Why do polls go wrong sometimes?

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

Presented at AAPOR 65th Conference, May 13-16, 2010 Chicago, Illinois, USA
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 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)
Research

• 3 levels of explanation:

♦ Methodology (coverage, sampling, weighting, adjustment, trattement 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):
  - 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Ban 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 (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?
References


References


References


