

Are opinion polls an unhealthy influence: or a source of useful information for voters and politicians alike?

The Polls Opinion pollsters or opinion formers ?

A roundtable discussion

Let's start by discussing the accuracy of the opinion polls in the last election. How close were they in their predictions?

Bob Part of the problem that opinion polls have is the way they're presented in the media. They have three principal functions: a reporting function, (explaining to the readers or viewers what's going on in the campaign); analytical (why what's happening is happening); and thirdly and the least effective in my view, predictive. I don't allow my clients to use the word prediction until my actual eve of election poll, because the function of a poll is to show how things are changing during a campaign. It drives me up the wall to see headlines like 'Tories to win by over 200 seats', in an election that's three, four or five weeks away; and yet the media do persist in this misuse of polls.

To get to the substance of your question, the polls in 1983 were probably better than anyone has a right to expect. The outcome of the election — rounded to the nearest percentage point — was 44% to the Conservatives; 28% to Labour; 26% to the Alliance; 2% others. MORI had 44; 28; 26; 2. There were seven polls published on election day, and all but one, a telephone poll, said that the Alliance would get 26% and they got 26%. Most of them overestimated the Conservatives and underestimated Labour.



James Curran, editor of *New Socialist*

Bob I have a table of all the final polls that have been done by all of the polling organisations since the first one in 1945. There have been 43 such polls published. The average error on the share per party is 1.5%, though sampling theory would suggest that an average of plus or minus 3% would be acceptable.

Peter That headline on the NOP poll in the *Daily Mail* is my favourite newspaper headline — I've got a copy of it on my office wall — but the actual NOP poll that the *Daily Mail* was reporting was not a bad one. Every party's share was within 2% or 2 1/2% of the vote on the day. What happened was that the newspaper grossly over-interpreted a poll which, if I remember rightly, showed a 4%

Bob Worcester, managing director of MORI



Peter Kellner, political editor of *New Statesman*

James MORI emerged with great credit because it got the results almost exactly right, but the record of opinion polls over the years has not been consistently good. For example, NOP provided the basis of the headline in the *Daily Mail* on February 28, 1974 which said 'A handsome win for Ted', and they went on to say there'd be a 50 or 60-seat Tory victory. That of course turned out to be entirely wrong.



Conservative lead. They said this would give a comfortable victory for Heath; in the event there was a 1% Conservative lead in the popular vote but Labour got more seats. It wasn't so much that the poll got the election wrong, as that a newspaper that had paid, in today's money, £4,000 or £5,000 for a front page exclusive story, and didn't want to waste that investment by saying 'Well, we think the Conservatives are a bit ahead but they may not be' — that doesn't produce a satisfactory headline; they went ape on the fact that the Tories were ahead.

James The point I was making was a modest one: the opinion poll predictions are not consistently accurate.

The second, more important, point is this. The very success of opinion pollsters in predicting more or less accurately the election results has conferred undue prestige on their work in describing attitudes. The great majority of opinion polls purported to show that the single most important issue in the election was unemployment. That led a lot of people in the Labour Party to believe that this was the key issue in the campaign and they conducted their campaign accordingly. However, when the Harris poll for the *Observer* asked not 'What is the most important issue?' but 'What is the most important issue for you and your family?' quite different results emerged: a very much higher proportion (over 50%) said that prices were what concerned them rather than unemployment. There was thus a subterranean issue, which in retrospect was the most important issue in the campaign, prices — and some people in the Labour Party, by relying on an over-literal interpretation of opinion poll findings, failed to fight that campaign correctly.

Opinion polls are very crude, inadequate ways of describing attitudes because they don't show the salience of attitudes, generally speaking, and they don't generally reveal the contradictions that often inform attitudes. They merely take the manifest, simple response, without probing into them.

Bob Too often simplistic approaches are taken by journalists and through journalists, by the public and indeed politicians. The 'most important issues' question is misleading. In 1979 trade unions, strikes and the winter of discontent were up at 51%. As strikes have been reduced by all the things that have happened during the Conservative government, then something else becomes an issue. People look around and say, 'well it's inflation' and if inflation has come down substantially, you look around for something else. You may not really be concerned about unemployment but you can't think of anything else. The politicians who say 'Oh well, we'll get all we need to know about public opinion from the public opinion polls in the papers' are foolish. You can find out much more by qualitative or motivational research, talking to people for hours on end either in small groups or in individual in-depth interviews, about their underlying opinions and concerns.

An important issue is how people respond to opinion polls in the election campaign and how the polls affect the way they vote. A criticism one often hears of opinion polls is that they're self-fulfilling. There is also their impact on the morale of party activists.

Bob There has never been any evidence, in any country, of a bandwagon effect. In Britain the effect has always been an underdog effect, and there has not been a self-fulfilling prophecy so much as a self-contradiction in opinion polls — the gap has virtually always been slightly less than the opinion polls suggest.

The second point is that I don't think there is any question but

that the politicians fear the apathy issue. My favourite quotation of the campaign was Brian Walden in the London *Standard*, when he quoted the late Lord Pannell saying to him as a young MP, 'Brian, the best election I ever fought was in 1931'. To which Brian Walden responded, 'But in 1931 you got slaughtered,' and Pannell said, 'Ah yes, but there weren't opinion polls so we didn't know it was happening'.

Now what quite senior Labour politicians were saying to me throughout the campaign, very cheerfully, was, 'I don't know who these people are you are talking to, Bob, your polls are going to be wrong, because we've never had a more enthusiastic campaign'. Well, they can't have it both ways. You can't have it that the morale has never been worse among the Labour workers because of the opinion polls, and at the same time have politicians saying 'morale's never been higher' and really believing it.

The reason it was so high was that they had a manifesto that an awful lot of strong Labour Party supporters truly believed in. It was a manifesto that was written to them and for them, for which they worked hard (and good on them); but they didn't convince the majority of the public that that was the best road for Britain.

Peter On the specific point about final polls I would phrase it slightly differently from Bob. I think with the exception of 1979, most final polls tend to be more favourable than the actual vote to the government defending their position in the election and less favourable to the opposition.

why shouldn't the public be able to talk back to the politicians through an objective and reasonably well conducted poll?

On the wider point, one has to separate out the impact of polls as artefacts, or more precisely, polling reports as artefacts of the media, from polls as methods of communicating the state of public opinion, because if it is true, as I think it is, that Labour morale was depressed by poll figures, what that is really saying is that morale was depressed by objective facts, of which the polls are merely the messenger. To say that if Labour had been oblivious of the state of public mood during the campaign it might have had a more buoyant campaign is possibly a true statement but ultimately it is politically frivolous, if not actually a depressing view of the way parties go about elections.

James There are two separate questions; one is whether the opinion polls had an adverse effect on Labour Party morale during the campaign. The answer obviously is yes, for a good reason, because Labour was doing badly. The second more important issue is whether opinion polls actually influence election results, and I think one must conclude that they do. During this campaign, for example, the credibility of the Liberal/SDP Alliance was obviously boosted by the opinion polls which showed that there was a ground-swell of support for them, and that credibility was crucially important for them in mobilising their vote. The problem they've always faced is that a Liberal vote is a wasted vote, and that argument was countered by the polls. Now, the polls are simply providing information about what's happening in the country; they are not creating a great bandwagon for the SDP/Liberal Alliance, but they're certainly reinforcing it. It's just not true to say that opinion polls are ineffectual in terms of their influence on results.

Bob Nobody says any more that they are not influential. I've certainly always acknowledged the fact that some people — not

very many — are influenced by what opinion polls say, either in their decision as to whether to vote or alternatively for whom to vote.

Another element here, which works particularly for the Alliance, but could work for other parties, is the development of tactical voting. People are prepared to vote now not so much for the party they prefer, but for the party they think most likely to keep out the party they don't want. To what extent have opinion polls encouraged this development and even moulded it? Is it a good thing or a bad thing?

Peter The obvious example of where the polls have interacted with tactical voting was the Bermondsey by-election, where an opinion poll a week before polling day showed the Liberals just in second place in front of O'Grady the renegade Labour man, and the Conservative nowhere. The Liberals produced three or four leaflets in that final week, through every door in the constituency, with rag-outs of newspaper headlines showing people that if they wanted to defeat Peter Tatchell, the most effective vote would be a Liberal vote.

Now as long as it is genuine, I think such information may even be a healthy thing, because it is part of the picture which enables voters to make an informed judgement about how to cast their vote. A further point is that in our electoral system, particularly when we have three principal parties in a closely fought contest, you can win a seat with something like 34% of the vote. One of the things tactical voting does is to raise the winning post to say 40%. Tactical voting, aided by published polls, which raises the winning post, under our electoral system seems to me a good thing because it would be unhealthy if a significant number of our MPs were elected with only 34 or 35% of the popular vote.

Bob One should not underestimate the calibre of the candidates. Simon Hughes was by all reports an excellent candidate. In the very next by-election at Darlington, an attempt was made to do the same thing with a less effective candidate and he was not successful. The candidates, the policies, the issues are all much more important in my view than the polls. But let's say opinion polls had been banned in Bermondsey; you would have been left with much worse information.

James What this discussion seems to imply is that there is a release of neutral information which enables the elector to make a more mature judgement. Of course that doesn't correspond to reality because we know the press uses its information to the advantage of the particular campaigns they're pursuing. The media commission the polls, they are very important in determining what questions are asked because pollsters are in a subaltern position to their clients.

Let me put this question to you, Bob. If your client says to you, 'I want to have questions asked about trade unions', you can't refuse. You use your professional competence to ensure those questions accord with professional standards but the media define the agenda of what's asked.

What is also disturbing is the over-literal interpretation of opinion polls which is commonplace and normal in newspaper reports. Opinion polls are generally being used in a conservatising way. During *In Place of Strife* a number of opinion polls showed massive support for its proposals but an 'anti-opinion poll' was conducted by the *Observer* showing that although a two-to-one majority was in favour of *In Place of Strife*, when cross-examined as to what it was proposing, only 15% were able to identify as many as two items in it. In other words, they were agreeing that



something should be done about trade unions, but they didn't have a very precise knowledge of what was being proposed. Yet the papers were constantly referring to the opinion polls as conclusive evidence that the mass of the population was solidly behind all parts of the Government's proposed anti-union legislation.

One of the worrying things is the way in which the press in particular can close the circle of legitimacy. On the one hand they can define as being salient and important certain key issues; they then derive legitimacy for that position by saying we're merely reflecting public opinion with the use, or the misuse, of opinion polls.

Peter I agree partly with James. I think there are instances where the media use a poll in a fairly shameless way, because they will broadly expect a certain set of results. But the full truth about the media's use of polls is more complex than that. James raises the issue of trade unions. Now, there is a familiar battery of questions about things like ballots before strikes, whether the closed shop should be scrapped, whether there should be regular elections for trade union officials and so on. These polls always show strong support for Conservative policies on these issues. When I was on the *Sunday Times*, we commissioned Bob to do a slightly fuller and more detailed survey of attitudes towards unions especially among union members. We found, on those particular issues, substantial majorities of union members in favour of these reforms. But we also got MORI to ask some questions about union members' perceptions of their own union, and we discovered there a majority level of satisfaction with their own union.

This is one interesting example of the complexity, the depth of

public opinion which polls conducted for the media very rarely get to. Sometimes this is an explicit ideological action taken by the media, usually it's much simpler than this. To get to the richness of public opinion in its full state is very expensive. You can spend £20,000 and get a pretty complete story, which will produce thousands of words of original information about the state of public opinion. This very seldom happens because, first, papers find it hard enough to find the £4,000 or £5,000 it takes to conduct a relatively simple poll, and secondly what they want is a clear headline, a simple story, perhaps a couple of graphics if they're feeling generous with space. In a way, this is an accurate commercial judgement. They do not think they can sell to their readers three or four thousand words of really detailed, useful understanding of public opinion.

On *In Place of Strife*, the press may have been misleading, but the Tories were also misled. One of the reasons why the Tories went strong in the 1970 election on union legislation and subsequently had an Industrial Relations Act which led by a series of steps to the whole Heath government coming undone was that the Tories themselves believed the polling figures. They thought union members would accept the Industrial Relations Act once it became law. But polling doesn't easily tell you how people would react if you actually carried out what the polls tell you the public want.

James Poverty is an inadequate explanation of why the media haven't used polls better. During the last election campaign there was a massive amount spent on opinion polls running almost every day on an unprecedented scale. One of the reasons why press use of opinion polls is so inadequate, is that badly conducted opinion polls regularly show the public ventriloquising opinions comparable to the opinions expressed by newspapers. If rather different results were being shown, I've no doubt at all that these papers would be commissioning more sophisticated opinion polls which interrogate and cross-examine opinion in order to bring to the surface some of the contradictions. It is precisely because opinion polls, done badly, are providing the right results, that better research isn't being done.

Bob I've listened now for 15 minutes to the two of them, James particularly, talking quite a lot of hogwash. The first thing that he said was that the newspapers tell me what questions to ask . . .

James I said they set the agenda.

Bob You said what questions to ask. Now they do set the agenda except during general elections. No newspaper told me even the agenda. I conducted more commissioned opinion polls than anybody else and I don't remember one instance of being given the 'agenda' by my clients. I had the freedom to ask whatever I thought was relevant. I never had any editor or political editor say to me 'Don't ask that question, ask this question.' It's a symbiotic relationship. Polls are a very expensive form of journalism and plenty of money was there, as you say, but if you, James Curran, had said to me, 'The next time you have the opportunity why don't you stick in this question?' as lots of people do, the chances are that during a general election I could stick it in. I agree with you that at other times, when money is much tighter, yes, your clients set the agenda for you.

James The point I'm making, and you seem to be confirming it, is that the agenda for opinion pollsters is usually defined by their client.



Bob Outside election periods.

James And that's the majority of opinion polls.

Bob OK, but why should the politicians set the agenda? Why shouldn't the journalists set the agenda? Why shouldn't the public set the agenda? Frequently we ask, 'What do you think the election will be about?' and then, 'What do you think the election *should* be about?' and communicate the differences to the politicians. We live in a democratic society, and why shouldn't the public be able to talk back to the politicians through an objective and a reasonably well-conducted poll?

But there is a problem in a society like ours where a large majority of the newspapers are pro-Tory. It affects the way they use polls, whether or not it affects their actual commissioning.

Bob Since 1970 the British pollsters have had a code of practice that has been and is difficult to enforce because we are the agents of our clients, the media. Three or four elections ago there were blatant examples of poor reporting of opinion polls and poor provision of information on sample size, field work dates, exactly the way the question was worded and so on. In 1983 there were almost no problems with that kind of thing. Sample sizes have become bigger in some cases — certainly not smaller. Precise question wording has become commonplace; and there is no public opinion poll in this country that would not give access to *New Socialist*, *Marxism Today*, *The Times*, the *Telegraph*, the *Daily Mirror* on every detail; the answers to every question, the cross analysis, it's all there for the asking.

James What I am suggesting is that pollsters are certainly letting the public speak, but they are part of a process of creating public

opinion. Let me give you one example. In the early 1970s the police ran a pressure group campaign on the issue of law and order. Their publicity helped to generate a large number of media stories indicating that there was a great wave of violence sweeping through our streets. So numerous were these stories in the press that public concern greatly increased. The newspapers then conducted opinion polls which showed that there was majority support for tougher action against law-breakers. Now you are certainly giving expression to public opinion, but you are part of a process in which opinion is being managed and manipulated.

Bob Absolutely. But why are you not doing as effective a job as the Right in manipulating public opinion? Because that is what democracy is all about: convincing the electorate that your ideas are the right ones for the British public.

James The snag is that the majority of people commissioning opinion research are on the Right and that shapes the agenda of what is being asked. I am sure the banks have asked you to do research but I doubt whether poverty groups have because they haven't got the resources.

Bob No but Clear has commissioned research from MORI on the issue of lead-free petrol. When Des Wilson came to me, I didn't think for a tenth of a second before I said 'Yes'. Now we do private polling for the oil companies which pay us a hundred times each year what Des Wilson paid me to do once. I was visited by a delegation from the oil companies saying, in effect, 'How could you ask these questions?' I defended Des Wilson's right to come to us and our right to do the work, knowing full well they could have used their financial muscle to pull back from me. The minute I give in to something like that, I am going to do something else, because I could no longer respect my profession. The fee for Clear, by the way, was £1,200. We have also done work, by the way, for trade unions, CND, the PLO, and of course, the Labour Party.

James Nevertheless, in the majority of cases opinion pollsters are employed by wealthy clients who can afford your services. They are not committed to the Left, nor do they wish to interrogate opinion in a way which reveals the potential for moving opinion in favour of the Left.

Peter There is a systematic cultural (rather than ideological) bias in normal published polls. Broadly speaking, if you are a conservative, and don't wish things to change very much, you will be satisfied with public opinion polls which bring out the *status quo* sentiment which on most issues is at the surface. But the kind of

public opinion one is interested in getting to if one is on the Left of politics, is by its nature more difficult, more expensive to get to. One wants, out of objective interest and for functional use, to discover the potential support for radical moves. Perhaps the discussion group approach is more suitable for this than the large survey.

There is a feeling within a section of the Labour Party that opinion polls should be banned during the pre-election period. What's your attitude towards that?

James It's wrong, because you shouldn't suppress information. Though I can see the argument that the opinion polls are largely in the hands of people opposed to the Left, and that information is sometimes used against the Left, I still think it's wrong to suppress information. It is also the case that tactical voting is an entitlement of the electorate and information which enables them to vote

most activists in the Labour Party are frightened of understanding and finding out what the public really thinks

tactically is information which should be publicly available (though it is a pity the *New Statesman* should be undermining the Labour Party by actually encouraging tactical voting).

When you say information, you mean that people should be entitled to know what other people think?

James Yes.

Peter If you simply ban polls as we conventionally understand them, do you stop TV crews filming half a dozen people gathered round a table talking? Do you stop the reporting of claims made by parties either nationally or locally? If you ban that, as a consequence of banning polls, we've come a very long way down the road of almost complete suppression of election information of any sort. On the other hand if you don't pursue the logical consequence of banning polls what you in effect do is drive out good information and amplify the use of bad information, which seems to me quite crazy.

One problem, though, and it has been observed in past elections, is that the more apparently out of line a poll is the more prominence it receives. In the final week of the campaign the *Sunday Mirror* had a poll which Marplan conducted on the Friday before polling day. It was the first published poll putting the Alliance ahead of Labour. It was out of line with all other polls conducted that day and the surrounding days. Now it wasn't a particularly bad polling operation, statistically speaking. The broadcast media, who I think had a choice of 5 polls in the Sunday papers, gave greatest prominence to that false but highly newsworthy figure.

I don't want to see statutory regulation, but something should be done. It is all very well to have rules about presenting field work dates, which the papers carry in little italic print usually at the end of the stories, but it can't honestly be said that the general weight of news impact that is reaching the public properly represents the technical information at the disposal of journalists.

Bob Over the past two years I have served on a Committee of the European Society for Market and Opinion Research, which has and together a guide to the interpretation and publication of

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opinion poll results, and point nine says that the research organisation and the client each have a responsibility in the public interest to ensure that the published report on a public opinion poll does not misrepresent or distort the survey data, for example misleading comments made on non-significant differences must be avoided. Now the Marplan report in the *Sunday Mirror* was precisely that. I have written to the editor to deplore the way that was done. I wrote to him and every other national daily and Sunday newspaper editor with a copy of those guidelines just as the election was announced. I had a few polite letters back, but I had no response from the *Sunday Mirror*. We have taken other steps in addition to developing a fairly detailed guideline. Earlier this year we put 140 people from the media, and politicians, through seminars of 6, 8 and 10 people at a time in an effort to teach journalists how to report public opinion polls. Many journalists came to that but unfortunately the journalists that needed it most didn't come.

Peter Bob, aren't you being a bit naive? Polling stories are amongst the most expensive a paper ever runs. Even allowing for the fact that they tend to get papers free publicity, the fact is that the popular papers are seldom going to give the kind of full, subtle, careful, reporting and emphasis that the material that they buy justifies. They want clear headlines and clear stories, as emphatic as possible. Done properly, this is a noble act of popularisation, but very often it is done in a way which is misleading. If you were to insist that the popular papers for which you work must give full weight to the subtlety of the information they would not buy it.

Bob I would not expect it. It is not the real world.

Peter It is not the real world of newspaper fantasies; but the subtlety and complexity I am talking about *is* the real world of public opinion.

Bob No. I just don't agree with that. Their readers are not that interested in that subtlety and I am sympathetic to them.

James There is another, more generalised misuse of opinion polls. They have enabled the media to treat the election as a horse race, rather than discuss the issues in depth and rather than commission good research which reveals the complexity of public attitudes, that would inform the democratic process in a much more satisfactory way than at present.

One final question. Having discussed the various often serious problems with opinion polls, and the inaccuracies and abuses by the press, do you think that the Left, by and large, is too grudging in its attitude towards them and the information they provide, notably on specific issues and attitudes. Someone said the other day that the information provided by opinion polls about the attitudes of society is much greater than Karl Marx ever had available to him when he was writing in the second half of the 19th century — about society's attitudes, working-class consciousness and related questions. Obviously one can become slavish to opinion polls, one could become very pragmatic and opportunist; that is a real danger. But the Left ignores opinion poll results at its peril; it is ignoring a guide to the way society's attitudes are moving. Do you think that is true?

James My answer is yes and no. It seems to me that the Left should not be intimidated by the conservative information in opinion polls. So many opinion polls give a superficial reading of surface opinion often producing conservative results. What the



Left could be in danger of doing is saying — 'look, there is no chance for us except us moving into the centre or the right ground'; that would be a misuse of opinion polls. On the other hand, what the Left needs to do is to commission good research, revealing the complexities, the uncertainties, the ambiguities, the contradictions behind opinion polls — so that we on the Left can see the openings for us to try and develop so that we can move opinion our way against the Right. That is why the answer is yes and no.

Bob I agree with James in general, but you spoke about seeing behind the inconsistency of public opinion polls. It's not the public opinion *polls* you're talking about, it's public opinion. You're confusing the instrument of measurement with what exists in the public mind, and frankly there are many issues of importance to the Left that the public has not thought about that much. And what the public opinion poll is doing is reflecting that shallowness of thinking. What you have to do is carry the message in such a way that people are given pause and that they reflect on your message. Polls should be as effective for you — lead-free petrol is a case in point — as they are for the Right.

Peter My experience is that most activists in the Labour Party are frightened of understanding and finding out what the public really thinks. Left pressure groups have commissioned polls, but I think it must be said in all honesty that in general the commissioning of polls by these groups has been basically for propagandist purposes and not for purposes of comprehension. There is nothing wrong with this in itself, of course, but the Left should go beyond the occasional propagandist use of polling research and get much more seriously into understanding what public opinion is about. One of the reasons we have now had these two Conservative victories in a row is because their comprehension of some of the sea-changes in opinion and behaviour — for example on home ownership over the last 20 years — has worked to their advantage and Labour has been blind to the same changes. I think if, with a much greater degree of humility and a desire to find out, we looked at public opinion then there would be a much greater chance of developing and successfully implementing a radical programme next time.

The question is not principally about polls, it is much more fundamental. Sadly it is to do with the Left's elitist arrogance towards the public as a whole. D