# Voter education, not surveys

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Public opinion surveys play a role in democracy. They are tools for data gathering, providing a snapshot of the fleeting views of the general public. But some surveys can be plagued by errors, among them sampling bias, loaded questions, response and interviewer bias, and low response rates.

The problem becomes more acute with pre-election polls, where the main issue is the survey’s conditioning effect on voters.

Section 5.1 of the Fair Election Act defines election surveys as “the measurement of opinions and perceptions of the voters as regards a candidate’s popularity, qualifications, platforms, or a matter of public discussion in relation to the election, including voters’ preference for candidates or publicly discussed issues during the campaign period.”

As voters often lack sufficient information or easy access to the candidates’ background and track record, survey respondents cannot easily make informed choices. At best, election surveys are popularity contests—whoever has name recall gets the upper hand.

The Brookings Institute stressed that “public opinion is an illusive commodity. Attempts to measure it… will perforce reveal inconsistency and change.” It added that “citizens use information shortcuts when making decisions in the political arena—with new and personal information driving out the old and impersonal.

## Bandwagon effect

With the public lacking fixed preferences on many issues, political actors have ample incentive to supply those shortcuts in ways that might broaden support for themselves and the policies they champion” (“Polling & Public Opinion: The good, the bad, and the ugly,” 06/01/03).

The bandwagon effect makes surveys self-fulfilling prophecies based on the perceived accuracy of their results. Senatorial candidates who are in the so-called Magic 12 list of pre-election surveys can increase their popularity by appearing to be winnable. This comes at the expense of those who are perennially outside the winning circle, not because of their lack of competence or genuine public service aspirations, but because they are either unknown or less popular.

Particularly problematic are nonscientific election surveys conducted by fly-by-night polling firms and even by traditional media and social media vloggers and influencers.

A study by Dr. Mike Farjam, published in the International Journal of Public Opinion Research in 2020, pointed to the bandwagon effect of internet polls, specifically those that use convenience samples or those that are easily accessible, assumes that “popular options become more popular because of a poll.”

## Election offenses

The research found that seeing the results of pre-election polls “increased votes for majority options by 7 percent.” Such a percentage can be crucial in close electoral contests, with the bandwagon effect becoming larger in less polarizing issues, the study found out. It can be argued that undecided voters are most vulnerable to the bandwagon effect of surveys.

It is thus laudable for the Commission on Elections (Comelec) to flex its muscles by regulating the publication of survey results in the lead up to the May 12 midterm polls. The Comelec en banc has now classified the following as election offenses: failure to preregister the survey conductor; disseminating fake surveys; nondisclosure of survey sponsors and details before the airing or online publication of the results, and non-submission of a comprehensive report.

The Comelec’s new policy on survey publication, if implemented assiduously, is a check on the power of election surveys to influence elections without sufficient information on candidates. It’s also a bulwark against the spread of disinformation, particularly results of skewed surveys that “are often used on social media or even fake news outlets to manipulate the perception of voters,” according to the National Movement for Free Elections.

## Live debates

Instead of putting too much premium on surveys, voters must have better information about aspirants for public office. The Comelec should take the lead in promoting voter education by working with various election watchdogs, the academe, media organizations and civil society groups that have platforms for helping the public scrutinize candidates, their platforms, and qualifications.

A major part of voter education is the mandatory attendance of candidates in media debates. Live debates are vital to the electoral process as they provide a steady stream of verifiable information that can counter the election propaganda and fake news prevalent on social media, which has become the new election battleground.

Comelec should make these debates mandatory for all candidates to provide voters with a venue to get to know their candidates’ platforms and stand on issues, as well as to reduce the harmful effects of echo chambers and confirmation bias that social media generates.