Opinion Polls In A Nutshell

Part 1 – Who needs a poll?

Kevin McConway - Narrator:

Back in 1824 the Harrisburg Pennsylvanian asked readers who they were going to vote for and in an exceptionally close race they correctly predicted that Andrew Jackson would be the next president. This was the first known opinion poll, and possibly the only interesting thing the Harrisburg Pennsylvanian ever did. Since then opinion polls have been used by the media to fill up pages of newsprint and hours of television. And the politicians have used opinion polls to find out how well they're doing, who they need to target, even if it's time to drop out of the race.

But how do you know if the poll is accurate? How do you know if you've asked enough people for their opinions? It can help to think of the electorate like a huge vat of soup. Taking an opinion poll is like sampling a spoonful from the soup to see how the whole vat tastes. But the problem is, the soup may not be consistent. It may have lots of ingredients, so there's a chance the sample might not be representative of the whole vat. If you just take a bit from the top, you might assume the soup is mainly croutons, or you might just get a spoonful of carrot, which is why it's important to stir up your soup and get a sample that includes all the ingredients in proportion, not just an isolated lump.

For example, some ingredients might be hard to spot, and some groups of voters tend to be reluctant to speak to you. But if you know that's the case, you can try to adjust your results to take that into account. So if you do it right, quite a small sample of the electoral soup can tell you what the whole vat will taste like. But more important than the size of the sample is the way you choose it. The Americans may have invented opinion polls but they don't always get them right. In 1936 the US Literary Digest polled 2.3 million people and still got the election results wrong because those polled were all of one type - they were all readers of The Literary Digest and that was about as much use as a bowlful of croutons.

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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 - no 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.

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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.