

Opinion-polling

The wisdom of crowds

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Public-opinion pointers to the future

We can do far worse in predicting the near future than to draw from recent trends in public opinion. The “surprise” legalisation of gay marriage in America by the Supreme Court in 2015 followed two decades of polling that showed increasing acceptance of same-sex couples. A close study of public-opinion trends across some 20 countries points to three developments that are likely to occur in 2016.

First, a big political development in America will speed democratic renewal, much as Occupy Wall Street catalysed the conversation about inequality. Chart 1 shows public perceptions of two of the main building blocks of democracy: being governed by the will of the people and having free and fair elections. Both measures have dropped a lot in America over the past decade, and are now below 50% for the first time.

A jolt is to be expected during the 2016 election. A low-trust political context is similar to a stressed physical environment where invasive species thrive—expressed through political volatility, fringe candidates and populism. Will Donald Trump’s presidential bid tear apart the Republican Party? Will outrage among African-Americans over police shootings of unarmed black teenagers escalate into a sustained rebellion in the last weeks of America’s first black president? Given the outrage over the status quo, something of this magnitude will occur.

Millennials changing the mainstream

A second development will see ethical consumerism reach breakout proportions not only in advanced economies but also in some emerging markets, such as China. As chart 2 shows, self-reported ethical consumerism is at its highest level in this century, having increased sharply over the past two years. For this to be occurring in a lacklustre economy is remarkable. In 2016 ethical consumption (including shared consumption) will leave the margins and become recognised as a driver of economic recovery and also of global culture. Millennials (roughly, those born after 1980) especially are helping make this a defining element of a new modernity.

Finally, 2016 will be another tough year for concluding global trade agreements. Chart 3 shows continuing high support for trade barriers, especially in non-OECD countries like China and Brazil. With 63% of Americans supporting trade barriers, Barack Obama’s administration had to resort to herculean efforts in June 2015 to get congressional approval for “fast-track” authority to help advance the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement. Imagine the domestic political challenges for other TPP-signatory governments like South Korea, Chile and Mexico, with protectionist sentiment around 20 percentage points higher. Given these numbers, it is hard to imagine the TPP or any other international trade agreement being successfully ratified by many national legislatures in 2016.

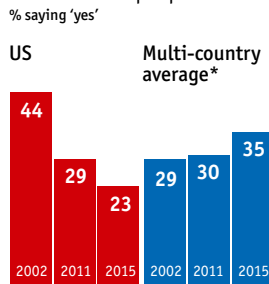
The wisdom of crowds, as approximated by trends in global public opinion, does not always prevail in the short term. But strong shifts in sentiment like those related to democracy, consumer behaviour and trade provide a pretty good basis for predicting the direction of events. ■

Ethical consumerism is at its highest level in this century

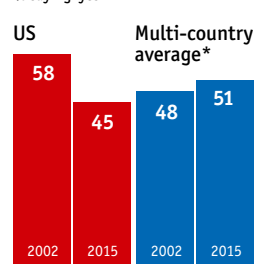
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World Be Wrong?”
(Greenleaf, 2015)

Polls as prologue

1
Is (your country) governed by the will of the people?
% saying ‘yes’

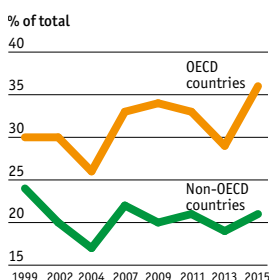


Do you feel that elections are free and fair?
% saying ‘yes’

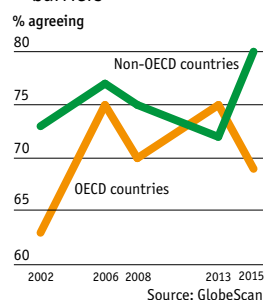


* Includes: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, France, Germany, Greece, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, South Korea, Spain, Turkey and the UK. Not all countries were asked in all years

2 Respondents who have rewarded socially responsible companies in the past year



3 It is important to protect industries and jobs by using tariffs and other barriers



Source: GlobeScan