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

By Claire Durand, Mélanie Deslauriers, John Goyder, Martial Foucault

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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)
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
The following data bases/journals:

- 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, unforseen 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Ban on public. polls (in days)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France after 2000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France before 2000, Portugal</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italia</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 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
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),....
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.
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.
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?
References


References


References