



Opinion Polls In A Nutshell

Part 2 – What's the point of exit polls?

Kevin McConway - Narrator:

As you can probably guess from the name, an exit poll is a poll of voters taken just after they exit the polling station. But if you're going to get the real results in just a few hours, what's the point of an exit poll? Well, there are several points. First, because elections are big, impactful things, it's only human nature for people to want to know the result as quickly as possible. Also, with the demands of all-night election coverage, exit poll results are very useful to the media, to fill a bit of airtime.

But more importantly, because voters cast their actual votes anonymously, you get much more detail from an exit poll - not only how different groups of people voted but perhaps even why they voted as they did. A well-run exit poll can be extremely accurate so that in countries such as the UK and South Africa, revealing the results before the vote closes is actually illegal, in case the exit polls influence people yet to vote.

And exit polls in countries such as Venezuela and the Ukraine, are sometimes compared with the official results, in order to check for signs of electoral fraud. Thinking of the electorate as a big bowl of soup, an exit poll is like taking a large spoonful in order to give you a really good idea of the recipe. It'll be a bit late to have any impact on that day's election, but there'll be another election coming along soon enough so the detailed ingredients of the soup will be studied by politicians who want to influence the soup in the future and pollsters who want to sharpen their taste buds for the next course.

So we can predict with confidence that exit polls are certainly not on the way out.