



Discussion

Opinion Polls: Your truth or theirs

Dave Middleton

When Neil Kinnock took to the stage in 1992 shortly before the General Election his exuberance was not just the result of the huge crowd, but his certainty that the Election was his. And, how did he know this? Like most politicians Neil Kinnock would have been studying the opinion polls carefully. If they were right then the keys to Number Ten would shortly be his.

Archive

BBC programme: Election 1992 with David Dimbleby – David Dimbleby announcing exit poll results

Dave Middleton

Hi, I'm Dave Middleton and this is the Open University Open Politics podcast "Your Truth or Theirs: The Making of Public Opinion". Of course, we now know that Neil Kinnock did not become Prime Minister in 1992 and that the Labour Party would have to wait another five years before becoming the British government. Fast forward to 2010.

Archive

BBC programme – Election 2010 – David Dimbleby announces the exit poll results.

Dave Middleton

If in 1992 the polls were dramatically wrong apparently it was a different story in 2010. Paul Whiteley, Professor of Government at the University of Essex and co-Director of the British Election Study.

Paul Whiteley

The opinion polls did very well in 2010, but with one exception. They got the Conservative vote pretty accurately, within the usual margins of error, and they got the Labour vote in the same margins. But the Lib Dems were severely over estimated. Most polling agencies were well out on estimating the Lib Dem vote, and so this is a big puzzle for the polling community and indeed people who research elections as we do on the British Election Study.

Dave Middleton

The apparent rise in support for the Liberal Democrats seemed to suggest that Nick Clegg was gaining significant ground on his Conservative and Labour rivals. But as it turned out, the results from the opinion polls didn't translate into votes on the day. The Lib Dems actually lost seats in Parliament: so what went wrong for the pollsters? Was this a return to the bad old days of 1992?

Paul Whiteley

We think we've got an answer to this. It turns out that if you track people's opinions during the election campaign, particularly after the first debate where Nick Clegg made such a big impact, lots of people decided at that stage they were going to vote Liberal Democrat, and in particular, young people did, that is the young voters between 18 and 25 years of age.

The Lib Dems actually led in the opinion polls over the Conservatives and Labour at that stage during the campaign. Now the problem was, when it came to polling day, they didn't show up at the polls. Only about half of that age group actually voted in contrast with 75 percent or in some cases more, of older groups.

Dave Middleton

You might think that having lost seats the Lib Dems would be rather suspicious of the opinion polls, but according to one time Lib Dem strategist, Mark Pack, the polls were responsible for shifting the attention of the national media away from their obsession with the other two parties.

Mark Pack

Had we not had those polls, to have the credibility check on what they were reporting, we'd have almost certainly seen several newspapers saying how David Cameron or how Gordon Brown had won the first TV debate. So I think they are quite important in terms of keeping in check the editorial or the proprietorial lines that the media might otherwise want to push.

Dave Middleton

Opinion polls could also play a role in shaping opinion. Far from simply being a reflection of what you and I think, they could actually be playing a more active role. David Moore, former senior editor of Gallup Poll, has said they are: "a threat to democracy because they distort public opinion". Sir Robert Worcester, Founder of MORI and Chancellor of Kent University, takes a different view.

Sir Robert Worcester

We have no hidden agenda other than to systematically and objectively represent British public opinion in the most honest and direct way that we possibly can with the least bias possible in the use of the language. We represent one thing and one thing only -- the honest views of the British public.

Dave Middleton

Opinion polls, says one pollster, are the honest representation of our views. Some would argue that rather than being a threat to democracy they are actually part of its lifeblood. After all, where else can you make your opinions felt? Paul Whiteley:

Paul Whiteley

I think they enhance democracy. It's quite important to have as many polls, from as many different sources as possible. But, they come with a health warning. You have to look carefully at the question. It's perfectly true that you can stack a question and slant it and make people respond in one direction rather than another.

Dave Middleton

But this might simply be to shift the ground. To the casual observer it might appear that the polls simply reflect opinion, but this assumes the casual observer understands the technical issues around polling – it is after all, a very complicated business, isn't it? Robert Worcester disagrees.

Sir Robert Worcester

Opinion polling's a very simple business. All you have to do is ask the right sample, the right questions, and add up the figures correctly. There is a fourth thing, is the difficulty that we have, and that's getting them reported responsibly and honestly in the media. And this is a problem.

Dave Middleton

So it's not the pollsters who distort opinion, but the media. On this issue, Robert Worcester finds some support from within the political machine itself. Mark Pack again:

Mark Pack

I think the overall quality of reporting of political opinion polls in the British media tends to be pretty low.

Dave Middleton

So maybe it's not us, the public, whose opinion is being manipulated by the polls but rather politicians and their policies which are being, if not manipulated, adapted in the light of the polls. Opinion polls are big news. And those on the receiving end tend to watch them very closely indeed.

Mark Pack

Politicians like telling the media that well, we don't really pay attention to polls but actually they do. And, you know, when for example, there's news of a new poll coming out and so on, there's often e-mails and text messages and so on flying around with this is what the latest figures are and so on. But having said that, I mean people do understand that you know, opinion polls are not the be all and end all of politics.

But what opinion polls do provide is an important insight into what the public are thinking. And you know, in a democracy in the end, what the public are thinking is absolutely crucial to whether a politician gets to stay in their job or not.

In a democracy it's not unreasonable for a politician to say well, look, if the public keep on telling us they don't like a particular policy perhaps we should change our views.

Dave Middleton

So, opinion polls do have an effect. Whether it is a good effect or not rather depends on whether you think that opinion polls actually represent public opinion. Opinion polling companies try to act responsibly by the way in which they select their samples and the questions they ask. But, the view of people's opinions that we get in the media is simply a snapshot of the questions asked of one group of people on a particular day. They don't predict the future, neither are they designed to do so. The opinion polls might just be harmless fun which provide newspapers with copy during long election campaigns. As Sir Robert Worcester reminds us the problem is not so much the polls, as our expectations of what we think they are telling us:

Sir Robert Worcester

Opinion polls are like thermometers, not barometers. They're not an indication of what the weather will do tomorrow, they're a measure of what the weather is today.

Dave Middleton

Your Truth or Theirs: The Making of Public Opinion was an Open Politics podcast produced by the Open University. You can watch the accompanying video or listen to more politics podcasts at www.open.ac.uk/openlearn/politicspodcasts.

[www.open2.net/politics.]