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International public opinion surveys and public policy in Southern European democracies

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyse the presence of and relationship between the most relevant comparative social research thorough international surveys and public policies reflected in the different official bulletins or gazettes of the countries of southern Europe, specifically Spain, Portugal and Italy. Following a consideration of the process of globalisation of research through surveys, four surveys were selected (Eurobarometer, World Values Survey, International Social Survey Programme, European Social Survey). The complex relationships between public opinion and public policy were also addressed. Finally, it is concluded that the most prominent international surveys have little or no presence in public policies in the countries analysed.

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Public opinion; public policy; international surveys; Europe; social research

Introduction: public opinion research

Studies conducted using surveys possess, among others, the virtue of gathering information about a wide variety of issues for a great diversity of objectives (Rojas Tejada, Fernández Prados, & Pérez Meléndez, 1998); however, they have come to be identified with those that focus on public opinion (Donsbach, 2016; Walden, 2013). Donsbach (2016) states that most academics would agree that a public opinion survey is defined by three terms: opinion, which indicates options and attitudes as well as the behaviours derived from them and is the nucleus of said surveys; the public, which means that the survey questions are mostly related to topics of general interest; and finally, survey, which indicates the technique that is applied in a standardised manner to large or representative samples.

In the same way, we find close links between democracies and public opinion. Thus, one of the keys to successful democratic governance is precisely the connection between representative policy opinion and public opinion that is responsible and active (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). Ever since political science has considered public opinion to be vital for addressing the problems of representative and democratic government (Lippmann, 1922), the leading challenges have been for citizens to link to and legitimize the status quo and connect with, participate in or deliberate about political decision-making.

Public opinion polls help fill that gap, whether by narrowing the democratic divide between representatives and the represented or simply by making citizens' opinions known. For these reasons, the media shows an interest in surveys as a way of incorporating citizens' opinions into public debate, and organised civil society considers surveys to be essential instruments for supporting their opinions and influencing the political agenda. Finally, political elites and political parties, governments and public policies must constantly show and demonstrate their connection with voters and the 'will of the people' through surveys (Carballo & Hjelmar, 2008).

International surveys and public opinion

The process of globalisation, democratisation in the West and the successful expansion of the technique of research using surveys after the Second World War led to the appearance of the first international surveys (Karp & Vowles, 2016; Smith & Fu, 2016). The precursors of surveys aimed at multiple populations initiated a new typology of social research characterised in most cases as being multilingual, multicultural, multinational and multiregional (Harkness et al., 2010). However, in truth, these international studies through surveys are really a set of national surveys conducted simultaneously with identical methodological instruments (questionnaires, samples, fieldwork, etc.), given that the ultimate goal is to obtain a comparison of countries or regions.

The first transnational, transcultural or international surveys, despite being largely limited to a few Western countries, represented an effort in which fieldwork was prolonged over several years, and the results were not published for still more years (see Table 1). Hadley Cantril was an American social psychologist and a key pioneer researcher about polling methods and social perception, establishing the Office of Public Opinion Research (OPOR) at Princeton in 1940 under a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. OPOR studied the American and other countries public opinion along World War II at the service of the Roosevelt and the allied countries governments (Geer, 2004). In short, the first steps of international surveys not only opened up a new type of research between the '50s and '70s but also faced numerous challenges and problems related to the translation of questionnaires, the credibility of the constructs, the representativeness of samples, comparability, homogenisation, reliability and validity of the instruments of measure and the results, etc (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik & Warner, 2014; Johnson, 2015; Szalai, Petrella, & Rokkan, 1977; Verba, 1971).

Table 1. Pioneering research using international surveys.

Name	Countries	Reference	Fieldwork
How Nations See Each Other	9	(Buchanan & Cantril, 1953)	1948-1949
Pattern of Human Concerns Data	14	(Cantril, 1965)	1957-1963
The Civic Culture Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations	5	(Almond & Verba, 1963)	1959-1960
Political Participation and Equality	7	(Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978)	1966-1971
Images of the World in the Year 2000	11	(Ornauer, Wiberg, Sicinski, & Galtung, 1976)	1967-1970
World Fertility Survey: Major Findings and Implications	42	(International Statistical Institute, 1984)	1974-1987

Source: Created by the authors based on (GESIS, 2016)

The 1970s opened up a new phase in the development of international or transnational surveys with the establishment of regular series of surveys on social and political attitudes and behaviours (Norris, 2018). In 1973, after some pilots, Eurobarometer began biannual surveys in European countries that in later years were emulated by other regions on all continents, undoubtedly because of the reduced costs and time required as well as increased local capacities to implement said projects (Lupu & Michelitch, 2018). The different international barometers make it possible not only to compare countries from different parts of the world but also to detect social changes occurring in public opinion (see Table 2). They offer results and databases not only to demonstrate transparency but also to make possible their use and analysis by researchers and any interested parties. As such, large databases managed by universities and research centres have been created that, in addition to serving as repositories of national and transnational surveys, are executing the work of dissemination and training for their maximum use, especially in the scientific community, for example: ICPSR, GESIS, NSD and UKDA¹ (Kruse & Thestrup, 2017).

Public policies and public opinion

Beyond the initial and recurrent studies about media manipulation and propaganda by those in power (Albig, 1957), political science has developed studies and research that focusing on the congruence and relationship between the opinion of the population and the public policies implemented. The classic studies initiated in the United States found considerable congruence, especially over the long term, between the preferences of public opinion and public policies (Monroe, 1979; Page & Shapiro, 1983); however, with the passage of time this consistency decreased (Monroe, 1998). In any case, the majority of social scientists who study public opinion and public policies in democratic countries

Table 2. Research through serial international surveys.

International Survey	Year established	Website
Eurobarometer	1973	http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion
European Election Study	1979	http://eeshomepage.net
World Values Survey (WVS)	1981	http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org
European Values Survey (EVS)	1981	http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu
International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)	1984	http://www.issp.org
Eurasia Barometer	1989	http://office.eurasiabarometer.org
Comparative National Elections Project (CNEP)	1990	http://u.osu.edu/cnep/
New Democracies Barometer (NDB)	1991	http://www.cspp.strath.ac.uk
International Self-Report Delinquency Study	1992	https://web.northeastern.edu/isrd
Latino Barometer	1995	http://www.latinobarometro.org
Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES)	1996	http://www.cses.org
Afro-Barometer	1999	http://www.afrobarometer.org
Asian Barometer	2000	http://www.asianbarometer.org
Pew Global Attitudes	2001	http://www.pewglobal.org/about
European Social Survey	2002	http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org
Caucasus Barometer	2004	http://www.crrcenters.org
Arab Barometer	2005	http://www.arabbarometer.org
Gallup World Poll	2005	http://wpr.gallup.com
Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS)	2005	http://www.comparativecandidates.org
East Asian Social Survey	2006	http://www.eassda.org
The Anna Lindh Report	2009	http://www.annalindhfoundation.org

Source: Created by the authors based on different sources (Karp & Vowles, 2016; Lagos & Chu, 2013; Norris, 2018; Smith, 2015)

agree that (1) public opinion influences public policies; (2) the more important a problem is to the public, the stronger the relationship will be; and (3) the relationship is threatened by the power of pressure groups, political parties and economic elites (Burstein, 2003).

Despite these points of agreement, the difficulty of assessing the coherence between what is preferred by public opinion and political decisions is essentially owed to difficulty in measuring the policy citizens want when they do not know in depth the issues to be managed or settled. Similarly, even if there is a certain correlation over time and a frequent connection between public opinion and politics, a single causal relationship cannot be established because public policies are hardly shaped by public opinion alone, and other actors such as political parties, economic actors, and so on intervene (Wlezien, 2017).

In summary, the most recent studies on the relationship between public opinion and public policies confirm a process that becomes more complex based on different approaches (correspondence, consistency, covariation and dynamics) of political representation (Wlezien & Soroka, 2016). Another important and emerging trend is the consideration of the international and comparative perspective in establishing the links between political elites and the preferences of the population (Bennett, 2017; OECD, 2017). While this globalising or transnational tendency in the analysis of public policies is evident even in manuals on this topic, references to international surveys that support the discourse of the necessary relationship between administrators and the administered are scarce (Klassen, Cepiku, & Lah, 2017; Ongaro & Van Thiel, 2018). In any case, we can find countries that serve as counter-examples, such as Dunlop and Radaelli (2018) acknowledging that the British government has been using the Eurobarometer surveys for decades to track the state of public opinion and changes over time.

Materials and methods

This study is interested in analysing the treatment of social research conducted regarding transnational public opinion in public policy, whether it is mentioned, and what is considered if so. In focusing our interest on southern European Union countries, we selected the most prominent international social research conducted using surveys in which the said countries participate and consulted documents in which public policy was expressed.

The selection of international surveys corresponded with the criteria highlighted in international social research using comparable representative national surveys that are currently active in Europe and have been consolidated throughout the second half of the twentieth century, reaching notoriety in the scientific community and in databases. Specifically, GESIS – Leibniz Institute for Social Sciences² conducts an on-going historical review based on the research conducted by Donsbach (2012 and 2016), which has served as a main source for us.

The four international studies selected and highlighted are as follows, in chronological order of appearance: Eurobarometer (EB), the World Values Survey (WVS), the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) and the European Social Survey (ESS). Eurobarometer was initiated in 1973 by the European Commission with two standard annual studies to which other research modalities were added (special, flash and qualitative). The World Values Survey was started in 1981 by a network of social scientists, and it has reached six waves of surveys in nearly 100 countries, representing 90% of the

world's population. The International Social Survey Programme began in 1984 with annual international surveys that have come to include up to 40 countries with topics related to social issues that have been repeated over time. Finally, the European Social Survey, was initially funded by the European Science Foundation in 2002 with a biennial periodicity, covers some 30 European countries (see Table 3).

While Italy has been included in all of the Eurobarometers, Spain and Portugal were incorporated after their signing of accession in 1985, specifically as of Standard Eurobarometer 24³. In the World Values Survey, the participation of southern European countries has been very minimal except for Spain, which has participated since the second wave; Italy has been present only since the penultimate wave and Portugal in none of the six waves. The participation of the three countries in the International Social Survey Programme has been quite irregular depending on the topic covered by each survey or the circumstances of each country; thus, in the 33 studies conducted up to 2016, Spain, Italy, and Portugal have participated in 23, 16 and 13, respectively. Finally, in the European Social Survey, Spain and Portugal have obtained results in eight rounds held until 2016, whereas Italy has only been present in three of them. To summarise, Spain's participation in the four international projects has been more consistent than that of Italy or Portugal, which have yet to participate in some of them.

In addition to the official bulletins of the three southern European countries, we considered it appropriate to add the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU) as a broader reference. The OJEU, previously known as the Official Journal of the European Communities (OJEC), comprises the official source of European Community law and is the responsibility of the European Union (EU) through the Official Publications Office of the European Communities, located in Luxembourg since 1952. In 1998, it became available online (EUR-Lex), where all documents since its founding may be consulted.

Spain's official gazette, in which the laws and other government regulations are published, is known as the *Boletín Oficial del Estado* (BOE) [Official State Gazette]. Its editing, printing, publication and dissemination are entrusted to the *Agencia Estatal del Boletín Oficial del Estado* [State Agency of the Official State Gazette] under a functional decentralisation system. Although there are precedents from the seventeenth century,

Table 3. Noted studies using international surveys.

Name (Acronym)	Year established (Frequency)	Topic (Sponsor)	Countries* (sample)
Eurobarometer (EB)	1973 (biannual)	Wide variety of topics related directly or indirectly to the EU (European Commission)	34 countries (33,193)
World Values Survey (WVS)	1981(every five years)	Change in values and its social and political impact. (A network of researchers around the World Values Survey Association)	50 countries (90,350)
International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)	1984(annual)	11 broad, recurrent topics such as religion, citizenship, leisure and sports, health and care, the environment, role of government, national identity, inequality, etc.(Research centres)	35 countries (36,546)
European Social Survey (ESS)	2002 (biennial)	Wellbeing, gender, domestic help, values, immigration, citizenship, social participation, etc. (Research centres and universities)	23 countries (44,387)

Source: Created by the authors.

* Standard Eurobarometer 89 Spring 2018 (European Union, 2018). World Values Survey wave 6 2010-2014 (Inglehart et al., 2014). International Social Survey Programme: Role of Government V - ISSP 2016 (ISSP Research Group, 2018). ESS8-European Social Survey Round 8 2016/2017 (European Social Survey, 2018).

Royal Decree 181/2008 established free and open access to the electronic edition, and it is currently possible to consult information dating back to 1960.

The Official Gazette of the Italian Republic, or *Gazzetta Ufficiale* (GU), contains the legislative texts and regulations in force in Italy. The precursor to the GU was the *Gazzetta Piemontese*, published since 1797. In January of 2013, approval was granted to make it available digitally to the public free of charge, and it is complete as of 1986.

The *Diário da República* (DR) is the official publication of the Portuguese government. It has had this name since 1976, although its precursors date back to 1715. As of 1 July 2006, detailed information has been available online with contents dating back to 1974.

In summary, these four official sources of laws and regulations of the European Union and the countries of the south constitute the documentary basis of decision-making in public policy by the different governments (see Table 4). Additionally, these publications have been made more extensive over time, containing historical series, and they are more transparent in that they can be publicly available on the Internet and even increasingly accessible by incorporating, in the case of Portugal, simplified language.

Results

The search for the presence of the four international surveys was conducted using the translations of their names and acronyms in four languages (English, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese). The four search tools of the different official gazettes allow for precise explorations by strings of words in the full content of the documents since the selected international surveys began except in the Italian case, which has only been available online since 1987. The results obtained through 1 January 2018 are conclusive; the World Values Survey and the ISSP are not mentioned except for a single instance in Spain's BOE and another in the OJEU; meanwhile, Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey are referenced several times in the official gazettes of the three southern European countries although less than once per year. Deserving of special consideration are references to Eurobarometer in the Official Journal of the European Union; the survey is cited nearly 2,000 times, and there are nearly 30 references to the European Social Survey (see Table 5). By country, Italy only makes two references to the international surveys in its GU, versus 12 and 17 references existing in the official gazettes of Portugal and of Spain, respectively.

Of the 31 times we found mentions of one of the four international surveys in the official gazettes of the three southern European countries, only on 11 occasions did they cite survey data. In the rest of the documents, the quotes address other bureaucratic

Table 4. Official sources on public policy in southern Europe.

Name (Acronym)	Countries	Year established (Online)	Website
Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU)	European Union	1952 (1952)	http://eur-lex.europa.eu
<i>Boletín Oficial del Estado</i> (BOE) [Official State Gazette]	Spain	1661 (1960)	http://www.boe.es
<i>Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana</i> (GU) [Official Gazette of the Italian Republic]	Italy	1797 (1987)	http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it
<i>Diário da República</i> (DR) [Diary of the Republic]	Portugal	1715 (1974)	http://www.dre.pt

Source: Created by the authors.

Table 5. Mentions of international surveys in official gazettes (mentions of data obtained).

1. English 2. Spanish 3. Italian 4. Portuguese	Official Journal of the European Union	<i>Boletín Oficial del Estado</i>	<i>Gazzeta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana</i>	<i>Diario da República</i>
1. Eurobarometer	1.888	4 (2)	2 (2)	7 (5)
1. Eurobarómetro				
1. Eurobarometro				
1. Eurobarómetro				
1. World Values Survey	1 (1)	1 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
1. Encuesta Mundial de Valores				
1. Indagine Mondiale sui Valori				
1. Pesquisa de Valores Mundiais				
1. International Social Survey Programme	1 (0)	1 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
1. Programa Internacional de Encuestas Sociales				
1. Programma di indagine sociale internazionale				
1. Programa Internacional de Pesquisa Social				
1. European Social Survey	29 (6)	11 (0)	0 (0)	5 (2)
1. Encuesta Social Europea				
1. Indagine Sociale Europea				
1. Inquérito Social Europeu				
Total	1,919	17 (2)	2 (2)	12 (7)

Source: Created by the authors.

or tangential issues such as appointments, publications, budgets, training courses, collaborations, etc. If any survey is worth highlighting, it is Eurobarometer; when this survey is cited, it is most often to make use of or apply the results. In the OJEU, for which we conducted an analysis of only the most recent 100 documents from 2017, 97% of the documents contain figures or data obtained from the EB.

Conclusions and discussion

The first conclusion resulting from the review of the historical process of globalisation of international research through surveys confirms the immense possibilities opened up not only for comparative studies in the social sciences but also for exploring or constructing a global public opinion that transcends borders (Smith & Fu, 2016). Second, the official bulletins and journals consulted for each country completely ignore some of the international social research highlighted, indicating not only the rejection of the research as a resource for designing public policy but also the missed opportunity to contextualise and draw comparisons across

countries and even to evaluate the results with a periodic nature (Fortin-Rittberger, Howell, Quinlan, & Todosijevic, 2016). Third, in addition to noting the infrequent mentions of these studies, they could be classified in most cases as formal references that do not contribute anything to the public policy of the countries. Meanwhile, the role played by Eurobarometer in public policy in the European Union is worth mentioning, where it is profusely cited in OJEU documents and with explicit references to results in practically all cases. This is perhaps the only example for which a more detailed content analysis would be warranted to determine the impact of this international survey on EU public policy.

The challenge of transforming this weakness of international surveys and their limited impact on national public policy in strategies to improve their situation is worth consideration. First, the involvement of public administrations in the different countries should be elaborated. In the case of Spain, we must recognise the decisive efforts to provide our country with a greater presence in these international studies by people such as Professors Juan Díez Nicolás and Mariano Torcal Oriente and institutions such as the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas [Centre for Sociological Research] or the Universitat Pompeu Fabra. However, it will be necessary to transcend the academic environment in order for national policies to echo the value added by these international surveys. Second, the field of comparative public policy that, as mentioned above, is beginning to appear in studies and manuals should be developed. This would reinforce the theoretical idea in political science that relates public opinion to public policy in a global context with empirical data provided by international surveys.

In this sense, we present some indications to improve the relationship between international public opinion surveys and public policy aimed at the main actors involved. The academic world should open to public administrations by inviting them to their activities and meetings where they discuss this type of research is addressed. Likewise, the institutions responsible for international surveys should incorporate a section dedicated to spread examples of national public policies where the results have been transferred or mentioned. And finally, public administrations should include in training programmes of their public officials and specialised civil servants, aspects related to international surveys to know them and know how to apply them to public policies in all levels, national, regional or local.

Notes

1. ICPSR (Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research in Michigan, URL: <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu>); NSD (Norwegian Centre for Research Data in Bergen, URL: <http://www.nsd.uib.no>); GESIS (Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences in Köln, URL: <http://www.gesis.org>); UKDA (United Kingdom Data Archive in Essex, URL: <http://www.data-archive.ac.uk>). In Spain, we could also mention ASEP/JDS (Análisis Sociológicos Económicos Políticos in Madrid, URL: <http://www.jdsurvey.net>).
2. URL: <http://www.gesis.org/ComparativeSurveyOverview>
3. For more information, see the Eurobarometer report EB24 http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/eb/eb24/eb24_en.pdf

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

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