

# **Mispredictions of Electoral Polls : a Metaanalysis of Methodological and Socio- political Determinants over 50 Years**

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Presented at the ISA World Congress of  
Sociology, July 11-17, 2010,  
Gothenburg, Sweden



# Presentation

- ✦ Context
- ✦ Data
- ✦ Characteristics of electoral systems
- ✦ Characteristics of electoral campaigns
- ✦ Characteristics of polls
- ✦ Attribution of causes
- ✦ Findings
- ✦ Conclusion



# Context

- ✦ There are instances where not one poll but all or almost all the polls published during a given electoral campaign *go wrong*.
- ✦ Usually, the polls have been right in previous elections and the failure of the polls appears as a shock.
- ✦ Terms used :
  - ✦ Failure of the polls, “A Nation of liars” (I. Crewe)
  - ✦ Polling debacle (P. Miller)
  - ✦ Catastrophe (C. Durand and all.)
  - ✦ Pollsters despair (H. Margetts)
  - ✦ Russian disaster (V. Shlapentokh)
  - ✦ “Black Sunday” of public opinion research (T. Bodor)



# Context

## +3 levels of explanation:

### + Methodological

- + coverage, sampling, prop. of non disclosers
- + Estimation : weighting, adjustment, treatment of non-disclosers, etc.;

### + Socio-political

- + characteristics of the campaign, of the parties, of the electoral system, etc.;

### + Sociological & psycho-social

- + relationship between socio-demographic and socio-political characteristics that are controlled for and voting intention is changing.
- + Inaccurate declaration of information from respondents, due to socio-political climate?



# **“Polls go wrong” What does it mean ?**

- ✦ Two phenomena :
  - ✦ Wrong winner predicted
  - ✦ Systematic bias in estimation of vote share includes under/overestimation of :
    - ✦ The left or the right
    - ✦ Extremist parties
    - ✦ A black candidate or a woman
- ✦ Usually, all the pollsters or almost err in the same direction
  - ✦ Sometimes with suspicious unanimity among the pollsters
- ✦ Rarely, lack of convergence between pollsters



# Data come from

## + The following data bases/journals:

- + International Journal of Public Opinion Research (IJOR): Spring 1989 to Spring 2010.
- + Public Opinion Quarterly (POQ): 1937 to Spring 2009
- + World Political Science
- + International Political Science Abstract
- + Social Science Index
- + Sociological Abstract
- + AAPOR - Conferences Programs : 2004 -to 2008
- + Political Studies : december 1994 to december 2008
- + Google scholar
- + **Examples of terms used** : election polls, election forecasting, election survey, election polling, pollsters failure, unexpected results, unforeseen results, etc.

+ Call to aapornetters in June 2008 giving 8 relevant replies pointing to or attaching specific articles or manuscripts.

+ Articles/manuscripts written in English, French, Spanish and Italian were processed; references in other languages (bulgarian and czech) could not be read.



# Data comprise

- ✦ 51 articles pertaining to
  - ✦ 39 elections, not including USA 2008 primaries and recent events in Switzerland,
    - ✦ 4 presidential (France, Nicaragua, Mexico, United States)
    - ✦ 35 legislatives
  - ✦ In 15 countries
  - ✦ More than 150 polls
  - ✦ From at least 80 different pollsters
  - ✦ 8 articles pertaining to the history of polls' performance in a given country.



# Data

## Evolution of cases

✦ 1940 - 1959 : 2

✦ 1960 - 1969 : 4

✦ 1970 - 1979 : 3

✦ 1980 - 1989 : 2

✦ 1990 - 1999 : 14

✦ 2000 - 2009 : 14

✦ 1990 - 2009 : In emerging democracies :  
Portugal, Nicaragua, Mexico, Russia,  
Hungary



# Characteristics of electoral systems

## Types of Electoral Systems

- ✦ Most countries use a form of proportional or mixed proportional type of election : Israel (list PR), Nicaragua, Denmark Portugal, Hungary (Mixed-member Prop.), Scotland, Russia, Mexico, Italia, Ireland (Single Transferable Vote), Australia.
- ✦ First past the post : GB, Canada
- ✦ Others: France (uninominal 2 rounds), United States (Electoral College)



# Characteristics of electoral systems

## Legal aspects

✦ Limits in publication of polls before election :

Countries	Ban on public. polls (in days)
Canada	1
France after 2000	2
Spain	5
France before 2000, Portugal	7
Russia	10
Italia	15

✦ Elections generally held at fixed term.

✦ In 4 countries, GB, Canada, Ireland and Denmark, elections are called by the Head of State or the Prime Minister at his/her will within a certain period of time (5 years maximum)



# Characteristics of the electoral campaigns

## ✦ Political parties:

### ✦ Number of major parties (39/39) :

- ✦ 2 major parties or coalitions = 22 elections
- ✦ 3 major parties or coalitions = 9 elections
- ✦ Multiple parties of quasi-equal importance = 8 elections

### ✦ Quasi-equality in final election results between parties (37/39) :

- ✦ winner's lead 5% or less = 15 cases
- ✦ winner's lead 3% or less = 12 cases

### ✦ Presence of extreme right- or left-wing/populist candidates (21/39)

- ✦ In 17 reported cases



# Characteristics of the electoral campaigns

## + Voter volatility (7/39):

- + Stable voting intention = 3 elections
- + Unstable voting intention = 4 elections

## + Level of participation (33/39):

- + Turnout of 90 % and higher = 11 elections (Australia only)
- + Turnout between 69 % and 89% = 20 elections
- + Turnout of 60% and under = 2 elections



# Attribution of causes

Methodology : Coverage, sampling

✦ Out of 51 articles :

- ✦ 26 mention non-response bias or high proportion of non-disclosers (10 countries)
- ✦ 17 mention quota related problems, outdated quotas, difficult to control or apply (4 countries, 14 on GB)
- ✦ 16 mention problems related to coverage, selection (9 countries)
- ✦ 3 mention small sample size



# Attribution of causes

Methodology : Estimation + other

## + Out of 51 articles:

- + 9 mention problems related to adjustment/weighting: lack of, inaccurate, carried out according to subjective criteria (5 countries).
- + 8 mention attribution of intentions to non-disclosers (inaccurate, proportional or lack thereof) (5 countries).
- + 3 mention inaccurate likely voter model or lack thereof.

## + Out of 51 articles :

- + 3 mention elapsed time between last poll and vote (may be due to ban)
- + 4 mention mode of administration (face-to-face/internet)
- + 5 mention questionnaire related problems.



# Attribution of causes

Socio-political : Campaign, parties, pollsters

✦ Out of 51 articles :

✦ 7 mention differential turnout

✦ 6 mention type of election or special events in the campaign (i.e. terrorist attack, etc.)

✦ 3 mention political influence on pollsters.



# Attribution of causes

Sociological and psycho-social

- ✦ Out of 51 articles:
  - ✦ 32 mention late decision, late swing, switchers, volatility, ambivalence (10 countries)
  - ✦ 20 mention spiral of silence, shame factor, lies (10 countries)
  - ✦ 3 mention strategic voting, underdog, bandwagon
- ✦ Rare mentions of sociological causes : evolution of society, relationship between variables used for quotas and voting behavior, attitudes towards polls, etc.



# Findings - 1

Where, when

- + We heard more about the “big” catastrophes in the western countries (GB 1992, France 2002) but
- + Since the ‘90s, a number of failures occurred, around two each year, many in “emerging democracies” (Eastern Europe, Latin America) where
  - + Polling is new to the population
  - + Transmission of know-how may have been difficult
- + Still, there are recent new “failures” in Western countries in different situations:
  - + Primaries in the US, 2008
  - + Referendum in Switzerland, 2009
  - + France (regional elections),.....



# Findings - 2

## Sampling, quotas

- ✦ Quotas used when
  - ✦ Face-to face surveys are used
  - ✦ Telephone surveys are used and the quota method is transferred from methods used for face-to-face before
  - ✦ In Europe mainly?
- ✦ Quotas sometimes seen as the culprits :
  - ✦ Some variables used for quotas are very difficult to measure, apply and control : Socio-professional category of the head of household (France); Social class (GB)
  - ✦ Quota control does not seem good enough anymore in order to insure a good estimation of voting behavior.



# Findings - 3

Whose fault is it?

- ✦ According to pollsters,
  - ✦ Failures happen when people
    - ✦ Change their mind
    - ✦ Decide at the last minute
    - ✦ Lie to pollsters
- ✦ According to academics,
  - ✦ Failures happen because of
    - ✦ Sampling, coverage, non response
    - ✦ Estimation, treatment of non disclosers, likely voters,...
- ✦ But it remains to be understood
  - ✦ How come polls in a given country give good results for some time and then... go wrong. There has to be something specific to a given campaign.



# Conclusion

- ✦ Poll failures should bring new insight on the impact of methodology if we take the necessary time to question the situation.
- ✦ Is probability sampling with quotas (PSQ) a good method to use with telephone surveys?
  - ✦ If so, are the variables used to define quotas still appropriate?
- ✦ Is the relationship between socio-demographics and political preferences changing?
- ✦ What are the consequences of weighting according to the census? According to which variables should we adjust?
- ✦ How is know-how in the conduct of surveys transmitted? Is there something to do about it?



# Conclusion

- ✦ Bad polls may have a substantial impact:
  - ✦ When more than two parties/candidates can win (almost equal) and either first past the post or 2-round : high strategic voting possible, based on polls (Blais et coll., 2003)
  - ✦ When they are used to decide when to call an election: GB, Canada,...
- ✦ Can we foresee in which circumstances polls are likely to go wrong?
  - ✦ All things equal, are failures more likely to happen in some specific political climate? When extremist parties or candidates are running?
- ✦ What does it tell us for years to come and new polling methods? Is it transferable?



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