What the Polls Really Say!

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In these weeks following the March 20th election and President Chen Shui-bian’s narrow re-election victory, Taiwan has been racked with controversy. Included in this are large protest demonstrations, a trashing of the Central Election Committee building by the losing opposition party and that same party’s repeated demands for a re-vote or at least a recount and an investigation into the pre-election assassination attempt on Chen.

Passions have run high; rumors have run rampant and reason has found little home for rest. Ironically, amidst all this turmoil, few have faced the reality of the abnormal influence of the polls.

Going into the election, depending on whose poll and on when it was taken, expectations ranged from a victory for the Kuomintang (KMT) and People First Party (PFP) by up to a million votes to a narrow squeaker of a victory for Chen and his Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

Herein is the problem, the problem of polls, the problem of Taiwan and the problem for any democratic society. Polls have extremely small samplings. In Taiwan the sampling proved to be about 1000 people from among some 16 + million voters. Polls have a margin of error. Even the most sophisticated pollsters normally admit to a 3-4% margin of error. Chen’s margin of victory proved to be 0.2%. Polls are chronologically limited. They are only a sampling of a minuscule amount of people at a particular time and a particular place. Despite this, we still allow polls to influence us, to stoke our emotions and to dictate our actions far beyond any poll’s scope of reliability.

Polls create unrealistic expectations. If they favor us, they give us expectations of victory and even expectations of entitlement.

Polls precondition us for results. Again, if favorable, they feed our self-righteous prejudices.

Polls create an illusion of scientific infallibility. Once more, when favorable, they justify our letting passion and not reason, govern our actions.

So in Taiwan, with no concrete proof and solely because of the polls, people have cast legal procedures and reason aside. With a sense of expectation and entitlement generated by polls, people have trashed buildings, called their opponents liars and cheats and allowed the flames of old hatreds and conflicts to be fanned.

This writer supports a recount and an investigation into the shooting; but it should be done with reason and in accordance with the law.
This writer supports a call for Chen’s resignation if it’s proven that he staged the shooting to gain sympathy and win.

However, this writer also supports a similar call for the resignations of any and all KMT and PFP leaders who without concrete proof have fanned the fires of hatred and prejudice among party followers and so dragged this country into turmoil. Too long have we tolerated such irresponsible behavior; too long have we been blind followers of polls.

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#4 in a series of comments and observations on the 2004 Taiwan presidential elections.