Opinion Polls In A Nutshell

Part 3 – Polls and predictions

Kevin McConway - Narrator:

How do opinion polls actually predict who's going to win an election? Using a soup analogy, all you need do is sample a representative spoonful and from there you can tell what the rest of the soup will taste like, right? Well, it's not as easy as that. In countries like the UK, whoever gets the most votes overall is not necessarily going to win the election. For example, in 1951, Attlee's Labour Party got a quarter of a million more votes that Churchill's Conservatives, but Churchill won more seats and so still became Prime Minister.

Because we use a first past the post electoral system, what really counts is not overall numbers of votes across the country, but individual results in constituencies. So instead of only sampling one bowl of soup, predicting an election is like dealing with a whole lot of bowls. In fact, in the UK, there'd be 650 - one for each constituency. And say all the garlic from the whole batch was concentrated in just one bowl, the garlic would surely win that one seat. But if the garlic was spread out evenly, the other more dominant ingredients would win every time.

So to get an accurate prediction, you need to sample a lot of different bowls and in particular, the ones that are harder to gauge. They could be either chicken with mushroom, or mushroom with chicken. So in order to predict the overall results, you not only need more samples, but you have to pay particular attention to the way the ingredients are distributed, or you might get an unexpected result.