opinion polls. There is thus a very weak institutional capacity for opinion polls in Malawi. Malawi has a national University, founded in 1964, complete with a fully-fledged department of political science and a department of statistics, but has never conducted an opinion poll.

OPINION POLLS IN THE MALAWI 2025 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

There were three opinion polls ahead of the 2025 Presidential elections. This is indicative of a poor electoral environment. For comparison, there were 907 polls conducted by 141 different pollsters as of late October, ahead of the 5 November 2024 USA Presidential election (Financial Times, 2024).

While the results of the Malawi 2025 Presidential elections between the two major parties was 56% versus 33%, none of the predictions of the three opinion polls were close. This is indicative of weak electoral institutional and weak data systems.

Institute of Public Opinion and Research

IPOR released an opinion poll on 4 September, two weeks before the elections (IPOR, 2025). The poll showed that the Presidential Candidate of the DPP would garner 41% versus 31% for the Presidential candidate of the MCP. This is a 10% difference. While the poll showed that the DPP Presidential Candidate will win by a margin of 10%, the prediction was far off from the actual result which had a difference/margin of 23.8% (56.8 % versus 33%).

International Institute for Research and Development Africa

IIRD released a poll five days to the election. Contrary to the poll from IPOR, the IIRD poll predicted a win for the MCP Presidential Candidate at 56.5% versus the DPP candidate at 27.2%. This is the opposite of the actual result which the DPP and MCP candidates obtained at 56% and 33%, respectively.

Shyley Kondowe Report

A week before the elections, an independent researcher released a poll. This poll, close to the IIRD poll, predicted that the MCP candidate would win with 55% of the vote (1% less than the IIRD prediction) and that the DPP candidate would garner 34.8% (7.6% more than the IIRD

prediction). The results of this poll were a diametric opposite of the actual results where the DPP candidate obtained 56% versus the MCP's candidate who obtained 33%.

Independent Assessments of Existing Opinion Poll Data

An independent statistician and economist, Dr Lweya, conducted an independent analysis of the data from IPOR. His prediction was that due methodological inadequacies, the MCP's Presidential Candidate would garner 52% and not 33% as predicted by IPOR (a difference of 19%) (Lweya, 2025, unpublished Assessment).

RESULTS OF THE 2025 MALAWI PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

The actual results of the 16 September 2025 Malawi Presidential Elections was in favour of the DPP. The DPP candidate garnered 56% versus MCP's candidate who obtained 33% of the vote (MEC, 2025). Table 1 shows a comparison of various results of the polls and the actual results. Only the IPOR study predicted a DPP candidate win (with 41%), all be it that IPOR's prediction was 15.8% off the mark (way off their margin of error of 2-5%).

Table 1: Comparison of opinion polls to actual results

Agency	Prediction (%)		Difference (%)	Margin of error (+/- 5 %)
	MCP	DPP		
IPOR	31	41	-10	Above margin of error
IIRD	55.6	27.2	28.4	Above margin of error
Kondowe	55	34.8	20.2	Above margin of error
Actual Results announced by MEC [‡]	33	56.8	-23.8	Twice above the estimate of IPOR

DISCUSSION

There were few (only 3) opinion polls ahead of the 2025 Malawi Presidential Elections. This is evidence of Malawi being a data poor electoral context. For comparison, there were 907 polls conducted by 141 different pollsters as of late October, ahead of the 5 November 2024 USA Presidential election (Financial Times, 2024). The predictions in these few opinion polls were way off the mark of the actual results. This is evidence of a weak institutional capacity for opinion polls in the country.

Quality opinion polls can support democratization by creating an environment where campaigns are data driven and policy is driven by vote needs. As such, opinion polls are an instrument in entrenching and growing a democratic culture. However, the differences between these three polls and against the main results is indicative of poor-quality polls. Political opinion polling is therefore an area that needs attention in Malawi as part of its process of entrenching democracy. Chikulo (2014) has addressed the vexing issue of quality in opinion polls.

It is not clear whether either the MCP or DPP used any of the opinion polls to design their campaigns. Indeed, the MCP's Secretary General publicly ridiculed opinion polls (YONECO FM, 2025, Daily News 2024). From the IPOR poll, Malawians stated food shortages (29%) and economic management (29%) as the top priorities of concern. It is not evident that the ruling

[‡] Malawi Electoral Commission. The Malawi Electoral Commission released final results.

MCP based their campaign on these issues. Post election analyses, Nyasa Times (2025), Vandome (2025) and Zeleza (2025) also point to the economy as the major voter driver in elections.

CONCLUSION

Malawi as a country, more specifically its political parties, the media, universities, and civil societies need to invest in institutions and data systems to conduct pre-election opinion polls. While such polls have gotten it wrong before (Chikulo 2014, Zhou 2021), they have largely been indicative of election results (Friday, 2016; Mohammed, 2024). In the USA, data from 1952-202 showed polls, if conducted properly are, on average, off by only 2.23 percentage points (American National Studies, 2024).

In the just ended 16 September 2025 Presidential Elections in Malawi, there were only three polls before the 2025 Presidential Elections. The results of the opinion polls conducted were far off the actual results, with the most credible poll producing a result that was 15.8% than what was obtained by the winner. Investments in such institutions and data systems is an input to grow a democratic culture. For political parties, such institutions and data systems can support them to design and implement data driven, cost efficient, and voter needs sensitive campaigns.

As institutions invest in opinion polls, quality needs to be taken into consideration. Jennings & Wlezien (2020) have documented systemic errors that need to be addressed when conducting opinion polls. Errors can arise due to low response rates and poor sampling among others (Sanders et al, 2018).

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