

Why do polls go wrong sometimes?

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Presentation

- Introduction
- “Polls go wrong” What does it mean?
- Data
- Characteristics of electoral systems
- Characteristics of electoral campaigns
- Attribution of causes
- Findings
- Conclusion

Research

- There are instances where not one poll but all or almost all the polls published during a given electortal 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)

Research

- 3 levels of explanation:
 - ◆ Methodology (coverage, sampling, weighting, adjustment, traitement of non-disclosers, etc.);
 - ◆ Socio-politics (characteristics of the campaign, of the parties, of the electoral system, etc.);
 - ◆ Sociology (relationship between socio-demographic characteristics that are controlled for and voting intention is changing).

“Polls go wrong”

What does it mean ?

- Two phenomena :
 - ◆ Systematic bias in estimation of vote share includes under/overestimation of :
 - The left or the right
 - Extremist parties
 - A black candidate or a woman
 - ◆ Wrong winner predicted
- Three possible situations :
 - ◆ All the pollsters err in the same direction
 - ◆ There is a lack of convergence between pollsters
 - ◆ There is suspicious unanimity among the pollsters

Data come from

- The following data bases/journals (to date) :
 - ♦ International Journal of Public Opinion Research (IJOR) : spring 1998 to spring 2008.
 - ♦ 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, russian election, nicaraguan election, 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 : 12
- 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 (MMP), Scotland, Russia, Mexico, Italia, Ireland (STV), 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 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 (37/39) :
 - 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 (36/39) :
 - 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
- Voter volatility (7/39)
 - ◆ Stable voting intention = 3 elections
 - ◆ Unstable voting intention = 4 elections
- Level of participation (4/39) :
 - ◆ Turnout of 69 % and over = 3 elections
 - ◆ Turnout of 50% and under = 1 election

Attribution of causes

Methodology : Coverage, sampling

- Out of 44 articles :
 - ◆ 20 mention non-response bias (7 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

- Out of 44 articles:
 - ◆ 9 mention problems related to adjustment/weighting: lack of, inaccurate, carried out according to subjective criteria (5 countries).
 - ◆ 7 mention attribution of intentions to non-disclosers (inaccurate, proportional) (4 countries).
 - ◆ 3 mention inaccurate likely voter model or lack thereof.

Attribution of causes

Socio-politics : Campaign, voters, pollsters

- Out of 44 articles :
 - ◆ 28 mention late decision, late swing, switchers, volatility, ambivalence (9 countries)
 - ◆ 20 mention spiral of silence, shame factor, lies (10 countries)
 - ◆ 5 mention differential turnout
 - ◆ 4 mention type of election
 - ◆ 3 mention strategic voting, underdog, bandwagon
 - ◆ 3 mention political influence on pollsters.

Attribution of causes

Other

- Out of 44 articles :
 - ◆ 3 mention time between last poll and vote (may be due to ban)
 - ◆ 4 mention mode of administration (face-to-face/internet)
 - ◆ 4 mention questionnaire related problems.
- Out of 44 articles:
 - ◆ Almost no mention of **sociological causes** : relationship between variables used for quotas and voting behavior, attitudes towards polls, impact of media, 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, more than one each year, many in “emerging democracies” (Eastern Europe, Latin America) where
 - ◆ Polling is new to the population
 - ◆ The know-how has no historical basis
- Still, there are recent new “failures” in Western countries in different situations:
 - ◆ Primaries in the US, 2008
 - ◆ Referendum in Switzerland, 2009

Findings - 2

Sampling, quotas

- Quotas used when
 - ◆ Telephone surveys are not considered possible
 - ◆ Telephone surveys are used and the quota method is transferred from methods used for face-to-face before
 - ◆ In Europe ?
- Quotas sometimes seen as the culprits :
 - ◆ Some variables used for quotas are very difficult to apply and control : Socio-professional category of the head of household (France); Social class (GB)
 - ◆ The once strong relationship between the variables used for quotas -- particularly related to social class -- and the vote has weakened since then.

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 gave good results for some time and then... go wrong. There has to be something characteristic of a given campaign.

Conclusion

- Polls failure as a combination of
 - ◆ Methodological problems that are or are not tackled...
 - ◆ Know how...(polls in emerging democracies)
 - ◆ Specific political aspects of some campaigns
 - ◆ Changing relationship between socio-demographics and political preferences.

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 the election will be called : GB, Canada,...
- Can we foresee in which circumstances polls are likely to go wrong?

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