

Slippery Polls: Uses and Abuses of Opinion Surveys from Arab States

[David Pollock](#)

April 2008

For better or worse, yesterday's "Arab street" has merged with today's information superhighway. One can hardly pick up a newspaper, turn on the television, or go online without coming across the latest poll numbers purporting to show what Middle Easterners are "really" thinking. Even senior U.S. officials often give such polls pride of place when dealing with the region. All of this attention raises two basic -- yet largely unanswered -- questions: How reliable are these polls? And are their findings useful, or even meaningful?

In this Policy Focus, former senior State Department advisor David Pollock argues that most Arab public opinion polls fail these tests. Apart from the particularly severe constraints of conducting opinion surveys in Arab states, many regional polls are fraught with methodological, political, and other biases. By comprehensively dissecting survey practices across a broad spectrum of countries and polling organizations, the paper serves as a guidebook for how -- or how little -- policymakers should use polling data to help them understand Arab states.

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