



SELECT COMMITTEE ON POLITICAL POLLING AND DIGITAL MEDIA

ORAL AND WRITTEN EVIDENCE

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The Alan Turing Institute – Written evidence (PPD0019)

The Alan Turing Institute makes this submission as part of the inquiry lodged by the House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media.

The Alan Turing Institute is the UK's national institute for data science. Five founding universities – Cambridge, Edinburgh, Oxford, UCL and Warwick – and the UK Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council created The Alan Turing Institute in 2015. Our mission is to make great leaps in data science research in order to change the world for the better. Our goals are: to undertake world-class research in data science, apply our research to real-world problems, driving economic impact and societal good, lead the training of a new generation of data scientists, and shape the public conversation around data.

Summary

- All polling methods have vulnerabilities that influence their accuracy, for example:
 - o Data collected must be subject to interpretation, which may be flawed;
 - o Bias, for example, people polled may not be representative of people who vote.
- Traditional polling methods have developed reasonably robust ways of minimizing the impact of these vulnerabilities but may still generate misleading results.
- Diminished credibility of authoritative sources and an indifference to accuracy of facts, combined with suspicion of politicians threatens to undermine any polling method.
- Leading questions and framing can mean polls can be influenced. To prevent results of polls being cherry picked, open access to raw poll results and third-party analytics should be encouraged.
- The influence of polls on voters, politicians and political parties depends on the type of poll (event-triggered, tracking polls, non-political polls, etc.) and sampling methods. Their influence can also be measured by societal experiments.
- The current self-regulation model does not address data access rules, such as for open data and automated processing, and access to polling sample populations or raw returns. In addition, the current model does not adequately address cybersecurity. Social media may make laws about e.g. publishing polls on election day increasingly difficult to enforce.
- Media analysis of polls would be more useful if it covered the quality of information and intensity of preference.
- Social media's impact on public engagement with political opinion polling and the accuracy of polling depends on how interactive those media are. Cues that activate thinking affect what comes out, that is, how seriously and 'rationally' we assess choices. This can be manipulated to achieve a particular answer.
- Using social media to predict elections:
 - o Digital and social media-based polling have different vulnerabilities whose impacts are less well understood, difficult to detect and to correct for.
 - o Models need to be tested through multiple elections in different countries and languages to test their performance and generalisability.

- o Models are typically 'black boxes', making transparency and reproducibility difficult to achieve.
- o Models cannot tell policy makers why a political shift occurred, only that it did. Future advances in machine learning and natural language processing may help remedy this.
- o Social media platforms such as Facebook can affect the moods of users and patterns of voter turnout, which could alter election outcomes.

Polling methods and accuracy

Question 1: What are the most significant challenges for conducting political opinion polling and achieving accurate results? What measures could be taken which might improve the accuracy of political opinion polling?

Jonathan Cave (Data Ethics Group)

1. To answer this question it must first be determined what 'accurate' means. Internal validity, which refers to the extent to which the results accurately depict the attitudes or responses of the sampled population, is likely to differ from external validity, which is concerned with extending these inferences to a larger population. Accuracy in relation to the population at the time of polling may not capture voting on election day. This particularly applies to voter turnout, though many other aspects of the difference between electronic (remote) and face-to-face ('real') context may introduce distortions between polled and 'real' behaviour. For example, cognitive biases including self-interest bias may be at play, or behaviour may be affected by instrument bias, where the way the instrument (such as a survey) was constructed or how it is perceived by respondents impacts on their behaviour. Likert scales, for example, may affect how people express their opinions. They require subjects to project qualitative or quantitative beliefs or opinions onto a discrete set of Likert items – typically containing between three and nine categories. The pollster's challenge is to record subjects' responses in mappings that are balanced, properly scaled, meaningful, informative, accurate and unbiased. There are many issues in interpreting the outcomes of this exercise, and it has many known vulnerabilities.

2. The primary challenge for accuracy is selection, followed by the 'instrument effect'. For the former, this includes the non-representativeness of those reached by different polling methods and – for pre-election or pre-referendum polling – the non-representativeness of those casting ballots. For the latter, those being polled know that the poll is not the vote, and that therefore their responses are "cheap talk" with more of a signalling than an instrumental impact. Particularly when it comes to referenda (but also regarding manifesto promises and other political signalling), the specification and specificity of the polling context and the questions asked exceeds that of the ballot. This is partially a temporal matter – if the poll replicates, samples or predicts the events leading up to the vote, the results should be more accurate. However, under- or over-sampling are always dangers.

3. The use of online samples, especially those propagated through social media, is interesting, since it can detect and follow complex networks of communication and shared opinion. We have used Facebook to sample hard-to-reach age and education ranges, and found useful correlations when A knows B

because they share an interest in issue 1; B knows C because they share an affinity for event 2; and so on. These are networks rather than groups, but issues and political affinity (choice and voting intention) follow those networks. Also interesting was the way events and campaigns rewired networks – again, a combination of social media sampling, enhanced online engagement and appropriate data analytics can tell us a lot about the structure, function and dynamics of these ‘hidden’ networks and their influence on the norms, conventions and opinions of people likely to vote or those whose interests are affected by policy.

4. A related approach is textual analysis and other forms of ‘twittermetrics’ to construct the syntactic and semantic networks of concepts used to discuss events. This uses traffic analysis rather than polling, but both can be considered sensor nets for understanding how people feel about something, as well as how they interpret and understand it, and what they know and/or believe.

5. The final issue concerns the counterfactual or framing of the question. Scenario techniques and induced histories can help improve the validity and coherence of views about the future, to ensure that individual results can be aggregated (and even to experiment with different lead-up scenarios). Complexity science can help here, especially as applied to opinion dynamics and thinking-acting trigger events.

Question 2: What new methods have had the most impact on political opinion polling? Can technological innovation help to improve the accuracy of polling? What is your assessment of polls that produce constituency level estimates of voting intention?

Jonathan Cave:

6. Stated preference sampling (for issues and candidates), scenario gaming, serious games and social network analysis – that measure and visualise linkages among those sampled and across issues – can be used to move prediction (and strategy) from individual positions and open-loop timing to portfolios of issues and closed-loop or dynamic campaigning.

7. More granular psychometric sampling can be used to structure cue-conditioned cognitive response analysis. The point here is that people do not generally consider all alternatives and all potential consequences of each choice, but are directed by environmental cues to consider subsets of these, and to reweight them away from ‘objective’ descriptions. Behavioural tools (‘nudges’) can be used both to identify the factors that might change the behaviour (advocacy, participation, turnout and choice) of voters, but also to elicit better information (through interactive polling protocols). This reduces sample cell sizes, but improves the informational content – just as coverage may be more important than numbers per cell when trying to ‘map’ preference space, as one would do early in a campaign or when preferences have not hardened.

8. A wicked issue concerns the presence in political attitudes of ‘post-truth’ preferences, such as diminished credibility of authoritative sources, an indifference to factual accuracy or a rooted distrust of all politicians or formally-produced policies. This challenges most polling methods, both because it is self-referential and because the statistically most significant attitudes or intentions

may be the least easy to sample. A sequential 'bandit problem' (Gittens) protocol may be the best way to measure these things simultaneously with an assessment of use to policy or politics. But this requires further work.

Adrian Weller:

9. New technology, particularly applied to social media data, will enable better estimation of turnout of different demographic groups, which could have a significant impact on predicting election outcomes.

Question 5: Can polls be influenced by those who commission them and, if so, in what ways? What controls are there on the output of results, for example to prevent 'cherry picking' of results?

Jonathan Cave:

10. Yes, they can be influenced. Leading questions and framing contribute to this, though the incentives may reverse (i.e. create a false sense of optimism for bandwagons and attracting 'speculative' funding or support; or create a false sense of challenge to encourage turnout and funding and support by vested interests).

11. There are few controls unless public access to (anonymised or pseudonymised) raw poll results are mandatory and third-party analytics encouraged. The problem is that poll data may be inherently unstructured (as regards the most important issues) so that data mining may be essential. As it can be tendentious, open access is the best solution.

Influence of polls

Question 6: What impact do political opinion polls have on voters, politicians and political parties during election campaigns? To what extent does the publication of voting intention polls affect voters' decisions, for example, in terms of turnout or party choice? What are the implications for election campaigns if polls are inaccurate?

Jonathan Cave

12. There is a difference between event-triggered polls, tracking polls, non-political polls and e.g. 'citizen jury' longitudinal polling. If the sample can be framed as a panel data set (with cross-sectional and time-series elements, possibly complemented by a panel of questions (also cross-sectional and time-series)), the various kinds can be modelled as special cases and appropriate modelling choices (e.g. fixed vs. random effects) made. There is also a difference between sampling methods (for both respondents and questions) between replicated random samples and 'longitudinal' methods that track individuals or questions.

13. Referring back to the network issue, it may also be useful to sample groups, clusters, etc.

14. The influence of polls can also be measured by societal experiments e.g. selective news blackouts on polling results to try to identify the impact of polls per se as distinct from the changes in opinion they measure.

International

Question 7: How does the conduct and accuracy of political opinion polling in the UK compare internationally? Are there lessons to be learnt for polling in the UK from other political contexts?

Jonathan Cave:

15. The Pew Research Centre maintains a wave-sampled evidence base on matters relating to the Internet, which combines repeated surveys on a set of topics with 'dedicated' studies on particular topics.

16. Poll-of-polls analytics platforms are used to aggregate and compare multiple polls. These are common both in the UK and Europe, and provide a form of meta-analysis. They can be improved by quality indicators and more explicit information on how polls differ.

17. Strategic voting sites are increasing in importance – if voters wish to oppose a specific party or policy outcome, the first-past-the-post system obliges them to vote strategically. But how do they know whom to back in their particular local council? Localised polling data, combined with analysis and endorsement relating to specific issues (such as the environment) can help, and were a visible feature in the last General Election.

Regulation

Question 8: Is the polling industry's current model of self-regulation fit for purpose? Is there a case for changing the way political opinion polling is regulated? What regulatory changes, if any, would you recommend and what challenges are there to greater regulation?

Jonathan Cave

18. It would be useful to mandate data access rules, such as for open data and automated processing, as self-regulation has not addressed these. Access to polling sample populations or raw returns could also be regulated. Non-response and incomplete responses are valuable information, but may not be disclosed. In addition, poor design may not be rooted out by regulation or competition (since there does not seem to be a very active market).

19. The connection between intellectual property and privacy is particularly sensitive. Cybersecurity will be an increasing concern, because as polls become more influential, they will inevitably be targeted by hackers. This may involve manipulating poll results or injecting false data into poll samples or poll-of-polls aggregators. It may also involve gaining unauthorised access to respondents' data (especially if the need for longitudinal consistency means that personal data or identifiers must be used).

20. The necessary separation of regulation from politics will be problematic – especially when the reliability of polls cannot be objectively verified (or may be disregarded). Standardisation (on methods, access, algorithms, and so on) may be better. They could cover anonymization, pseudonymisation, sampling, weighting methods, treatment of multiple or partial responses, etc.)

Rob Procter:

21. Beyond self-regulation, legal measures, such as laws about publishing polls on the day of the election pre-date social media and hence may become increasingly difficult to enforce: access to data and tools to analyse it make polling open to a much wider range of individuals and organisations; the global reach of social media platforms leads to problems of establishing jurisdiction.

Media coverage of polling

Question 11: Does the media report on opinion polls appropriately? What steps could be taken to improve how the media reports the results of political opinion polls? For example, should standards be set in relation to the reporting of political opinion polls, or should a code of conduct be introduced?

Jonathan Cave:

22. Many mechanisms work like polls (informal social media polling apps, petitions, markets, etc.). They vary in terms of whether respondents engage for expressive purposes or instrumental purposes, and the degree to which expressed opinions regress towards the mean or move to extremes. These structural differences should be reflected in reporting, but rarely are – coverage concentrates on the ‘bottom line’ and attempts to serve as a bridge to bootstrapping opinion change. That is, network coverage of polls only makes sense if it is recognised that this coverage may influence results (for example, by increasing turnout). If analysis covered quality of information and intensity of preference, it might be more useful. Without defining what ‘appropriateness’ means, a code of conduct is unlikely to provide clear guidance or stimulate improvement.

23. A related issue concerns speed of reporting and frequency of sampling. As with financial data, speed may be very important, but self-limiting (lack of time for reflection, polling fatigue, etc.). As above, it is the impact rather than the accuracy that changes.

Digital and social media

Question 13: What impact is the increased use of digital media channels having on the way in which the public engages with political opinion polling? How is political opinion polling shared across social media platforms and what impact does social media have on the accuracy and reliability of political opinion polling?

Jonathan Cave:

24. Social media need to be categorised according to whether they are hot or cold – meaning that media that are more interactive produce different expressions of opinion and have different potential to change the person’s

thinking and actions - and whether people think fast or slow. Cues that activate thinking affect what comes out, that is, how seriously and 'rationally' we assess choices. This can be manipulated to produce the pollster's desired answer, a more accurate answer, or one that more accurately reflects the 'real' interests of the subject.

25. The path-dependence and the evolution of arguments on non-push channels introduces a 'bandit problem' aspect; people get a payoff and information by participation, but 'nudge' (change the state of) the processes they are sampling. This may be especially important if you want to know the character of those who will influence the successful candidate once elected rather than the unreliable promises in speeches, manifestos and media appearances.

Question 14: Can social media and other new forms of data successfully predict election outcomes? What are the challenges associated with using new forms of data to predict elections?

Jonathan Cave:

26. These are complex processes, and the tools of strong emergence (for example persistent mutual information) can be used to distinguish between anticipation and prediction. Emergent behaviours cannot be anticipated, but only predicted using a greater or lesser amount of information. Strong emergence means more information is needed. With available information, sometimes only approximate prediction is possible, which then needs to lead to approximate answers and decisions. This approximate information may be highly structured, so therefore does not necessarily mean 'error bars'.

Adam Tsakalidis:

27. Social media form powerful tools of communication and opinion sharing. There is a continuously growing research effort to use this content in order to predict future events that are dependent on people's opinions, with one of the predominant examples being the task of predicting election results. While this task seems plausible, there are several challenges to overcome:

a. Social media users are not representative of the whole population; hence, algorithms and models that are trained on social media data need to account for this demographic bias in their predictions. Considering the location of users posting online is an important factor and poses difficulties, as such information is readily available only in a small number of cases and methods for inferring geolocation are required.

b. Political opinions expressed online do not all carry the same weight; identifying influencers and isolating SPAM accounts by automatic means is an important task, in order to provide accurate predictions.

c. Predicting election results in a single electoral race cannot guarantee a model's performance in future events; the same models need to be tested in many elections across time, countries and languages, so that we can test their generalizability and adaptivity, while enriching them with knowledge from different political settings.

d. Most importantly, most algorithms predict the election results without reasoning about their outputs; while trying to achieve the ultimate goal of predicting outcomes, such approaches fail to inform politicians, policy makers and citizens on the reasons that trigger a political shift, which is of crucial

importance in the political domain. Such reasons may be long-standing or due to sudden events, and making this distinction, as well as understanding opinions towards specific targets (e.g. politicians, organisations, policies) and issues (e.g. topics such as immigration), is crucial .

28. Recent advances in machine learning and natural language processing make it easier to address the aforementioned challenges. With consistent evaluation of models in multiple case studies, we aim to build more robust algorithms that, contrary to traditional opinion polls, can provide clearer insights into the underlying reasons that trigger shifts in political views. Finally, we can make use of these insights and reasons to better predict election outcomes.
Rob Procter:

29. Social media has become a widely used substitute for conventional polling methods (and not just in political polling) because the easy availability of data reduces collection costs substantially. Problems such as demographic sampling bias can be addressed but there are other problems, which derive from assumptions about how the data may be interpreted (and which have implications for many other applications of social media data in sociological research). Unlike traditional survey-based methods, where repeated testing provides confidence in what is being measured (e.g. voting intention), social media data is open to different interpretations (e.g. to what degree does 'sentiment' extracted from social media postings correlate with – and so provide a reliable proxy for – voting intentions?). Simply put, the meaning of social media data is much more difficult to calibrate than is the case for other political polling data collection methods.

30. The problem of bias in social media is more complex and subtle than demographic bias alone. The algorithms underlying many online environments have an impact on people's behaviour. In some cases, these may be characterised as benign; for example, search engine autocompletion suggests search queries based on the first few characters input by making use of popular queries by other users; in contrast, the recommendation algorithms on social media platforms such as Facebook represent a more overt attempt to influence people's behaviour. Hence, rather than being simple transducers of people's behaviour, these online environments are actually generative of the behaviours they capture, which adds further doubt as to whether it is representative of the phenomenon of interest and thus to the difficulties in its interpretation.

31. Commercial data science companies rarely publish their methods, undermining transparency and reproducibility of social media-based polling.
Adrian Weller:

32. The extent to which social media can influence voter behaviour is of significant concern. As shown by Kramer et al. Facebook was able to affect users' moods, which may impact their voting behaviour. More directly, Bond et al. demonstrated the ability of Facebook to influence voter turnout. One can imagine a targeted campaign to alter voter turnout of specific population subgroups which could potentially influence the outcome of an election.

Additional questions for the Committee to consider

How is political polling used, and for what purposes?

Jonathan Cave:

33. There may be serious risk of endogeneity – that is, that the way opinion is measured affects the opinions themselves – if it is used to gauge the ‘true’ state of opinion, because people will react to what is said (or made available about) the results of past polls. Pollsters are getting better at documenting respondents’ characteristics, which changes the feedback loops linking successive rounds – or cross-linking across polls. This endogeneity (which includes how past measurements, poll triggers for event-driven checks, and instrument wording affects the internal and external validity of polls.

How does polling relate to other mechanisms?

Jonathan Cave:

34. The most relevant are probably interactive mechanisms such as: predictive or synthetic markets, in which the interaction of participants in real-time produces ‘emergence’ consensus information that can outperform analytical or empirical models; stated preference studies that can be used to assess counterfactual quantified data, like willingness to pay or other measures of societal impact; and Delphi or focus group methods. In all of these, the interactive part is most important – digital polls do this in a relatively uncontrolled way. Non-interactive mechanisms, such as online petitions, function in a different way.

1 September 2017

Dr Nick Anstead – Written evidence (PPD0018)

Executive summary of key observations and recommendations

- Recent high profile polling failures have had a diverse range of causes. However, what unifies them is the backdrop of growing political instability, which is making measuring public opinion harder than it is during times of political stability.
- It is hard to prove that polls influence individual voters, but they play a hugely significant role in shaping the public discourse around major political events such as elections and referendums. Flawed polls can therefore lead to misdirected or irrelevant debates becoming central to media coverage, and the exclusion of other issues.
- One bright point in the recent history of public opinion research has been genuine methodological innovation. This process has been going on for several decades. However, the challenge that comes with innovation is finding a language to describe what is being measured, what value it has and its limitations.
- Social media analysis is problematic because it does not conform to the definition of public opinion deployed by pollsters, where it is vitally important that the dataset is representative. Social media monitoring might be best understood as something quite different to traditional polling. Instead of trying to construct representative samples to replicate the work of pollsters and predict elections, researchers might think of this new tool as being a powerful aid to qualitative research, more akin to focus groups or even a twenty-first century version of the mass observation
- It seems clear that the negative effects of any kind of legislation banning or restricting polls in the period around elections greatly outweigh any possible benefits.
- The problems facing public opinion measurement are both methodological and cultural. The cultural aspect of the challenge relates to the role polls and public opinion play in our political discourse. Furthermore, given the methodological difficulties may be intractable, our best response is to try to deal with the cultural challenge.
- The major lesson from recent years – for all forms of public opinion research, old and new – is that we should always adopt a critical perspective towards the data being used and ask what can legitimately be claimed based on its strengths and weaknesses.

Submission to House of Lords Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media

Polling and public opinion measurement is central to our political life. It is however far from uncontroversial, as events in recent years have proved. For this reason, the work being done by the committee is very worthwhile. My own research has focused on the relationship between the media and public opinion, as well social media metrics and public opinion measurement.

I wanted to make observations on four areas relevant to the committee's call for evidence:

- The context of the challenges around polling and public opinion measurement;
- Influence of polls on media coverage;
- The challenge posed by digital and social media;
- Concluding thoughts: The democratic challenge posed by polling and public opinion measurement

The context of the challenges around polling and public opinion measurement

Opinion polling is central to contemporary politics and elections. It is unfortunate then that recent years have seen many high-profile polling "failures", both in the UK and abroad. It is worth noting that, when examined in depth, these so-called "failures" are quite distinct from each other.

- **The UK General Election 2015.** This event has been widely examined by researchers specialising in public opinion measurement (see especially Baker et al., 2016). Broadly the problem with pre-election polls seems to have involved the over-sampling of would-be Labour voters.
- **The EU Referendum 2016.** To call this event a polling failure is perhaps unfair. In the run-up to the referendum, the polling data was quite mixed, with some polls showing a leave victory (UK Polling Report, 2016). The real problem was the commentary surrounding the polls, which was built around two (often unspoken) assumptions. First, that there was a methodological divide between internet pollsters and telephone pollsters, the latter of which generally had better results for remain. Second, and most importantly, was a belief that the days before the referendum would see some voters (either undecided or leaning to leave) ultimately breaking for the status quo. Based on previous experience both inside the UK and internationally, this belief was plausible, but far from being a political law.
- **The UK General Election 2017.** Investigations into polls in the last UK general election are still ongoing, although three observations can be made. First, it is not fair to talk of polls as a single entity. Indeed, what marked this election was the diversity of results produced by different pollsters. Second, while the polling companies had mixed success at predicting outcome of the election, what they did collectively pick up was the general trajectory of public opinion i.e. the move away from the

Conservatives to the Labour Party. Third, the problems with the polls seem to be driven by unexpected turnout patterns on election day, including increased youth turnout and decreased voting by older citizens.

Additionally, it is worth considering the highest profile international polling failure in recent years.

- **The US Presidential Election 2016.** While Trump's victory over Clinton might have been unexpected it is worth noting that several national-level polls in the election were reasonably close to predicting the popular vote. The failure of the polls was two-fold. First, polling at the state level was far less accurate. Second, the way in which national vote share would be translated through the Electoral College was not foreseen. It is important to appreciate how unprecedented the outcome in 2016 was however. Clinton beat Trump in the national vote share by nearly 3 million votes, yet still lost the Electoral College by a considerably margin (Trump exceeded the required 270 votes in the College by 36. Compare this with George W. Bush in 2000, who was considerably closer in the popular vote, but eked out 271 votes in the Electoral College)(Patel and Andrews, 2016).

Collectively, recent polling failures point to a diverse set of challenges. The committee will certainly receive submissions from data scientists and psephologists who are better able to comment on the methodological challenges of contemporary polling, so instead I will confine my observations to broader structural challenges.

The obvious conclusion from the account above is the diversity of challenges facing polling. However, these challenges are linked by the growing instability of contemporary politics. This is reflected in several issues including: unstable turnout patterns across elections, significant changes in public support over the course of election campaigns¹ and historically unusual results once public preferences have been fed through pre-existing institutions. This is not wholly unexpected. The German sociologist Wolfgang Streeck (see for example Streeck, 2016), has argued that, as governments struggle to re-invent the capitalist system in an effort to ensure continued growth, the defining pattern of contemporary politics will be crisis and instability. In turn, these crises open the door for populist, anti-system politicians – as well as segments of the electorate willing to listen to them – who can further destabilise established patterns of political life (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

The challenges posed to pollsters by these structural changes are profound. The polling method is built around the idea of stability, with models for upcoming elections being built on assumptions made about voter behaviour based on previous elections. How does polling work if politics is fundamentally more unstable and volatile from election to election?

¹ This is the opposite of would be expected by most political science research in the area, where it has long been assumed that election campaigns have little effect on public preferences. Instead, preferences are settled by longer term factors such as the state of the economy and trust in the government.

Recent high profile polling failures have had a diverse range of causes. However, what unifies them is the backdrop of growing political instability, which is making measuring public opinion harder than it is during times of political stability.

Influence of polls on media coverage

Whether polls influence the behaviour of citizens is a widely-debated question. A number of theorised effects have been noted, including the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), the underdog effect and the band-wagon effect (McAllister and Studlar, 2009). The evidence for these effects is mixed and heavily contested.

Instead of revisiting these debates, it seems worth looking at the effect that polls have on another, narrower group of actors – the journalists and editors who produce political news. This group matters because they play a huge role in shaping national political coverage around major political events and, quite simply, set the agenda for what is considered important in that context.

One well documented pattern across the western world is the hugely dominant role played by polls in generating so-called “horserace” election coverage. The broad argument, which goes back a number of decades (see Broh, 1980) is that, during election campaigns, the media become fixated on who is winning and losing an election, and small movements in the various parties’ level of support, to the exclusion of discussing policy and substantive political issues. Furthermore, there is some evidence that growing pressure to produce 24-hour broadcast news and online commentary has increased the reliance on horserace coverage in recent years (Rosenstiel, 2005), although it should also be noted that such coverage is popular with audiences, so this phenomenon might be demand rather than supply-led (Iyengar et al., 2004).

The dominance of a polling-driven horserace is problematic because it frames other discussions about political events. In the 2015 UK election, for example, a huge amount of energy was expended talking about possible coalition deals that might emerge in the event of a hung parliament. Arguably, these discussions had a material effect on the election result, with the possibility of a Labour-led “coalition of chaos” providing a powerful rhetorical device for the Conservatives. Different polls, showing a significant Conservative lead over Labour, for example, might have led to a rhetorically very different campaign, with Conservative plans for government facing a much higher level of scrutiny.

The relationship between the media and polling is potentially problematic because academic research suggests that a lot of media coverage of polling is methodologically unsound (see Pétry and Bastien, 2009 on Canada, for example). Very few journalists are polling specialists and therefore polls are understood through the prism of a media logic, which tends to stress novelty and a dynamic situation. To take one obvious problem, statistically insignificant changes in the level of support are often recorded as being meaningful. Methodological caveats are sometimes omitted or, if they are included, not made prominent enough.

In summary, it is hard to prove that polls influence individual voters, but they play a hugely significant role in shaping the public discourse around major political events such as elections and referendums. Flawed polls can therefore lead to misdirected or irrelevant debates becoming central to media coverage, and the exclusion of other issues.

The challenge posed by digital and social media

One bright point in the recent history of public opinion research has been genuine methodological innovation. This process has been going on for several decades. The 1990s saw a growing role for focus groups, providing a qualitative tool to better understand not only what the public thought, but why they thought it. In the 2000s, internet panel polling came of age and developed as a genuinely viable alternative to traditional telephone and face-to-face polling. More recently, we have seen the deployment of social media monitoring and modelling methods, such as the multilevel regression with post-stratification technique deployed by YouGov in the 2017 general election (Shakespeare, 2017).

Broadly, innovation of this kind is always welcome, as it provides new and interesting research tools. **However, the challenge that comes with innovation is finding a language to describe what is being measured, what value it has and its limitations.**

My own work has examined the role played by social media monitoring in contemporary coverage of British politics (Anstead and O'Loughlin, 2015). Some academics have hoped that social media analysis, especially of Twitter, will provide an alternative to traditional polling methods, possibly able to predict election outcomes in advance. In turn, this aspiration has been critiqued due to the unrepresentative nature of any sample gathered on social media, where users tend to be younger and more politically interested than the average citizen (for an overview of these debates, see Gayo-Avello, 2013). One response to this challenge is methodological, seeking to create representative samples of social media users. Their data can be monitored and then analysed.

While such an approach would be possible, it runs the risk of losing vibrancy and organic nature of social media research (unlike other forms of public opinion research, social media data can be gathered without researcher intervention). Our response to the challenge is therefore somewhat different, which is to simply ask: what do we mean by public opinion?

Social media analysis is problematic because it does not conform to the definition of public opinion deployed by pollsters, where it is vitally important that the dataset is representative. Since the advent of the representative sample opinion poll in the 1930s, western societies generally have not been terribly reflective about the idea of public opinion. Indeed, there has been a tendency to employ a circular definition, thinking of public opinion as “what pollsters try to measure” (Price, 1992: 35).

The American political scientist Susan Herbst (1993) offers a different and powerful definition, which she terms the public opinion infrastructure. This can be broken down into three parts, which can broadly be defined thus:

1. A role for public opinion in the life of a democracy.
2. Methods for understanding public opinion.
3. Forums where public opinion is discussed / mediated.

The public opinion infrastructure is important because it opens a range of questions about what we mean by public opinion, and provides an important reminder that definitions of public opinion are historically contingent and subject to change. The current infrastructure is a product of the opinion polling age which began in the 1930s. It was not always the case. Coffee house culture of the 18th century, for example, had a very different attitude to public opinion (Habermas, 1991). Our ideas about public opinion and its role will likely change in the future too as new methods, such as social media analysis, continue to develop.

Considered in this way, **social media monitoring might be best understood as something quite different to traditional polling. Instead of trying to construct representative samples to replicate the work of pollsters and predict elections, researchers might think of this new tool as being a powerful aid to qualitative research, more akin to focus groups or even a twenty-first century version of the mass observation** (Harrison, 1986).

Concluding thoughts: The democratic challenge posed by polling and public opinion measurement

Discussion of democracy has been intertwined with the measurement of public opinion since the 1930s. The most prominent of the early pollsters George Gallup was unapologetic in seeing opinion polling as a tool for a more effective, representative and reactive democracy (Gallup, 1939). This argument was based on two assumptions. First, that public opinion on an issue was an objective reality that could be discovered through the correct scientific method (particularly representative sample public opinion polling). Second, prior to the advent of representative sample opinion polling, public opinion was largely a rhetorical device employed by politicians, who could – without fear of contradiction – claim the support of the public for their own programmes. Gallup would therefore claim that his method empowered ordinary citizens at the expense of political elites.²

This position has been hugely controversial. Notably, the French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu published the provocatively titled essay *Public Opinion Does Not Exist* (1979). Inverting Gallup's argument that public opinion was an objective reality waiting to be discovered, Bourdieu argued that opinion pollsters generated the concept of public opinion by the act of asking questions, often about issues on which those being polled had little knowledge or were simply not very interested in. Furthermore, because polling is expensive, only those who already enjoyed political or economic power had the ability to generate "public opinion", largely to serve their own interests.

² Gallup's relationship with democracy was complicated. While he made the argument that polling was democratic, the need to accurately predict elections meant that polling samples were constructed to reflect the electorate rather than the population. This meant that African American voters in the South who were excluded from the franchise were not polled, for example.

In many ways, these two arguments continue to echo in debates about the regulation of polling in political life, with one side seeing polling as an aid to democratic citizenship, and the other side seeing polling as a threat.

Several countries around the world do regulate opinion polls in the run-up to elections (Bale, 2002). Based on the preceding analysis, such a move has obvious attractions. It might lead to greater coverage of more substantive political issues and decline in “horserace” commentary. It could prevent a situation such as the 2015 election, where flawed polling framed almost all election coverage.

However, any ban on the publication of polls could also have negative effects on the democratic process. Five reasons are particularly significant:

- Such a move would have significant freedom of speech implications and would be a substantial shift from the British tradition of generally employing “light-touch” electoral regulation.
- Regulation of this kind tends to involve banning the publication of polling. This means that political parties, corporations and those with the resources to conduct private polling will still have access to opinion polls, although the public will not.
- In the evolving media environment, especially online and on social media, it is debatable whether a ban of this kind could effectively be policed. What, for example, would be done about poll results that are published on websites hosted outside the UK?
- Polls can be empowering for individual voters. This is a facet of the UK electoral system, which gives voters in some seats much more power to influence the result than others (Petts, 2015). Knowing the relative levels of support of the parties allows voters to make a more informed judgement about how they can best use their vote to achieve their preferred outcomes. Obviously, this argument is somewhat less powerful if polls inaccurately predict election outcomes. Nevertheless, coupled with a healthy scepticism, polls can still provide important cues to voters.
- An absence of polling would create an information vacuum into which other forms of data and rumour would leak. The “horserace” might not cease, but instead be based on a much wider range of flimsy and contradictory evidence.

Considering the arguments on both sides, **it seems clear that the negative effects of any kind of legislation banning or restricting polls in the period around elections greatly outweigh any possible benefits.**

Regulation is a blunt instrument and certainly not the best solution to the profound challenges facing us. **The problems facing public opinion measurement are both methodological and cultural. The cultural aspect of the challenge relates to the role polls and public opinion play in our political discourse. Furthermore, given the methodological difficulties may be intractable, our best response is to try to deal with the cultural challenge.**

The root of the methodological problem is the growing instability and unpredictability of politics across many western liberal democracies, reflected in fluctuating voter turnout, unstable voter preferences and institutional instability. This is challenging because modern public opinion methods are largely based on assumptions of levels of continuity between elections.

These problems raise the profound question of whether politics can really be studied as a science? If politics is a science, then can discover laws that remain constant across time and space. However, it looks increasingly like what have been thought of as “laws” (that election campaigns do not make much difference to election outcomes and that non-voters in one election are likely to remain non-voters in a subsequent election, for example) are in fact engrained and relatively stable historical tendencies. Furthermore, because they are tendencies rather than laws, these patterns have potential to break down, with very problematic consequences for polling and public opinion measurement.

Whether the opinion polling methodology can be fixed depends on how the current disruption develops. Ongoing instability may herald a realignment, leading to new patterns emerging which provide the basis for building new models of the electorate. Young people may continue to vote at the levels they did in the 2017 general election, for example, and this could establish a pattern in coming decades. This would be good news for opinion polling, as it would be mean that current difficulties are transient. More troubling would be continued unpredictability, with instability becoming the permanent state of political life. If that were to occur, it is hard to think of a methodological fix that could be effectively deployed.

It is this challenge that makes a re-assessment of the role of public opinion in political life and the way it is discussed even more important. Above all, both elite actors in political life (pollsters, academics, politicians and journalists) and citizens more generally must adopt a far more sceptical relationship with all forms of public opinion research. While accepting that polling and public opinion research can have positive effects on democratic life, there must also be a much greater awareness that flawed evidence has the potential to undermine democratic practices, and therefore all forms of public opinion data must be discussed with great care.

Above all, the major lesson from recent years – for all forms of public opinion research, old and new – is that we should always adopt a critical perspective towards the data being used and ask what can legitimately be claimed based on its strengths and weaknesses.

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1 September 2017

Professor Susan Banducci and Carl Miller – Oral evidence (QQ 23–31)

Evidence Session No. 3

Heard in Public

Questions 23 - 31

Tuesday 12 September 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Baroness Fall; Baroness Ford; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Janke; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve; Lord Rennard; Lord Smith of Hindhead

Examination of witnesses

Professor Banducci and Carl Miller.

Q23 **The Chairman:** Welcome to the session. You should have in front of you a list of interests that have been declared. You are being broadcast, but you have the protection of parliamentary privilege; you cannot be successfully sued for anything you have said. There will be a transcript to which you will have a chance to make any necessary corrections, so do not worry if a word slips out. The subjects in which you are both expert are slightly different. I will start with Professor Banducci, and then we will turn to social media and Onora O'Neill will ask you some questions. Do not worry if you want to come in on each other's subject; it is quite informal, but that is a broad way of covering the ground.

Professor Banducci, we have now had two elections in succession where the polls have been wildly out. Where does polling now stand? Should we just give it up as totally unreliable? Is this happenchance, or what?

Professor Susan Banducci: There are a couple of different things to consider when evaluating whether polls are accurate or reliable. We know that polling and any sort of survey research where you try to measure the opinion of a representative sample is increasingly difficult. We know that people are not answering their phones; they do not have landlines to do phone surveys, and finding them at home is difficult. The industry has moved to online polling, where there are questions about the representativeness of the sample, so the environment in which polling is conducted is increasingly problematic.

However, we understand those problems and issues with polling very well. We have a good understanding of the errors that are introduced in polls, so I am quite comfortable with polling. We do not need to scrap polls or surveys. I am quite comfortable with the polling results and how they have performed. That is different from using polls to predict election outcomes. It is a different process from what we are talking about. Polls are there to measure public sentiment and provide a snapshot of the public mood of the day, but increasingly they are used to predict election outcomes. The outcome of the election is used as the standard by which they are judged. That is a different process and question, because there

are issues about weighting and modelling that go into the use of polls to predict election outcomes.

The Chairman: There might be thought to be a further factor, the increased volatility of politics, which obviously makes all this more difficult. Do you have a comment on that?

Professor Susan Banducci: Exactly. There is a noted increase in the volatility of the public, in everything from their preferences for parties or how closely they feel aligned to a party to making up their minds later in the campaign. There is some notion that volatility might influence the accuracy of polls, but the polls are taking a snapshot of public mood or sentiment at a particular time.

Q24 **Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** This is quite a simple question and grows out of what you have just told us. We understand that there are at least two ways of thinking about what polls are for. One is to provide an accurate measure of sentiment at a moment in time and the other is to predict future sentiment and action: for example, voting. You pointed to some of the reasons why it may be more difficult than it used to be to shift from accurate measurement of sentiment at a moment to prediction of the actual casting of votes in an election.

There is a third purpose of polling, which is neither accurate measurement nor the prediction of future action but intervention in future action. To what extent do you think polls are now being used by political parties, and by third parties—other parties—as a basis for intervention, regardless of issues of either accuracy at the time or prediction of the future?

Professor Susan Banducci: There has been some evidence of intervention in elections. That might be driven by changes in the polls, if we think about the 2016 presidential election, when there was an attempt to manipulate opinion in the campaign. It is a new phenomenon that bears watching. I am unsure about the influence that such intervention has on the public mood or sentiment. Obviously, there is a belief among political elites and operatives that opinion can be influenced, and that influences their behaviour. As to the extent to which it then turns around and influences the public mood, the effects tend to be small and are conditioned by the particular context in which opinion is formed.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: Do you see a difference in that respect between polls commissioned by political parties and polls on the same issues funded by other commissioners of polls?

Professor Susan Banducci: In general, I do not have access to the private polls conducted by parties, and they behave according to those. There are some differences across different types of agencies that commission or do survey work, but these are changes and differences that we understand and can explain.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: Do you think we have access to good sources of evidence about the variety of commissioners and about the financial stake that different organisations have in commissioning polls?

Professor Susan Banducci: I have to say no. That information could be improved, and it might improve public understanding of polls. Of course, it relies on journalists reporting on and investigating those sorts of questions. It is an area where there can be greater transparency about who is commissioning polls and who is paying for them. Again, that is separate from increased information or transparency about methodology and weighting.

Carl Miller: Thank you so much for having me here. Good morning, everybody.

It is quite obvious that polls are often used as rhetorical manoeuvres within political contests. To see them as purely dispassionate or objective attempts to try to ascertain an empirical state of the world is politically naive. The vicious outcome is that the effect of a poll is obviously proportionate to the amount of coverage it receives in either conventional or social media. The amount of coverage a poll receives is itself proportionate to, or reflects, how sensational the outcome of the poll is. Let us dwell for a second on the single poll on the front page of the *Sunday Times*, a week before the Scottish referendum, putting the yes vote ahead. Many other polls taken over that time gave no a comfortable lead, yet that was the poll everybody saw.

The level of sensation that a poll creates is also proportionate to the likelihood that the poll is wrong; the more powerful a poll is politically, the more unlikely it is to be correct. That is a vicious outcome. It is the interaction between polling and media, and it is a real problem. It does not necessarily have anything to do with the methodology of a poll, although I hope we can talk about that because there are some deep questions to discuss. It really has to do with the way polls are used both by media and by political organisations and voices. That is what we see time and again.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Is that particular phenomenon exacerbated by social as opposed to conventional media?

Carl Miller: Absolutely. If there is one rule of social media, it is that sensational content is shared far more than worthy, objective, sober and rational content. That is having an enormous impact on the nature of political debate generally. Anyone can now do their own poll on Twitter, and the polls that are highly shared are the ones that have sensational results.

Q25 **Lord Hayward:** Professor Banducci, I see from your biography that you are a member of the Centre for Elections, Media and Participation. Is that purely a process of analysis, or is it an attempt to change the approach of the media, increase levels of participation or whatever? I have an associated question. In your opening comments, you said that the media were increasingly used to predict outcomes. Could you identify the basis on which you say that and give some of the examples you had in mind when you made that comment?

Professor Susan Banducci: Let me start with your second question, because I may have misspoken. In one sense, social media are being used to predict election outcomes. I am not sure that predicting the outcome of

elections is the appropriate way to use social media. That is my answer to that question, but I can come back to it.

Secondly, in the centre of which I am a member, our first step is to understand, based on empirical evidence, the relationship between exposure to information and news and how that influences attitudes and behaviour and engagement, and then to take that research and see what impact it can have. For example, we know that the media cover elections in a way that focuses on the horserace. However, we also know from the analysis we have done that the horserace coverage, where the focus is on polls, is alongside issue information. Traditionally, it was thought that horserace coverage dominates the news in a campaign, but that is not always the case; it goes alongside issue information. If we can talk to journalists about bringing to the top of the news the issues of the day and analysis, alongside the poll reporting, it is all important information for citizens. We should not think that polling is not important information for citizens. It is another bit of information they can use when coming to political judgments.

The centre is involved in analysis, but it is also interested in engaging citizens. We do that in a variety of ways, from talking to journalists to creating web resources that citizens can use to inform their voting. We need to pick apart a bit the comment about all the coverage being driven by social media, and that somehow there is a special relationship between the rise of inaccuracy in polls and the increase in social media. Traditional media still play an important role in informing citizens. The data we have been able to collect about where people go online and how they use news and information resources point to heavy reliance on traditional sources, but online. From the data we collected, the most visited site during the Brexit campaign was the BBC. It was not social media sites; it was not fake news; it was a BBC news aggregator of the important stories of the day. That is from looking at people's actual online activity.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Do you have any thoughts on what the responsibility of the pollsters is when faced with people commissioning polls, whether newspapers or political operators, in order to heighten the salience of particular issues to alter attitudes and shift behaviour? How do pollsters act properly and responsibly when pressured with those requirements from their commercial clients—the people who pay them? With that question, are there opportunities, which may not be much taken so far, for pollsters to communicate directly with a wider public, perhaps using social media themselves, to ensure that this information, valuable as you said it ought to be, is not distorted en route to public audiences?

Carl Miller: Pollsters rarely make much money from the polls we see jumping into the newspapers. Elections are like a shop front for a pollster; they are profile-raising and often loss-leader activities. A pollster's major interest is in getting coverage for their polls. They are trying to demonstrate to the public, via newspapers, that they can get stuff right, so that commercial actors engage them to do other things that are not public. It is the same kind of relationship as, say, academics or think-tankers have with media. We want to get our research into the public domain so that it is as visible as possible, which is not necessarily the same as the story a journalist wants to write about the research we do. It

is a tangled and difficult relationship about which I think pollsters could be clearer. They could probably push back further on newspapers to try to communicate their research in a more objective and fairer way, but it is a mixed incentive. They need to get a story from the polls they do.

Q26 **Baroness Couttie:** I have several points and questions that I will try to roll into one. I comment first on something Professor Banducci said about polling being a useful form of information about elections for political parties, as they try to make a decision. That is true only if the polls are accurate. The problem arises when misinformation is put out, which means that people make decisions based on wrong information. That is what this Committee is concerned about, quite rightly.

Earlier, you mentioned research about people using mainly tabloid or newspaper media online, as opposed to more broadly. Did your research look at chatrooms, which I know are probably more biased towards youth, because particularly in the last election there seemed to be an enormous explosion of political content, a lot of which was very inaccurate? Some of it was based on polls, even straw polls, in chatrooms, which was a concern. Specifically, what research was done around the last two general elections when there was quite a big difference between what was predicted from the polls and what the outcome was? That is more likely to have had an influence on voter behaviour, particularly if someone wants to cast a protest vote, which they are more confident in doing if the party they would otherwise support looks like getting a landslide anyway, and other behaviours like that.

Secondly, social media are increasingly becoming an important part of where people get their information, despite the fact that, as you said, much of it is reproduction of tabloid and newspaper media. In so far as the trend is probably more towards other sources, is there anything that we as a Committee should be looking at as regards controls, guidelines, regulations or whatever, to try to ensure that what is reported is as accurate as possible and carries the appropriate health warnings about polls being a snapshot in time, the number of people surveyed and so on? That is potentially a difficult question for this Committee to answer. I see what we can do around media based in the UK, but obviously social media have much broader sources.

Professor Susan Banducci: To start with the question about how we have come to understand how people are exposed to news and information in this new environment of social media where it is shared and user-generated, the data we have collected is what users are doing online. We refer to it as clickstream data. We have a panel of respondents who have agreed to download an app and have their online activity monitored.

Baroness Couttie: Is it monitored by humans, so that they know when people go into a chatroom whether they are talking about political things or about the new shoes they have bought?

Professor Susan Banducci: Yes. Wherever they go online, we collect all the URLs—the stories and information they are exposed to and where they are clicking.

Baroness Couttie: To be very precise, is that analysed by a computer listing that they have been to this site, this site and this site?

Professor Susan Banducci: Yes.

Baroness Couttie: It is not a human looking at what was said on that site.

Professor Susan Banducci: No. As a human, I look at the data that has been collected. It takes a computer to process the data, because for 1,000 respondents a week's worth of data amounts to at least 50 gigabytes. We have to use a computer at some point, but I tell the computer that I want to see everywhere they have been online in the past week. How many are news and information sites? People go to a very small proportion of news and information sites; whether it is chatrooms or sharing political stories on social media, it is a very small amount of activity. We know that is the case. It was the case before social media. We know that the amount of time people invest in informing themselves about politics is quite small.

Baroness Couttie: In an election period—

Professor Susan Banducci: It is greater.

Baroness Couttie: Not only is it greater but, given that they are thinking about going to vote, the influence of that perhaps short period of time on social media around politics has a greater impact than looking at what shoes they might buy.

Professor Susan Banducci: Exactly.

Baroness Couttie: It is not just volume; it is about the impact.

Professor Susan Banducci: It is about the impact. What we see is that the news sources they go to are not always or dominantly social media. As I said, they click on the BBC, because what social media capture are what people are sharing, and news stories they are sharing. It does not capture the sites that people click on in the morning when they are doing their morning routine. It used to be the case that they might open the newspaper. Most of the people who opened a newspaper may go online to a news source. What social media do not capture is that sort of activity and news exposure. What the focus on social media has done—because journalists pick up on this—is to drive the news cycle. The important story on Twitter or social media is picked up and amplified by journalists, which in turn is amplified by social media, but there is a whole other set of activity going on outside social media. A majority of people are exposed to news and information that way, as opposed to what is being seen on social media.

Baroness Couttie: Do you think that is because still, probably correctly, people have greater trust in our newspapers and broadcast media than they do in chatrooms where anyone can say anything?

Professor Susan Banducci: From opinion polls, people trust information on social media, but the traditional media still have a privileged position as regards trust. Generally that is television, not the partisan press.

Carl Miller: That trust is being eroded and it is highly generational. Younger people tend to have less trust in conventional news sources than

older people. While that is true, another picture is that the use of conspiracy theory websites is going up a lot. An entirely new stable of digital voices is becoming more powerful online. There is an entirely new complexion of who is trusted and who is not, and social media are one of the forces causing a pretty important societal shift in whom we turn to for our political news and content. The BBC is important, but there are trends at work that are causing the BBC to become less important and for entirely other sources to become more prominent.

Baroness Couttie: That goes to the second part of my question: what do we as a Committee need to look at to make sure that what is on social media is regulated, as far as that is at all possible, so that it is as accurate as possible in its reporting of polls?

Carl Miller: In so far as one of the underlying questions or concerns for this Committee is how the political debate is being deleteriously affected by social media, the presentation of polls is the least of our worries. Political debate on social media is entirely unregulated. We have seen the emergence of one of the most important arenas in political debate in this country with no rules around how it works. We know that now social media are literally militarised. The information space is considered by foreign militaries to be a theatre of war. We know there were attempts to influence media operations and so on. In that space it feels as if we are not reacting to all the different ways in which people can be lied to and manipulated using these new online worlds. I believe that the presentation by conventional British pollsters of their polls within conventional British newspapers is a very small part of the problem.

Q27 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** The evidence both of you have given has been very interesting and helpful. Professor Banducci, you said there needs to be greater transparency and methodology in the commissioning of polls. Mr Miller, you mentioned the way in which polls have been misused and misinterpreted. The YouGov rogue poll in Scotland was one that influenced the whole process of developing Scottish devolution. You have gone on to how polls are being used by social media. Why do you think pollsters are so opposed to any form of independent regulation?

Carl Miller: I could not speculate on that.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Why can you not speculate?

Carl Miller: I do not really understand why the polling industry has reacted in the way it has over the last five or six years to a clear drop-off in its accuracy. It is acting in a very defensive way, which is probably quite natural. The entire industry is facing what it sees as an existential threat. Independent regulation of an industry such as that is seen, as it would be if it was academic research, to be a threat to its integrity and independence.

Professor Susan Banducci: Pollsters in polling firms and organisations adhere to professional norms. There is a professional body with a set of guidelines and principles by which polls are to be conducted and communicated. If they adhered to those, as well as journalists adhering to how polls should be reported, it would increase transparency and understanding.

There are a number of things journalists need to communicate when they talk about polls and the uncertainty surrounding polls. There is a methodology to the polls and uncertainty around the results that may be influenced by particular factors, et cetera, but there is also the notion that journalists and pollsters should be clear that what they are measuring in a lot of polls are national sentiments. That is not necessarily how the election results are played out in a two-party single-member district system, or the Westminster single-member system. The results of the election are based on constituency-by-constituency results, not national results. That translation is extremely important for voters in understanding what the polls mean, but it is rarely explained when polls are reported. The methodology of the polls should be explained as well. Accuracy of polls is also about what the polls mean in terms of national versus seat results.

The Chairman: Can I go back to the beginning when we might inadvertently have misspoken? There is no control over the methodology that polls use. The British Polling Council does not have a methodological guide. All it says is that you have to be transparent about methodology, which is a very different thing, whereas in France, for example, the Commission des sondages monitors methodology.

Professor Susan Banducci: That is correct.

The Chairman: Thank you.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: It is not just the methodology and the technical aspect, but the way polls are interpreted, and used as predictions rather than snapshots, and the way rogue polls are given huge prominence because they are out of step with mainstream polling. Other industries in other areas are subject to independent regulation. Polling is now becoming a very powerful force in British politics. Why should there not be some kind of independent regulation? Why are the pollsters so defensive about it?

Professor Susan Banducci: I might disagree with the assessment as to the power of the polls themselves, rather than what Carl was talking about—the spread of information about them. What is regulated? Is it the polling itself or how information is disseminated through social media in a campaign? Is it Facebook? Is it Google? Is it other organisations or social media platforms that need to be investigated and regulated, or is it the polling industry itself? I think Facebook and Google are moving in the direction of trying to self-regulate. In trying to implement things like fake news detectors et cetera, they realise that there is a move to regulate those sorts of social media in that direction. Facebook itself is powerful as a sharing platform.

Carl Miller: In the scale of risk we face in our political debates, there is a gigantic mismatch between the use of polls in mainstream media and the current capacity of social media to misinform and systematically manipulate. I underline that point once more. I can go on to social media and pretend to be 10,000 people when I am only one person. I can game search engine results to mean that, when you google me, only sites that I have written come at the top. There is a whole world of disinformation and manipulation out there that we have not yet even begun to tackle

seriously in a regulatory, legal or technical way. That is currently happening and it is incredibly worrying, and far more legislative attention needs to be paid to how we can protect our democratic and political debate from those kinds of threats.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: That is very helpful.

Q28 **Lord Smith of Hindhead:** Can I ask both of you whether you think that pre-election polling has any effect on people's voting intention?

Professor Susan Banducci: The evidence on whether or not pre-election polls influence preferences, as well as engagement and turnout, is not conclusive. By not conclusive, I mean that there is evidence that pre-election polls in some elections and in some contexts have influenced preferences, but they are marginal effects. There is also evidence to suggest that pre-election polls in certain elections and in certain contexts have not influenced outcomes. I would not say that there is some absolute truth out there, which we have yet to discover, as to whether or not pre-election polls influence elections; it is simply that under some conditions and for some people it matters marginally, and for others not. It is not something on which I have conducted research, but that is basically where current research is.

The research I have conducted suggests that what happens as an election nears is that polls tend to engage the less interested. As election day approaches, pollsters are more likely to pick up the politically uninterested in the polls. What that means is that in one sense there is a broader, more representative variation of political interest, but also that those who are not politically interested do not have well-formed opinions. The quality of responses we are likely to get from them is lower as well. That is how I would summarise both the extant research in that area and my own contribution.

Carl Miller: I agree with Professor Banducci. There is no clear evidence. This is a bit of a researcher get-out clause. It is very difficult. Researchers are often asked what X or Y does during an election. An election is one of the times when it is notoriously difficult for us ever to draw any causal influences, because people are bombarded on all sides by all kinds of things during elections—conversations they might have had around the kitchen table or the news piece they saw yesterday, or that day. It is difficult for us to untangle what is going on. The same goes for the effect of social media on electoral preferences.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: But you can understand the question, can you not?

Carl Miller: Yes.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: We want to establish whether pre-election polling affects people's voting intentions or turnout, because if the polling is inaccurate, obviously that is a serious concern. It might answer the question as to why so many other countries ban pre-election polling, 16 in the EU, as well as Canada. Is that a sensible idea?

Professor Susan Banducci: No. I am not convinced that the benefits of banning polling—again, they are not clearly evidenced—outweigh the benefits of that information. In addition, we are an open and free society

with freedom of expression, and that is part of the important information we get in a campaign.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Canada is an open and free society, is it not?

Professor Susan Banducci: From my understanding of how that is played out in Canada, it is not really enforced and the courts have—

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Reduced it.

Professor Susan Banducci: Yes.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: But it is still a ban.

Carl Miller: There is a case to be made for the banning of polling in the immediate run-up to elections. My only response is that, of all the different fights and things we might do, that is not the one I would prioritise. To ban political polling would be a big fight. A lot of political energy and parliamentary time will be spent on it, at the same time as the whole of online digital political activity, which is growing ever more important and copious, is entirely unregulated. People can say whatever they want on there. Third-party campaigners can do whatever they want. People from any country can send whatever information they want into British political debate. Just as a matter of priority, putting some kind of enforceable regulatory system in place to begin to defend the integrity of online political discourse would be the thing I would spend political time and wherewithal to try to put in place.

The Chairman: It might be helpful to have a supplementary note on your priorities. Possible recommendations that we could look at would be helpful.

Carl Miller: Of course.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: It is also a matter of practicality.

Carl Miller: Practicality is a huge one.

The Chairman: Mr Miller has said that the priority is not to ban polls. I suspect we will come back to that issue at some length.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: That might be so in an ideal world, but the organisation and regulation of the internet does not come within our scope.

Carl Miller: That is a horribly scary thing for legislators to say. We cannot step away from the question of making sure that the law has voice online as well as offline.

Q29 **Lord Rennard:** I first declare an interest as someone who occasionally employs opinion pollsters and used to employ them quite extensively.

In thanking our expert witnesses for their expertise, I would like to ask them, first, whether or not they think the political parties themselves and, secondly, as a separate question, media organisations believe that the reporting of opinion polls influences voting behaviour. It is not whether or not you think it does, but whether you believe the parties, and separately the media organisations, believe that.

Carl Miller: I am not sure that media organisations necessarily have an opinion, or need to have an opinion, on that. They use it to sell newspapers and drive stories, and it does that very well. For political parties, the Ashcroft polls are a good example. They were certainly being used to influence some constituency, whether the broader public, the Conservative Party or voters in swing marginals. I definitely think polls are used to have an effect on the preferences of people to whom the polls are directed; otherwise, why would they exist?

Professor Susan Banducci: I agree with Carl's assessment about the use of polls by the media to drive coverage and attention on various stories. I think elites and parties believe that they have an influence, but it is a very iterative process. They read polls to figure out where the public are; they move strategically and then expect a congruent shift in opinion as well, so it is a complex interaction between their strategic behaviour and what the polls show.

To go back to the point about the banning of polls, if they were banned, the legal framework would apply to polling agencies within the UK. It was the case in France when polls were commissioned or done outside French polling. In this global media environment, polls from Belgium and Switzerland about the French election are clearly visible and accessible to French voters. In one sense, the banning of polls would open the British political environment, as Carl argued, to outside forces and to polls that possibly could be less accurate and provide less useful information.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: But the French polls have been very accurate, have they not, when ours have not been? In the last French presidential election, the poll was almost spot-on, whereas ours have not been.

Professor Susan Banducci: Yes. It would be my argument that the accuracy of polls fluctuates, and, as noted before, we are looking at two different things: prediction versus sentiment.

The Chairman: In the second round, the polls in France were miles out—worse than ours.

Lord Rennard: I want to go back to potential regulation and the context of all that. For the reasons you have given, it is obviously very hard to try to regulate how polls are conducted. It is probably harder to regulate how polls are conducted than perhaps Lord Foulkes suggests. It seems to me that the problem is that if you attempted to regulate how polls are conducted, or if you banned them in the last week, it would allow the political parties themselves to make claims without any independent scientific verification as to the state of play, and, perhaps even worse, some of the media organisations might have vested and controlling interests. Perhaps our focus ought to be more on things such as the BBC's guidelines to regulate how polls are covered. There are no guidelines as to how newspapers cover polls, so it is possible for a tabloid newspaper owned by someone with a particular vested interest to suggest, without any regulation or on any proper basis, that the whole country is switching strongly this way by exaggerating the effect of polls. Should we focus more on how polls are reported, with some degree of responsible regulation of the media and coverage, which I accept is probably harder in

social media than in broadcast or print media, rather than regulating the polling industry?

Professor Susan Banducci: I agree about focusing on two areas: on how polls are reported and covered by the media in the press and in broadcast, and on what is now known as digital literacy, and how we inform and give skills to citizens in encountering information in this more complex environment. It is about giving skills in digital literacy and how to read polls accurately, or how to understand what the methodology is. How do citizens counteract fake news—I am sorry to be the first to say “fake news” today—and deal with misinformation? Those are two important areas where there could be either regulation or policy change: media reporting and social media reporting, which is more difficult, and digital literacy.

We also have to understand that within this context we want to focus on the accuracy of information that citizens receive, and that enhances the quality of democracy. Better information and better decisions mean better democracy. However, we also have to be mindful of the way citizens process that information. We know from experimental evidence that misperceptions are held by voters. Even if we give them accurate and correct information, it is very difficult to shift those misperceptions.

There may be some initial shifts in misperception. We ran some experiments around the 2017 election about misinformation and misperceptions about how immigration had influenced pressures on the NHS. The believability of that was quite high, even though it was an incorrect, false claim. Then we gave information to the respondents that corrected the misinformation. We gave them factual information from Full Fact, the fact-checking organisation, about the actual impact on the NHS of immigration from the EU. It changed believability, but it was a small change. Immediately after reading the information their perceptions were corrected. However, we went back a month later to see if that correction had held. It did not hold; people had reverted to believing the false claim.

We can focus on the accuracy of information, and we should. We should get poll accuracy and the reporting of it correct. We should get factual information about policy consequences correct; voters deserve that from the media and politicians, but we are working in an environment where voters come to these issues with predispositions. The information we give them from the media, or social media, is just one more bit of data that goes into their political judgment, and it becomes difficult to correct misperceptions. We need to keep correcting the misperceptions that they hold.

Q30 **Baroness Ford:** I declare an interest as chairman of the STV Group plc, which is the public service broadcaster that holds the Channel 3 licence in Scotland. As such, we commission a number of polls.

I am particularly interested in Mr Miller’s evidence, which I found compelling. We have heard clearly that three standards of accuracy and impartiality are being held to at the moment. Broadcast news has the highest standard of impartiality and accuracy applied to it. Ofcom obviously takes that very seriously; public service licence-holders take it extremely seriously. A very high standard is set for how those polls are

used by the broadcast media. Newspapers are different; they are self-regulating and apply a different standard. As we heard so eloquently from Mr Miller, the online world has no regulation at all. Given the proliferation and complexity of big data and machine learning, all the conflation of lack of regulation and increasing complexity in the use of data and its manipulation, do you think it is realistic for us to think we could start to regulate or legislate for standards to be applied online in this field?

Carl Miller: It is an unbelievably scary world if we do not try. The rise of online debate genuinely challenges some basic conceptions about the nation state and the way we have collected legal authority around territorial units. The trans-jurisdictionality of all this is a massive headache for any national legislator or law enforcement agency, but we need to try. I do not see why digital literacy is not a fundamental part of the national curriculum or part of citizenship education. For the record, a Demos pamphlet called *Truth, Lies and the Internet* was published in 2011 in which we began to argue for digital literacy to be made part of the national curriculum. That is something we have argued for up to this day.

Quite widespread across government and in lots of public bodies is the idea that we should not even try to regulate the internet; it is too difficult. That is not true. At the moment, service providers are companies with significant presences in the UK and that means they are subject to the law we create. There is plenty more we could do to regulate, and to try to improve the quality of political debate.

As a brief footnote, I do not think regulation is the only level we can or should look at. In a sense what has happened is that the gatekeepers have been washed away. The newspaper editor, the anthologist and the academic—the experts in many ways—no longer make judgments on the public's behalf about what information can or cannot enter the public sphere. Instinctively, we have always looked to regulate people to play by certain laws that we create, or that they create themselves. That does not really work any more. You can put whatever regulatory framework you want around pollsters or conventional media, but that is not a future-proof solution to the problem. The solution is a push down to the individual level; it is about how all of us make decisions on our own behalf—become our own gatekeepers—about what information we receive and what we judge to be true or not. That is what has been lacking. It is unclear to most people how they might be the subject of manipulation or attempts to influence them online. It is unclear to all of us.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: I have a question for Carl Miller that leads straight on from that. Would it help the public to have accurate information if we were—this may not be feasible—to regulate internet service providers as publishers rather than as platforms, as at present, thereby bringing them within the scope of legislation against defamation and misrepresentation, while preserving freedom of expression, as we do for print publishers?

Carl Miller: That is a very good question. In doing that, we would make it legally impossible for those entities to exist. Legally, they cannot take responsibility for the content on their platforms; they never would be able to, and they would all shut down in a day. We need a new kind of legal

settlement, seeing them not as publishers and not as completely objective, almost like utility companies. Something else has to happen. We need to be creative in the new legal fictions we create, in order partly to empower our own law enforcement and regulatory agencies to be more powerful online and partly to hold the large tech companies to their responsibilities.

Q31 **Baroness Fall:** I want to pick up Lord Rennard’s point about newspapers. A lot of polls, especially political ones, are commissioned and then published by newspapers at weekends to great effect. What worries me is that to a certain extent they are looking for a story. They often have a political viewpoint anyway, or their owners do. I worry about the way they are presented in the newspaper. Often, other questions are at the bottom of the article, or on page 9, and that distorts the way we read it. My related question goes back to Mr Miller’s point about online polls in particular. Trying to regulate the people who run the internet is a bit like the wild west; it is a very difficult thing to do. On secondary reporting, let us say you have a poll on a blog. The sample might be absolutely tiny. There is not much you can do about that now. We might discuss that, but is there something we could look at about the way it is reported the second time? For example, a newspaper following up an online poll could say that only about 12 people were questioned.

Carl Miller: The brief answer is yes. As Professor Banducci mentioned earlier, often online content is radically amplified when it is then reported by conventional mainstream media. This is a loop we see time and again. An adage among campaigners I have spoken to is that you put something on Twitter to get it into the press, because you know that is where journalists are looking, although not necessarily many other people.

Baroness Fall: At that point, you could do it.

Carl Miller: Yes. Using the regulatory teeth that currently exist, that might be a point where you try to exert some influence.

Professor Susan Banducci: I agree. It is the responsibility of the journalist, we would think, to be transparent about the source of the poll, the methodology and the sample size. To come back to the notion of digital literacy, or any sort of literacy, the reader could judge the accuracy of that information if given the right skills to understand that small sample sizes, or any sort of bias, might exist in the poll, so they can evaluate the result in the context of other information. Those two mechanisms should assist in the understanding of the polls.

Baroness Janke: On a similar subject related to the internet, I support the view about individual responsibility, and putting digital literacy in the national curriculum, but those are quite long-term measures. Mr Miller, you said you did not feel that the task of starting to introduce measures whereby activities on the internet could be regulated was quite as impossible as some people think. Is there any written evidence, or something we could look at? It seems that, while we focus on the pollsters, there is a whole world we are not really penetrating. Baroness Fall made suggestions about re-reporting, but could we have a written submission from Demos, or other organisations, on the whole area of

misreporting, fake news or whatever? It seems to be a big area that we are not really penetrating.

Carl Miller: Absolutely. As a very quick note on fake news, one of the reasons I have not used the phrase is that I think it is an entirely unhelpful way of trying to describe what is going on. Two things are happening underneath fake news. One is the deliberate and concerted attempt to manipulate an online information space, usually by a powerful and sophisticated actor, often a foreign Government.

The other thing is the clickbait economy, which is largely apolitical. I met a fake news merchant in Kosovo as a result of book research I had been doing. It is not necessarily a deliberate attempt to get any kind of political effect; it is just harvesting clicks. The content that is put on there is almost like a mirror to ourselves; it is the stuff we click on. It tends to be gore, not necessarily political. That was an aside on the fake news theme. I am happy to submit written evidence.

There is cause for optimism. In the long narrative of the role of tech giants in having responsibility over the content their platforms hold, initially they said there was none; then with child sexual abuse online, they took responsibility; then it was terrorism, and they took responsibility for that; and increasingly on hate crime and racial, ethnic and religious abuse online the tech giants are taking responsibility. Next will be the broader question about information and misinformation online.

The UK is one of the largest digital markets in the world; we are one of the largest economies in the world, and the tech giants have large holdings here. We are one of the few countries in the world outside California that can have an influence on the way the tech giants think about this. We should use it not only on behalf of the UK but on behalf of lots of different nationalities that are struggling with the issue. In a sense, a much more profound conflict is happening between technology and politics, so for politics to say, "We do not think this is a space we should regulate", will lead to a digital world where we do not want to live.

The Chairman: We must draw to a close. You will kindly produce a small supplementary note on the priorities and why you think they are so important.

It has been a very stimulating session. That has been clear from the liveliness and width of the debate. Thank you both very much for the trouble you have taken to prepare for it. It has been a pleasure having you.

BBC – Oral evidence (QQ 89–95)

Evidence Session No. 12

Heard in Public

Questions 89 - 95

Tuesday 14 November 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Baroness Fall; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Janke; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve; Lord Rennard; Lord Smith of Hindhead.

Examination of witnesses

David Jordan and Ric Bailey.

Q89 The Chairman: I welcome our witnesses this morning. I will say one or two things in advance. We are being recorded and, potentially, broadcast, so you may want to bear that in mind. Equally, you will be glad to hear that you are protected by parliamentary privilege, so you can say anything that you want about anybody and cannot be sued. You might get assassinated, but you will not be sued.

David Jordan: The chance of a lifetime.

The Chairman: Quite. Are you coming up for retirement, David?

You have in front of you a list of interests that have been declared. Later, you will get a transcript of the proceedings, which you can change to correct any things that are not as clear as you would like them to be.

We have heard evidence from a couple of ex-BBC people, including David Cowling, so we know some of the background. This question is probably for you in the first instance, David. We have had two elections that have been disastrous for polls, and, of course, the BBC reflected in its coverage what those polls were showing. What changes have you made to your guidelines for polls as a consequence of those two disasters?

David Jordan: I do not think that we needed to make any specific changes to our guidelines. As you may have gathered from looking at them, if you have done so, they start from a pretty sceptical position about opinion polling in the first instance. That stems from the previous occasion, which some of you may be old enough to remember, when the opinion polls went badly wrong in suggesting what the outcome of a general election might be. That was in 1992. Not only did the opinion polls preceding the 1992 election suggest that there might be a different outcome, but we had considerable problems in the BBC with our exit poll on that occasion. Consequently and subsequently, we reviewed the advice we were giving to programme-makers and content-makers in the BBC at that time about how we should use opinion polls. Those guidelines have served us pretty well since then. They have been revised a few times subsequently, but the fundamental guidelines have not changed very much.

However—Ric might be in a better position to say something about this—on the occasion of each general election we provide programme-makers with a specific set of election guidelines, which contains a section about opinion polling in that general election. I do not know whether on the last occasion those changed slightly to reflect our experience of 2015, of the European referendum and other recent occasions on which the opinion polls have not suggested the right outcome or have had some issues along the way. For example, in the Scottish referendum, there was a single poll that suggested a different outcome. In the 2015 general election, the opinion polls suggested a narrative that was not true; in the 2017 general election, they suggested an outcome that did not occur. In the American presidential election, the state-wide polls suggested outcomes that did not happen and were quite badly wrong, although the national opinion polling was rather accurate. I defer to Ric on the guidelines for each individual election.

Ric Bailey: There was a small change. As you know—you have discussed it in previous sessions—there are elements of our guidelines that talk about never leading or headlining a bulletin with the reporting of a poll. That has been a long-standing thing. We stiffened it slightly between 2015 and 2017. I know that in previous sessions it has been said that, even if we do not lead with a poll, telling the story somewhere else is still reporting the polls. The bit we strengthened for 2017 was to say that we would not normally do a news story on a single opinion poll. We do not do that. As David said, we are generally pretty sceptical about individual polls. Obviously, when there is a range and a trend of polls, we report on that.

The other change that we made, with which David and I were involved quite a bit, relates not particularly to the guidelines, but to the prominence of polls. You will see that they had much less prominence in our general coverage in 2017 than in 2015. For instance, in 2015 there was a regular spot on the news channel when a correspondent took you through the polls. He did it absolutely appropriately and in context, but the fact that we had such a spot was itself giving the polls some prominence, so we did not do that in 2017. In our online reporting of polls, we did not do a poll of polls either during the referendum or in 2017. In other words, we did not take an average of all the polls and suggest that that had more credibility. When you could not know which polls were right and which were wrong, the average was not going to tell you very much either. We did more of a tracker; people were able to find out what all the different polls were saying, but we did not move them on from that to suggest that there was a particular number to which they should pay more attention.

The Chairman: We were not critical of the guidelines, on the whole. One of our main concerns about them was that they are very unspecific. For example, they refer to the margin of error. How do you understand the margin of error of a poll?

Ric Bailey: I would probably defer to the many greater experts you have had on that topic. Michael Thrasher tried to explain in one of the sessions, and I agree with him, that margin of error is a slightly misleading term to use now. It should refer only to randomly selected polls, and most of the

polls we are talking about are not that. As David said, we keep these things under review. One aspect of the terminology in the guidelines we will look at is whether it is relevant to talk about a margin of error and what other variations there might be.

We are trying to give the audience a clear impression of the level of robustness and credibility in the polls. At the moment, we say that one of the things we should include when we report a poll is the margin of error, as well as the sample size and who commissioned the poll. There is a whole load of information that the guidelines say should be there. With the changes in methodology and so on, we are keeping that under review.

The Chairman: You are asking an awful lot of the poor old programme producers out there, who know less about this. You have had a very good shot at the question, but how does a programme producer know the difference between the statistical margin of error and the margin of error commensurate with the fact that these are not random samples?

Ric Bailey: You have had David Cowling here. He and I worked together very closely when he was in that role. I work very closely with his successor, who does not have the same title but is doing a similar job. From the point of view of the guidelines, I advise very carefully anybody who is doing polling that is controversial or political, or that is about public policy, but they also get specific technical advice.

David Jordan: We are in the process of revising our editorial guidelines at the moment. There will be a new edition in 2018. This is something that we will take into account when we revise that section of the guidelines for the 2018 edition. Although I entirely take your point about the concept of margin of error, which is absolutely accurate, I think that it is helpful, even if slightly inaccurate, for programme-makers to understand that a poll that says that 49% of people are in favour of something and 51% are against—or vice versa—could be completely reversed within the margin of error. Understanding that when reporting the poll is a very important concept, so that people do not take too seriously polls that are that close and might not show the sort of trend Ric referred to. Although margin of error is not a perfect term, it helps in that sense.

The Chairman: Thank you for mentioning that you will be revising the guidelines. The Committee may want to take the opportunity to make suggestions about ways in which you might wish to move those forward.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: How much information do you provide about who commissions a poll?

Ric Bailey: It is part of our guidelines to say publicly who commissioned a poll. We always make that public as part of any publication of polls, usually directly on the output, but certainly online.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: You would name the publication, the company or the individual who had funded the poll.

Ric Bailey: We always use the British Polling Council for this sort of polling. We would name the organisation that did it and who commissioned it.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: The question is motivated by the thought that there can be several layers in this. We have become aware recently of content—not polls so much—that was commissioned by sources that were not evident to the public but which had electoral implications. Some of it was apparently funded by sources in Russia. Would you know that when you say who commissioned a poll? Would you know who lay behind it?

Ric Bailey: If it was the sort of poll that we would report, yes. If it is not a poll, we are talking about something different. We would do normal journalistic inquiry about where it was coming from and what its sources were. Where it is a properly commissioned UK poll by a British Polling Council—

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: What is the meaning of properly commissioned?

David Jordan: For us, it would be a poll carried out by a reputable polling company. The reputable polling companies are all members of the British Polling Council.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: The reputable polling companies have clients, do they not?

David Jordan: Yes, they do. Once upon a time, I used to commission polling from reputable polling companies, when I worked for “Weekend World” and when I edited “On the Record”, “Panorama” and so on. In my experience, those polling companies are very jealous of their reputation for doing a proper job, whoever is commissioning them. They would be very concerned at any suggestion that they altered their polling methodologies, their results or anything else to fit the requirements of whoever was paying for the poll and whoever their client was. Of course, the client asks for the poll to be conducted. Beyond that, polling companies have a duty to create questions that are properly phrased and balanced, so as not to suggest one answer or another. They have strict guidelines around that. The British Polling Council is very strict in making sure that polling companies that belong to it conduct their polls in a proper way and publish them in a proper way subsequently, which they are required to do.

The Chairman: Lord Ashcroft’s polls are not conducted by a member of the BPC. Does that mean that they will never get any mention on air on the BBC?

Ric Bailey: It does not mean that they will not get a mention. The thing you have to remember in all of this is that we are making judgments about information that is in the public domain all the time. To pretend that something is not happening, when it is, is not helpful journalism for our audience. If something is having an impact on political decision-making in some way, it is not sensible to ban mentioning it.

We take the approach that you should put everything in the appropriate context. David has already mentioned the famous poll during the Scottish referendum. That was a single poll. If we had a rule that said that we should not mention a single poll at all, we would have missed a huge chunk of political activity—not least, as I recall, the cancellation of Prime

Minister's Question Time and three Westminster party leaders dashing on to the first plane north to start making vows to the Scottish Parliament. That may not have been due entirely to the publication of a single poll, but it was certainly influenced by it. If we are going to explain to our audience what is happening in politics, we have to explain what is impacting on political decision-making. That includes all sorts of information, including some polls. We report on the politics that those polls generate. In doing so, we have to give the context of what they say, but with the caveats that we explain in the guidelines.

The Chairman: First, you said that you use only polls that come through members of the BPC. Now it turns out that you do not; you use any old poll that comes along, if you believe that it is affecting the climate of news. Which is it to be?

Ric Bailey: No. I am making a very clear distinction. If a poll is published and we simply say, "Here is a poll. This is what it says", we do so only if it comes through the British Polling Council. If a correspondent is being asked in a two-way to explain the context of what is happening at Westminster, and one of the things happening at Westminster is that a political party's strategy is being influenced by polling, of course he will talk about that. He will have to make sense of it by referring to polling, but he will do so with appropriate caveats and appropriate context.

The Chairman: But he will not necessarily say that they are not members of the BPC and, therefore, you cannot find out a damned thing about how the polls are done. Let us leave that on one side. It is something that you really should address in the guidelines. The Committee may well say that when it reports. Sorry for banging on. Kate, you were next.

Q90 **Baroness Fall:** I want to ask you about something slightly different—the BBC Reality Check. The Committee has been looking at the whole issue of fake news, social media and politics. Can you tell us a bit about what got that going in the BBC? How is it developing? How do you see it progressing, especially amid the arguments at the moment about advertising, Russians and fake news?

David Jordan: Reality Check started in the 2010 general election as a way of literally checking the statements that were made during elections, to tell our audiences what the veracity of those statements was. I am not suggesting that politicians tell lies in elections, but sometimes they are, in the famous phrase, "economical with the actualité", and might not tell the entire truth. Reality Check was a way of putting the claims of politicians in elections into some form of context and explaining to our audience what other factors they should take into account and where the truth lay. That is how it started—in a fairly small way, in that election.

Since then, it has developed to become a more prominent part of our output in elections. Subsequent to the 2015 election, it was decided that it would not be something we used just during elections. Because of the increasing amount of fake news in circulation, we decided not only that it should be used in the fashion in which it was used initially, but that it should be extended. Where some piece of what we thought was incorrect information was circulating widely in social media or elsewhere, we would be able to step in, through the online site or even by intervening in a

social media stream, to put into the public domain the facts of the situation, where people were misconstruing them, either deliberately or inadvertently.

Now, if something significant is happening where the wrong facts are being used, we use Reality Check to intervene in that debate. In Twitter streams, occasionally BBC Reality Check will come in with some facts, where there is a contested argument going on or where people are not using the true facts of the situation, or to put the facts into context. That allows people to understand that, when they talk about 10,000 new nurses, they know that it is between one year and another year, rather than the wrong year, or something of that nature. It is just a way for the BBC to make a small contribution by adding a factual correction to some of the misinformation that is circulating online at the present time.

Baroness Fall: I am interested in what you said. Obviously, the BBC is a very strong brand, so you have a powerful starting point for this. You said that BBC Reality Check goes into social media debates, so you must have people who monitor some sites. I find that very interesting. How many members of the team are there? What sorts of sites do they regularly monitor? Can you give us an idea?

David Jordan: I will probably have to come back to you with the exact number. I think there are about 10 or a dozen people working for Reality Check at the moment. They keep an eye on Twitter streams. Obviously, they cannot watch the entire internet or the entire social media output—even Facebook cannot do that, and it generates a lot of it—but they keep an eye on important streams of information. If they see something that they believe is significantly misleading people, they have the power to intervene. That is a significant development of the brand from what it started as, which was simply a way of correcting misimpressions that may have arisen in political debate.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Can we come back to the influence of polls on political decision-making? Ric Bailey gave us a dramatic example from the Scottish referendum campaign of politicians responding very vigorously to a particular poll. It is by no means always so obvious that polls influence political decision-making, yet you have suggested that that is a criterion that you use—that it is legitimate to report polls if you sense that they are having such influence. How do you know whether opinion polls are influencing decision-making? It is a question that interests us. Maybe you can cast some light on it.

David Jordan: I am not sure that that was what we were mainly concerned about. I am not sure whether there is convincing evidence that polls influence decision-making or whether, in the current phraseology, they simply confirm people's existing biases. For us, it is a question of making sure that the information people get is as accurate as it can possibly be, and that our own journalism focuses on the right areas in the right way. Our concern about the 2015 and 2017 general elections and the Scottish and EU referendums was the capacity of the polls to influence the journalistic narrative of those election campaigns. In particular, we were very concerned that, in the 2015 election, there was a huge focus on

the possibility of a Labour-SNP coalition, which turned out to be fanciful, shall we say, in the context of the outcome, and really rather misleading.

Inevitably, political journalists enjoy the horse-race, as do many politicians at Westminster, I can attest. We try our best to restrain that and use lots of mechanisms in the BBC to make sure that we report and cover all the issues in a campaign, across a very wide range of output. If you are not careful, the issue of who is ahead, who is behind and so on can take over. The implication is that polling can take over the narrative of the election. In the 2015 case, we were very concerned about that happening. In the case of the Scottish referendum, we were very concerned that a single poll—which, with great respect to the Chairman, could easily have been in the other direction, given the margin of error—had the influence Ric talked about earlier. The poll had a convulsive effect on political behaviour and on the political parties, when actually, in all probability, opinion had not really changed in that period. Those are the things that concern us. We want to make sure that we are giving our audiences the best possible account of the election, and the best possible chance to make an informed decision. We were concerned that, in recent instances, the reporting of polling had not helped us to do that. That was our starting point.

Ric Bailey: Can I add two points? As David said, the interesting thing in 2015 was that a narrative was established—I think you have talked about it before—and it became too narrow, because of the expectations of where polling was going to lead the election. In hindsight, we looked at our own coverage in that light, but that narrative was accepted not just by the BBC and the media, but by the whole political establishment. We then had to report that. It was not just about what we were reporting, it was about the constituencies party leaders were choosing to campaign in, the subject areas they wanted to campaign on, and the interviews and who they gave them to. A whole series of political strategies by the parties themselves were dominated by that narrative. We were all in the same boat, as it were, and perhaps we should have stood back and said that.

In all elections, we make a point of always trying to cover all the issues that are not necessarily part of the narrative. We commission our health editor, our education editor and all our specialists to make sure that policy areas are covered. They may be less prominent when the so-called horse-race takes over. In 2017, we made a point of pulling back on that. You have probably seen the research that Loughborough did on that. I do not know whether or not its measure of the so-called horse-race aspect is accurate—it is not a measure that we use—but Loughborough suggests that that aspect, while still reasonably prominent in 2017, was a full 10% less so than in 2015. That is part of our gearing back on that aspect of polling and other process aspects of the election.

The Chairman: Please be patient, because I have quite a long list. Robert is now at the top.

- Q91 **Lord Hayward:** Can I ask a question that takes us away from straight political polling to social surveys and surveys in general? Particularly at this time of year, in the run-up to the Budget, everybody is lobbying for one cause or another. Do the standards outlined in your editorial policy apply

to those sorts of surveys, whoever they are covered by, in the same way as they apply to political polls?

Ric Bailey: Yes. The section on polling is about all sorts of ways of finding out opinion. Polls are one of them, but that sort of survey is another. Surveys of MPs or chief constables are clearly a different animal from polls, but they are something that we also police pretty strictly, particularly if we are going to commission them ourselves. If it is a BBC survey, we have pretty high criteria for what it needs to achieve. There is a mandatory reference to me, so that I can talk through with people how they do it, and how they do it appropriately. You will have seen evidence about “surveys” that are completely self-selecting and come out with things that are entirely unrepresentative. When we commission surveys ourselves, we have guidelines that are very similar to our polling guidelines. Obviously, when reporting other surveys, done by other people, we need to be really careful around the language, to make sure that we are not implying that something is more scientific than it is, and that we put due scepticism into the reporting of surveys of that sort.

Lord Hayward: I typed in the words “teachers”, “survey” and “BBC”. It was completely random, and I took the first one I came to. I have in front of me a survey reported by the BBC, from the BBC website, on 5 April. It states, “Teachers survey suggests 1 in 3 want to quit”. This was a survey undertaken in Wales. I have done research into the organisation—I may be proved wrong, because I did it in the last half-hour—but it appears to be a self-selecting survey, of the kind to which you referred. In fact, only 14% of teachers in Wales responded, and they appear to have been self-selecting, but the BBC carried it. I may be corrected—I am happy to be afterwards—but it seems to me that this is a classic example of a self-selecting survey, where the people who respond are the people who are reported. We get this very regularly, not just on the BBC, but from other organisations. We are told the views of police, teachers, nurses, landlords or whoever you choose to mention—politicians, probably—but it is not a scientifically weighted group.

Ric Bailey: Again, there is a distinction between what we would commission and what we might report. When we are reporting, David and I are usually the first people on the phone if we think that something is not being reported appropriately. We cannot do everything, but we are usually pretty quick to act if a survey that is not robust is being given more prominence than it should have. I would not say that you should not report that sort of thing at all, as it may well be part of a campaign. As long as you put it in the appropriate context and are clear about who has commissioned it and what its basis is, either online or by providing links, that is better than having some sort of prohibition that says, “We would never report that sort of survey”. If it is information that is informing the political debate, it is better that people understand it, and understand its robustness, than that we pretend that it is not there, because that plays into the whole idea that the mainstream media are in some way hiding something.

The Chairman: In effect, you are giving the PR men a charter: “Please put out any rubbish you like. The BBC will report it, because it might affect politics”.

Ric Bailey: Seriously, I am not—completely not.

The Chairman: Why?

Ric Bailey: We are talking about editorial judgments and whether things are appropriately put in context. Any information that comes to any journalistic organisation has to be assessed for its worth and importance, and an editorial judgment is made about that. It is a normal function of journalism to decide what a survey's worth is. Its worth may be as part of a campaign that a particular organisation is using. That is what the organisation is doing. Failing to report the survey at all and pretending that it did not exist would not be an appropriate editorial context, if it was important and was affecting the debate.

The Chairman: The facts that Robert put were that only 14% of teachers responded, and they were self-selecting.

Lord Hayward: They certainly appeared to be.

The Chairman: It does not matter whether or not it is affecting the debate. That is a PR point. The BBC should not have put that on its website. The guidelines should have prevented it. Why did it happen?

David Jordan: Ric makes an important point about the editorial justification for including it in a report. Where I completely agree with Lord Hayward is that we should not headline on a self-selecting survey of that sort. As Ric said, whenever he and I hear or see anything like that, we jump very hard on the programme-makers and content-makers concerned and say, "What are you doing? You cannot make general statements about the population of teachers based on a survey of that sort, if it is self-selecting".

There are plenty of other examples, because all kinds of people have realised that they can try to generate headlines by carrying out surveys with self-selecting samples, particularly online. Essentially, they put up a question online and say, "Please respond". They then publish the results as if it is a bona fide piece of polling. That is one reason why we make a distinction between bona fide polls, which we call polls, and these sorts of things, which we call surveys. Surveys with self-selecting samples are not necessarily unreportable or unusable as a stimulus to debate or as part of a picture, but to treat them as if they are representative of the population as a whole is, as Lord Hayward implies, quite wrong. We try to prevent that whenever we can. If you send me that example, I will have words with the person concerned.

Lord Hayward: Can I clarify my point? This was a survey undertaken by the Welsh Government, so it is reasonable to report it. It appears to be self-selecting. What concerns me so regularly with the reports that I hear in the media in general is the amount of self-selection. We had a case this week involving 4,000 teachers. That is a lot of teachers, so I accept the point, but is it representative of an incredible number of teachers?

David Jordan: It should not be reported as if it is representative if it is a self-selecting sample of that sort. Unless it is done as a representative sample, by a reputable polling company, it should not be reported in that way. As I said, we take action if we hear or see anything of that sort occurring in our output.

The Chairman: Could you do a short note for the Committee explaining the particular case that Lord Hayward mentioned? That would be very helpful.

David Jordan: Of course.

Lord Rennard: Would such a report be subject, potentially, to BBC Reality Check investigating itself? If so, how would someone raise it with BBC Reality Check?

David Jordan: I think we are the reality checkers in that case. If things are wrong, we take action to correct them. We get things wrong, because we are a very large organisation and we are not perfect. If either of us had seen the case in question, and it involved a self-selecting sample, we would have taken action to have it corrected.

Ric Bailey: If it was a survey commissioned by the Welsh Government, it would be reportable. It would be reportable with appropriate context that said, "This was the methodology. This is how representative it is or is not". That ought to be part of the reporting.

Lord Rennard: Indeed. I am interested in how the process of BBC Reality Check works. For example, last night Theresa May made very bold statements about Vladimir Putin's interference in democratic elections with fake news and social media. How could BBC Reality Check check what Theresa May was saying last night? Would it do so? If someone wanted it to investigate something, how could they raise the issue?

David Jordan: It is an editorial judgment for BBC Reality Check. There is an awful lot of fake news around in the world at the moment. I am not going to accuse the Prime Minister of being a perpetrator of fake news. Frankly, I suspect that the problems with her—if there are any problems at all—are a lot smaller than the problems that lie elsewhere. I suspect that, in general terms, Reality Check is concentrating on statements by people other than the Prime Minister. It has to make an editorial judgment about what is out there, what is playing big and what seem to be misleading facts and figures. I do not edit Reality Check; Ric and I do not edit anything. It makes an independent judgment as to what it thinks is worthy of its attention.

Lord Rennard: My final question is about the value of BBC Reality Check, which should be a very high value. I note that you have fewer than 43,000 followers on Twitter. For a major BBC Twitter site, that is not terribly many. Are there any plans to promote more extensively the existence of BBC Reality Check—for example, by referring to it in more of your programmes?

David Jordan: We promoted it a lot during the general election campaign. Not only did we have an online site that intervened online in debates and put out material, but we gave it a slot every Sunday night on the 10 o'clock news during the election campaign that cross-referenced to the online site. We also made other references to it in our election coverage. At the time of the election, we did a lot of promotion of Reality Check. We know that the public's recognition and awareness of Reality Check went up in that period, because we did surveys that showed that. I entirely take your point. There is not much point in having it if nobody

knows it is there, so it is incumbent on us to continue to promote it and to make sure that people are aware of it.

Q92 **Baroness Couttie:** I have two questions. The first goes back to some of the comments you made earlier about headlines versus context. We have just talked about the teacher survey. The content of that article probably went on to give some more details. However, the difficulty I have is that, unfortunately, because of most people’s lack of interest in many of these subjects, particularly politics, what people take away from an article is the headline. I would be interested to hear your views on that. I do not think that it is justifiable to put up a headline that talks about a swing when, in the article, you explain that there is a margin of error or that the sample was not representative. That headline is factually inaccurate—certainly, if it is within the margin of error—or, at least, misleading. People will not necessarily read the article, and, even if they do, they will not necessarily remember it. It is the headline they will take away.

Ric Bailey: That is why we do not do it. It is why our guidelines talk about not leading in our broadcast output and not headlining with polls. In our view, giving something a headline in that way or making it the lead gives it a prominence that lends it an authority and a credibility that we do not think a single poll could ever justify.

Baroness Couttie: I misunderstood what you meant by headlining. Headlining means “the headline”. I thought it meant the intro bit in the news that picks out different aspects.

Ric Bailey: No. That is an introduction or a cue. A headline means that at the top of the bulletin you say, “These are the top three stories today”. We would never headline a poll that said, “Theresa May surges ahead”.

Baroness Couttie: Even as the title of the article.

Ric Bailey: No.

David Jordan: We should not.

Baroness Couttie: I am referring to both broadcast and online articles.

Ric Bailey: Clearly, what is meant by a headline online is slightly different from what is meant in broadcasting.

Baroness Couttie: Yes, but the point is relevant to both.

Ric Bailey: Yes. I agree with you. That is why we do not do it.

Baroness Couttie: You do not do it. I cannot remember what the headline was on the article that Lord Hayward cited.

Ric Bailey: It would not have been that—unless there was a mistake.

Baroness Couttie: I thought that Lord Hayward said that it was something like that.

Lord Hayward: I have moved off the website. I will call it up in a second.

Baroness Couttie: I think the article was headlined something like that.

David Jordan: The second bullet point of our guidelines on reporting opinion polls is very clear. It states, “We should not headline the results of an opinion poll unless it has prompted a story which itself deserves a

headline and reference to the poll's findings is necessary to make sense of it".

Ric Bailey: That applies not just to voting intention polls, but to polls generally.

Lord Hayward: For clarity, the headline was, "Teachers survey suggests 1 in 3 want to quit". My concern, which we asked you to write to us about—that is why I moved off the website—was not that the BBC did not qualify how many had been surveyed, et cetera, but that the national education workforce survey says, "All ... registrants were invited to" take part. It was about the fact that it was a self-selecting process.

Baroness Couttie: Absolutely. Therefore, I think that headline is misleading.

The Chairman: You are going to do us a report on this case. You may just say, "We were wrong". That happens in the world.

David Jordan: It is not looking good at the moment.

Baroness Couttie: My other point picks up on some of the earlier questioning. Do you feel that during a general election enough emphasis is put on the differences between the policies of the different parties—in a simple way, so that the average person can make judgments about which party they agree with more—as opposed to the horse-race aspect of it, which most people find much more interesting? My general feeling is that that is not the case, particularly when polls are very exciting, such as the Scottish referendum poll or the hung Parliament that we were supposed to have, with a Labour-SNP pact. I do not feel that the public are getting enough information on the policy differences between the parties.

Ric Bailey: I agree with you. We put a lot of emphasis on trying to tease out differences in policy. As I mentioned, some research suggests that that was significantly better in 2017 than it was in 2015. I cannot quite remember the dates of the manifesto launches for the 2017 election, but I remind you that none of the main parties would discuss policy at all for the first few weeks of the election campaign. How they were campaigning, and the things they were saying on public platforms and in interviews, became part of the story, but what their policies were could not become part of the story until they published their manifestos. This time, in particular, that was pretty late.

David Jordan: We make sure that we cover every party's manifesto, when it is published, in our output. We also provide a site online that compares all the different manifestos and all the pledges that are made in them. We have a system that tries to ensure that all our output deals with the main issues across the election—as we see them, not just as the parties see them—and we make available very comprehensive coverage. The problem is that, to some extent, you can take a horse to water, but you cannot force people to look at that output and those pieces of online analysis.

Ric Bailey: In 2017, of course, some of that was disrupted by the terrorist attacks.

Baroness Couttie: I understand that. To go back to what you just said, do you feel that you publicise it enough? Until we started doing this inquiry, I was unaware that you did that analysis online. I am very politically interested, so I probably should have been aware of it. If I did not know about it, perhaps it is not mentioned enough in your news broadcasts or in other areas of your website.

Ric Bailey: We encourage presenters on Five Live, the news channel and so on to do the links. We reference it quite a lot, but it might become part of the whole sound of an election. We say quite frequently—often on the main bulletins, when there is a particular story—that you can look at the policies of all the parties by going online.

David Jordan: I have spent my broadcasting life trying to get people interested in policy. Sadly, it is not as easy as it sounds.

Q93 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** I want to go back to the very interesting conversation you were having slightly earlier about how the reporting of polling drove the narrative of the elections, rather than the decisions of individuals, who might or might not change their mind. In a sense, I am representing my colleague Lord Foulkes, who, unfortunately, is not here this morning. You will know that he has introduced Private Members' Bills about banning polling. This Committee has rejected that idea—slightly dismissively, I think.

One of the things I have learned from sitting on the Committee is that the polling can drive a narrative, as you have illustrated very clearly this morning. You do not have the capacity to explain the limitations of the polling; no one wants to listen to that, in any case. The only accurate polling we get is right at the end, when we have the exit polling, which, as we have heard very conclusively, you cannot replicate during an election campaign. It is not simply something about this country that there is a uniquely formidable position that polls must happen during an election campaign and that they must be reported, either at the top of bulletins or lower down, with the statistical caveats that the Chairman emphasises regularly. I am beginning to think that the polls should be driven to the margins of political debate. If saying that they cannot be reported during an election campaign achieves that, good. We are not really learning anything, and we are putting you in the difficult position of reporting them in a way that is comprehensively accurate and understood by the people who are watching the programmes. Why do we shy away from that so much?

Ric Bailey: You could have a wider argument about the democratic aspects of whether you should stop people polling, and so on.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: It is about reporting.

Ric Bailey: On a practical level, if polls are commissioned privately by political parties or City institutions, and that information is known to some people, it seems to me quite difficult for an organisation such as the BBC to say—

Baroness Jay of Paddington: You do not report the private polls anyway, do you?

Ric Bailey: No. But if that is all there is, and there are no public polls, people are being asked to make judgments in a vacuum, where some people have access to that information but people generally do not.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: What vacuum is this? As we have discussed, it is probably driving the narrative inaccurately. You gave a very good illustration of that in the 2015 election. We all know about the Scottish referendum.

Ric Bailey: The point is that the information would not be private. These days, it would be everywhere on social media, and we would be silenced. If the mainstream media—in particular, the BBC—were not able to mention polls during an election, people would have access to all sorts of unregulated and uncontextualised information. They would make judgments on that without the sorts of guidelines that we impose on the reporting of it, and which are a way of giving the electorate an idea of what polling information means. If they get that information only through social media, they will not get any of the context. It seems to me that that is a lot more dangerous than having us do our normal journalistic job, which is to explain what is happening to people and to give them the proper context and information around it, so that they can make a judgment.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Yes, but, as Pippa said, you then have to put it not at the top of the bulletin, in the headline or in the introduction, but right at the bottom.

David Jordan: The democratic point is very powerful in this debate, is it not?

Baroness Jay of Paddington: No. You have the social media anyway.

David Jordan: Some people would be able to conduct polls, but they would not be reported to the general public. There is an argument—if Peter Kellner were here, he would probably use it—that, in some elections, some members of the electorate have used polls to vote tactically. People voted Liberal Democrat in some constituencies where they thought that there was a better chance of defeating another party.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I am sure that the Liberal Democrats organised that on the basis of their private polling, not the public polling. I defer to Lord Rennard.

David Jordan: I make no comment on Liberal Democrat feelings, but there has been tactical voting, allegedly, on occasion. To restrict knowledge about polls to an elite would seem very peculiar in current times, and would generate a problem. If you are talking about doing something of the sort, the only solution is to ban anybody from doing polls during the period of an election.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: You cannot do that. As you rightly say, the social media, which we cannot regulate, would do it.

David Jordan: I also suspect that the political parties might not be hugely happy about that.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I am sure they would not, but that is a different issue.

David Jordan: It is the only way you can stop the polls happening. Even then, you would have had polls right up to the moment when the general election was called. Are people then working on the basis of information that is out of date? A very illustrious pollster is sitting just behind me. It used to be the case that things did not change much during election campaigns, and that the result at the beginning was probably the same as the result at the end, but the last election gave the lie to that. Therefore, relying on a poll that was done just before the election was called and assuming that it was still relevant four or five weeks later would not be a very good idea. There are some practical problems. That is all I am pointing out.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I accept what you are saying. We agree that the polls will not show the statistically correct position and may be driving the narrative in the wrong direction. You argue for putting sufficiently good guidelines around them to enable them to be well reported from the point of view of journalistic practice, but not from the point of view of statistical practice, because you are unable to educate the general public—certainly, not me—sufficiently in the niceties of all of that. Therefore, what value do they have?

David Jordan: I am not here to argue on behalf of the pollsters, but, to be fair to them, there have been many years when the problems that arose in 2015, 2017 and 1992 did not arise. After 1992—I was part of this at the BBC—the pollsters spent a lot of time changing their methodologies, devising new methodologies that reflected the times and trying to get their methods to the point where they were more accurate. They are doing that at the moment. I do not know when we will see the results, because it takes a while for these things to feed through. It is perfectly possible that in five years' time the pollsters will again be much more accurate than they have been recently. To be fair to them, there is work going on.

Secondly, polls are about a lot more than just voting intention.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I know, but we are talking about polling and politics.

David Jordan: Voting intention polls are also about issues—what issues matter most to the electorate—and other things. A huge amount of valuable information comes into the political debate as a consequence of that kind of polling. I am not here to argue on behalf of the pollsters, but, in deference to the noble Lord behind me, I think something should be said about them.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I am sufficiently old to remember, as I was then working for the BBC, how inaccurate the polling was in the 1970 election. I do not think this is a new issue.

Ric Bailey: Everybody has talked about 2015 and how wrong the polls were, but while we are being fair to the pollsters, aspects of the 2015 polling, and the polls in the two years before that, gave us quite a lot of information about what actually happened in 2015. The rise of UKIP was very clearly signposted by the polls right through to the election. They were pretty accurate. The increase in support for the SNP in 2015 was clearly marked out in the polls in a way that gave added value and

information to the way we reported them. The decline of the Lib Dems was also clearly earmarked by all the opinion polls. They were all pretty accurate on all of that.

Q94 **Lord Smith of Hindhead:** We have heard from previous witnesses that the BBC does not commission political polls, but you commission the exit poll, or at least, you commission a third of it. Apart from giving Mr Dimbleby and others something to talk about from 10 o'clock until we know the result, what is the point of the exit poll?

Ric Bailey: To be clear, we commission political polls sometimes during elections; we never commission voting intention polls during election periods.

David Jordan: Occasionally, we commission voting intention polls outside election periods, but these days we do so very rarely. For example, we participated in voting intention polls in Wales, because nobody else does such polls there and it was a way of adding to public information in Wales. We do voting intention polls very occasionally, although they are rare.

Your question was about the exit poll. Even I do not remember why we started doing exit polls in the first instance. I think initially it was a way of trying to give people some understanding of what might have happened.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: It is not about what might have happened; it is about what has happened, is it not? The exit poll is not like any other poll.

David Jordan: No. One of the things that came out of the review of 1992, which the director-general—Lord Birt, as he now is—asked me to conduct, was that we disentangled the exit poll from the results. Before that, we did our seats projection based on a combination of the exit poll and the results. As a result, in 1992, when the exit poll was quite badly out, we ended up, as it were, infecting the real results until late in the night. It was 3 am or 4 am before that effect was taken out.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: The exit poll cannot have an effect on the result.

David Jordan: At that time, we were combining the two—the exit poll and the real results—into a seat projection, and changing the seat projection as we went along. The result was that we did not change the seat projection sufficiently until very late in the night. Since then, we have not combined the effects of the exit poll and the results. What we say about an exit poll is, “This is our exit poll, for what it is worth. This will be a very interesting result”. Once the real results start coming in, you will notice that people now start to compare them with what the exit poll says, to see whether or not the exit poll got it roughly right.

It is an indication of what might have happened, but we never suggest that it is infallible. Indeed, it is not. We have done very well over the last few years, since we started combining with other broadcasters. We now have far more sampling points than we used to have, and the genius of John Curtice and his team interpreting the results into seats, which is an incredibly difficult thing to do. We would never pretend that it will necessarily be that accurate on every occasion. It is just a way of

indicating what might have happened and talking about it. Then the real results come along, and you start to concentrate on those.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: So it is just something to talk about from 10 o'clock until the morning.

Ric Bailey: It is television. It is trying to inform the public about what is going on. Results come in over a long period, and the interest starts bang on 10 o'clock. Having something to talk about, if it is accurate, is extremely valuable, but it carries with it a huge degree of jeopardy. It is risky. You may say that an opinion poll that comes out five weeks before the election is inaccurate, but you do not really know, because you are not testing it against anything real. You are testing an exit poll against something that will happen in a couple of hours. If you get that wrong, it is pretty difficult reputationally. It is a hard judgment to make. That is why the three broadcasters combined to do it. We did not do an exit poll for the referendum, because the methodology does not work for that, but that leaves an editorial gap when you are trying to tell the story of what is happening on the night. It is a very popular programme. People want to tune into it.

David Jordan: I do not think it is a dishonourable ambition. Our programme begins at 10 o'clock, as the polls close. These days, real results are getting later and later—even in Sunderland, which does its best to get the results quickly—and, this time, the first one came in after midnight. The bulk of the results do not come though until much later than they used to. As a broadcaster, we want something that interests the audience and gives us the biggest possible audience through to the real results, because we think it is a valuable contribution to the democratic process and to our citizenry. I do not want to apologise for trying to keep people interested from the beginning of the programme, so that we can keep them there until the real results start to appear.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: How much did your one-third contribution cost?

David Jordan: On the last occasion? I will have to write to you about that. One reason why we started to combine with other broadcasters was that the cost to the BBC was quite considerable. It did not seem to us to make a lot of sense for us all to be doing the same thing, at considerable expense to each of us. It was much more sensible for us to get together. It also had the effect of allowing us to combine a whole lot of sampling points across the country, which gives us much more chance of being accurate than with the smaller number of sampling points that each broadcaster was using. The two pollsters in question—MORI and NOP—got together as well, which was deeply helpful.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: I wonder whether it is a good use of public funds to be told something we will know the result of in a few hours anyway.

David Jordan: I think it is, on the grounds that far more people are still watching the programme when the results start coming in than would have been if we said, "We do not start until midnight".

The Chairman: Could you give us the figures for the numbers watching, as well as the cost? Could you do us a little note on that?

David Jordan: I could. I am sorry that I did not bring them. I could have brought them, but I did not want to boast.

The Chairman: There is no reason why you should have. Could you do that in the note?

Lord Smith of Hindhead: I would also like to know how much the BBC spends on political polling in an election year. I do not think that we were aware that you conducted polls, but you have corrected that in the evidence that you have given today.

David Jordan: We do not conduct polls within an election period. We very rarely conduct voting intention polls at all. The Wales polls are the only ones I can remember. That is a few over the last few years—scarcely any.

The Chairman: Let us not pursue this further. It would help the Committee if you were able to produce a factsheet on polling, including exit polling and non-exit polling, showing the amount you do and the cost. That would give us a better picture.

Q95 **Baroness Janke:** I have a follow-up question about the use of polls. Some countries do not have any polls produced in the last week of the election. They have a close-down on that. What do you think about that possibility? My second point is about reporting what newspapers say. Sometimes there are completely bogus polls, particularly as the speed and momentum of the election increases, yet quite often those are still reported on programmes such as “What the Papers Say”. Has your Reality Check ever had the headline, “X bogus polls reported”, as part of an election? Do you ever do a story that takes apart some of the bogus polls that are produced?

David Jordan: I am not sure that the polls in newspapers that we report are bogus. They are all done by reputable polling companies. When we do newspaper reviews, we take care to introduce the same caveats if a poll result is displayed on the front of the newspaper, as they sometimes are. We make it clear that it is only one poll and we discuss it in the context of trends, if, indeed, it is discussed at all.

Baroness Janke: As Pippa said earlier, people take the headline, particularly when they just hear, “This is what is in the *Daily Mail*”. As momentum builds up and people get excited, that can have a very disproportionate effect.

David Jordan: The thing about a newspaper review is that it tends to have a wealth of headlines, many of which are completely contradictory. A headline from the *Daily Mirror* is unlikely to make the same of a poll as a headline from the *Daily Mail*. You have a range of headlines. The important thing for us is to make sure that when we report what is on the front pages—if it is just headlining a poll, as you suggest—we introduce the appropriate caveats to the discussion.

I do not think that we have done reality checks on polls of the sort I just mentioned, which are done by reputable polling companies. I do not think we would ever need to do that. Reality Check is not primarily there to do reality checks on polling generally. Were there to be what you call a bogus

poll—what I sometimes call a voodoo poll—or some other misleading piece of information, there would be no reason why Reality Check should not deal with that, in the same way as it deals with other misleading information. I do not think we have ever done that up to now. I do not remember an example.

Baroness Janke: It is a bit like the apology that appears on page 106, whereas the accusation appears on page 1. Do you ever do exposés of the false nature of certain polls or the interested parties that commission them, having established the veracity of your reality check?

Ric Bailey: If one of these voodoo polls became so prominent that it led to a high level of discussion around a false premise, you can see perfectly well that that might be an appropriate thing to do. There are plenty of voodoo polls around all the time, and through proper contextualisation and good editorial judgment we try to make sure that we do not give them prominence.

Baroness Janke: What about the suggestion of a blackout on polls for the last week of the election? It seems to me that it is very difficult to deny things or to put alternatives at that point, because of the momentum and the fact that everybody gets very excited in media circles. What do you feel about that?

David Jordan: It has all the same problems that I discussed with Baroness Jay earlier, only even worse. For however many weeks of a campaign, polling would go on incessantly; in the 2015 general election, the *Sun* newspaper did a poll every day. Then it would suddenly stop, leaving everybody with the result that they had a week ago. I am not sure that that is more helpful—

Baroness Janke: It is really because of the reporting of the British press. It seems to be okay in other countries.

Ric Bailey: It is not just the press. If the polling is being done and there is no way of stopping it being reported through social media or from sites outside the UK, that information will be there but will not be properly contextualised if we are not allowed to publish it.

David Jordan: In this era of fake news, a properly done opinion poll by a reputable company—even with all the caveats that we put around it—is preferable to something generated by a Russian-funded website that purports to tell us what the result of the British general election is going to be. There is a balance to be struck. I know which I would prefer, even with the defects.

The Chairman: Thank you very much, gentlemen. We have come to the end of our time. I see the powerful arguments that you have put against banning polls. It makes it all the more interesting for me that 16 of the 28 European Union countries ban them in the run-up to elections. They must take a different view on where the balance of advantage lies.

You have been very helpful today. You have kindly offered us two more papers to come, one on the specific and very interesting case raised by Lord Hayward and the second on your general polling activity—how many people watch it, what it costs, and so on. You have also drawn our attention even more closely to your guidelines, which are matters on

BBC – Written evidence (PPD0025)

which the Committee will feel free to make any recommendations that it thinks would be helpful. Thank you very much for your time.

BBC – Written evidence (PPD0025)

BBC News is the biggest provider of news in the UK and remains by far the most trusted source of news in the country³, with audiences coming to the BBC time and again for coverage of major news events. Whilst 76% of UK adults used BBC News each week in 2016/17, during the EU Referendum results week in 2016, 93% of UK adults consumed BBC News coverage⁴.

Providing an impartial and independent news service for all audiences, BBC News offers breaking news, analysis and insight as well as fast and comprehensive coverage of local, UK and international events as they unfold. Audiences value BBC News for accuracy and impartiality above all other news providers⁵.

The BBC has guidelines and guidance on commissioning and reporting polls across all BBC platforms. These are set out in the BBC's Editorial Guidelines⁶.

The General Election Exit Poll

Methodology

For the 2017 General Election exit poll, the BBC, ITV and Sky commissioned Ipsos MORI and GfK NOP to interview approximately 30,000 people across 144 polling places. Voters leaving polling stations were asked to fill in a replica ballot paper and post it in a replica box. On Election Day, data is sent throughout the day to the exit poll team based in London and include representatives from each of the broadcasters.

The overall design seeks to follow the basic principle of returning to the same polling districts (where possible) as in the previous election, and conducting interviews with voters as they leave the polling stations. This enables the analysis team to estimate change in vote share for each of the parties at each of the visited polling stations. From this information the team model estimates of the result in each constituency using demographic data. The exit poll team then estimate probabilities for each party winning each constituency. The headline figures published at 10pm are the sums of the probabilities.

³

http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howwework/reports/pdf/bbc_report_trust_and_impartiality_nov_2017.pdf

⁴ <https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/reports/pdf/bbc-annualreport-201617.pdf>

⁵

http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howwework/reports/pdf/bbc_report_trust_and_impartiality_nov_2017.pdf

⁶ http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/pdfs/Editorial_Guidelines_in_full.pdf

BBC – Written evidence (PPD0025)

Exit Poll History

The first proper BBC exit poll was in 1992. Prior to this, smaller, non-comparable exercises were carried out.

The current methodology has been in place since 2005 which was also the first year that the BBC and ITV commissioned a joint poll with Sky joining later. Previously the BBC's exit polls focused as much on estimating the national share of the vote as the outcome in terms of seats but post-2005 the methodology has focused on seats.

Exit Poll Purpose

The Exit Poll is commissioned to give audiences an early indication of the General Election results and to engage audiences ahead of informing them of the results as they are announced across the country. This is becoming increasingly significant as over time there has been a trend for the flow of results announced to be slower than in previous elections. Without the exit poll, broadcasters would have to rely on speculation prior to results being announced, plus any 'on the day' polls conducted using more usual polling methods by the polling companies.

The Exit Poll provides a benchmark against which early results can be judged. Analysts would not expect the swing to be uniform across the whole country so without the Exit Poll giving us an indication of how the result will vary between different types of seat, a very misleading impression could be given from the first few seats declared.

For example, at the 2017 General Election the second and third constituency results announced showed a swing to the Conservatives. As this was, broadly speaking, what the Exit Poll had been indicating, the psephologists had not drawn false conclusions from those results about the national picture.

Audiences

As the campaigns intensified and Election Day drew closer, all audiences – including traditionally hard-to-reach audiences – came to BBC coverage in their millions. TV remained the BBC's strongest platform with 19.1m people tuning in to the BBC News on results night until 7am (for 3mins or more) and there were also over 4m requests on BBC iPlayer – meaning the BBC drew significantly higher audiences than other broadcasters. The average audience overnight was 3.2m, and the peak audience was 6.9m which came at 10.55pm. During the day on the 9th June, TV reach to Election 2017 output was 16.9m whilst online saw a record performance.

Other Polling at the BBC

It is rare for the BBC to commission voting intention polls – the exception to this is the annual St David's Day poll produced for BBC Wales. The BBC does, however, commission polls about issues more regularly. For example, a poll on abortion was conducted for the BBC Two documentary *Abortion on Trial*⁷ and the BBC's Newsbeat team commissioned polling for their Generation Z news pieces as outlined below.

BBC Wales Poll

BBC Wales has commissioned an annual St David's day poll since 2006. Prior to that, there had been ad hoc polling commissioned by BBC Wales.

The poll is commissioned because there is very little Wales-specific polling conducted in Wales. The poll has allowed BBC Wales to track long-term shifts on issues such as constitutional preferences as to how Wales might be governed. We also ask about topical issues relating to Welsh politics and these questions vary from year to year. Over the years, the polls' conclusions have been cited by a number of academic institutions in telling the story of Wales and exploring public policy issues.

Since 2014, the annual BBC Wales poll has, on occasion, also asked about voting intention. The decision to include voting intention has been taken in response to the distinct lack of plurality in political opinion polling in Wales. The conclusions of the annual polls are reflected on all of BBC Cymru Wales news services in both languages on TV, radio and online.

The St David's Day polls are conducted by ICM (a member of the British Polling Council). The sample size is always 1000+ and interviews are conducted by telephone.

The 2017 poll is available online⁸. The fieldwork was conducted between 17th and 21st February 2017 with telephone interviews of a sample of 1,002.

The population effectively sampled is all adults (aged 18+) in Wales using two sampling methods:

- Sampling Method, RDD: A random sample of telephone numbers was drawn from the entire BT database of domestic telephone numbers in Wales. Each number selected had its last digit randomised so as to provide a sample including both listed and unlisted numbers
- Sampling Method, Mobile RDD: A random sample of mobile telephone numbers was generated in proportion to network provider market share.

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09b1z7n>

⁸ <https://www.icmunlimited.com/polls/bbc-wales-st-davids-day-poll-2/>

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As with the landline process, seed telephone numbers are used to create the mobile RDD sample by randomising the last N digits of the seed number

Data were weighted to the profile of all Wales adults aged 18+ (including non-telephone owning households). Data were weighted by sex, age, social class, household tenure, work status and region. Targets for the weighted data were derived from the National Readership survey, a random probability survey comprising 36,000 random face-to-face interviews conducted annually.

Newsbeat Poll

The Generation Z poll for Newsbeat⁹, conducted in 2017, included topical questions such as what participants considered the most important issues that needed to be addressed in Britain. The aim was to explore differences in attitudes, thoughts and behaviour between those aged between 16 and 22 years of age and those aged between 23 and 71 years. The poll was conducted by Ipsos MORI¹⁰.

Costs will vary depending on whether a question has been included in a standard omnibus poll or whether a bespoke poll has been commissioned with costs increasing if there is a need to target a specific group of people. For example, in the Generation Z poll the sample had 1,000 16-22 year olds and 2,004 23-71 year-old respondents.

BBC Reality Check

BBC Reality Check¹¹ analyses news stories by sifting through claims and counter claims, challenging falsehoods and establishing the facts. By presenting the evidence in an expert and impartial manner, Reality Check offers audiences the chance to make their own mind up.

Chris Morris, Reality Check Correspondent, regularly appears on BBC News outlets, Reality Check has its own topic page on the BBC News website and there is a Reality Check Twitter account¹². An editor for the service was appointed in June 2017.

In the BBC's Annual Plan¹³, the BBC set out how our data and journalism teams will strengthen our capability for interrogation of data, facts and presentation. As

⁹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/41348207/were-not-lazy-were-innovative---generation-z-hits-back-in-live-debate>

¹⁰ <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/opinions-generation-zs-ambitions-and-priorities-differ-greatly-between-generations>

¹¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/topics/cp7r8vql2rqt/reality-check>

¹² <https://twitter.com/BBCRealityCheck>

¹³

http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howwework/reports/pdf/BBC_Annual_Plan_2017-18.pdf

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part of this, the BBC will expand Reality Check to fact -check the most popular outliers on social media and refute claims if we find them to be false.

In December 2017, James Harding, Director of BBC News and Current Affairs, announced a new BBC initiative helping young people identify real news – giving them the tools to filter out fake and false information. The new service is open to all secondary schools and sixth forms across the UK and is targeted at 11-18 year olds.

The plans include offering as many as a thousand schools mentoring in person, online, or at group events from BBC journalists – including Huw Edwards, Tina Daheley, Nikki Fox, Kamal Ahmed and Amol Rajan.

All schools will have free access to online materials including; classroom activities, video tutorials, and an interactive game developed by the Aardman Studios where the player gets the chance to find out what it is like being a BBC journalist.

A Reality Check Roadshow will tour the country and local schools will be able to nominate their own Reality Checker pupils to attend one of a dozen regional events. In addition, some pupils will be invited to present on BBC's School Report News Day in March 2018¹⁴.

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¹⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/aboutthebbc/entries/84e0f9a4-e82d-449f-b095-90a3d46cd9ae>

BBC – Supplementary written evidence (PPD0026)

Follow up written note to evidence session on 14th November with BBC's David Jordan, Director of Editorial Policy and Ric Bailey, Chief Adviser Politics, regarding survey of teachers in Wales.

Background

Lord Hayward asked the witnesses about a story he had found on the BBC website which was headlined as follows:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-39507299>

"Teachers survey suggests 1 in 3 want to quit", published on 5th April 2017. Lord Hayward's question about the robustness of the survey and its use in the headline was in the context of the witnesses explaining that BBC guidelines say that an opinion poll should not be headlined "unless it has prompted a story which itself deserves a headline..."

Guidelines

As was mentioned in the oral evidence, the guidelines restriction on leading or headlining refers specifically to opinion polling; the guidelines do not place a similar restriction on "surveys". They are, as it were, two different animals; the logic for not headlining or leading on a single opinion poll (without relevant context) is that such a poll (especially regarding voting intention), no matter how well conducted, should only be reported as part of a trend and not as a one-off: even a poll with a methodology meeting the highest standards of the British Polling Council may be wrong because of sampling issues and it is not possible to know if it is, in itself, perfectly "representative" of the population as a whole.

A "survey" is not seeking a "representative" sample; in the way that the BBC guidelines define a survey, it is actually seeking to contact and gain responses from an entire group; thus, its reliability will depend on the response rate, not on the quality of its sampling. So it is possible for a survey to produce, definitively, the views of an entire group...or, such a significant proportion of the group as to make it very robust.

To give an entirely hypothetical example: if a survey was sent to every single MP in the House of Commons asking if they thought the world was flat and every single one decided to reply, with a resulting headline saying "One in three MPs think the world is flat", that would be entirely justified. It would not be appropriate to have a guideline which prevented the BBC from using such a headline or, indeed, to lead on such a story.

Of course, very few surveys achieve a 100% response rate (though with Freedom of Information legislation, it is certainly not impossible, for instance, a survey of all the health trusts in a given region or of all the local authorities in a nation of the UK). But even if only 50% respond, that may well be significant enough to justify running a prominent story. That would be an editorial judgement - there is no set percentage response rate for all cases, as this will vary according to the sort of overall numbers, the context of the survey and the

likelihood of those contacted being motivated to respond. In the case of MPs, for instance, surveys are often ignored by front bench MPs; but providing there is an appropriate range of different backbenchers, a survey answered by more than – say – 100 MPs, may well justify a headline, even though that may constitute less than 20% of the total.

So the BBC does not prevent “surveys” being headlined. The present guidelines do, however, say that when reporting surveys carried out by other organisations, “care is required, particularly in news output, not to report such surveys in a way which leads our audience to believe they are more robust than is actually the case.” One consideration, for instance, might be to test the methodology of such external surveys against the standards the BBC would itself set when commissioning a survey.

Teachers in Wales

The first thing to say about the survey under discussion is that it was not any old survey; it was commissioned not just by the Welsh government, but involved the Cabinet Secretary for Education personally asking respondents to take part; and it was carried out by the official regulator.

<http://www.ewc.wales/site/index.php/en/research-statistics/national-education-workforce-survey>

This was a very formally sourced government survey of its own workforce. Secondly, it was NOT “self-selecting”. When a tabloid newspaper poses a question and invites its readers to ring in or go online to answer that question, the methodology is entirely self-selecting and it has no statistical value whatsoever. By contrast, the EWC survey was sent individually to every school teacher (plus other groups in education, such as further education teachers and support workers) in Wales, not just to a sample of them; there were several follow-ups to encourage participation. It was, in fact, conducted in exactly the same way as the BBC itself might commission a survey – and altogether, more than 10,000 people responded.

It is not surprising, though, that the Education Secretary described the response rate of less than 15% as “disappointing”. Nevertheless, at no point did she – or the Welsh government – claim that the results of the survey (her own survey) were not indicative of the real position in Wales; all sides in the political debate which ensued addressed the underlying issue and did not doubt that the survey was reflecting something real among the workforce in Wales.

The low response rate did mean that it should have been reported with particular care: we cannot know why only one in seven took part, but we should be mindful that in those circumstances, the people who respond may well be more engaged and opinionated than those who do not – so their views may well not be typical of the group as a whole. There is no evidence in this case, however, to suggest that the results painted a picture that was anything other than an accurate assessment of the views of Welsh teachers which politicians on all sides acknowledged needed to be addressed. The Cabinet Secretary herself identifies the problems illustrated and says that dealing with them is a priority.

BBC Story

To be clear, the way the story was reported did not break any BBC guidelines, nor did it do anything but accurately reflect a genuine issue which was an important talking point on the day in Welsh politics.

It is important, however, to be self-critical – few stories are written “perfectly”. As is often the case, the advice which is given by members of the BBC’s Editorial Policy team reflects their experience in editorial and journalistic matters and is not simply confined to interpretation of the guidelines. There was no particular reason why the journalists in Wales should have referred this story to the Chief Political Adviser, but they did not and so this note includes some relatively minor points which he would have advised, if consulted.

- The reason the survey itself is noteworthy is because it is official: it was commissioned by the government and carried out by the regulator to find out the views of their own workforce. This should have been mentioned – prominently - in the BBC report, in order to underline the context and significance of the survey
- The comparatively low response rate should have raised a query about the robustness of the survey – not in a way that meant it was improper in any way to report the story or the numbers, but simply in terms of the language used giving the reader the appropriate level of scepticism and context
- To this end, the bald headline about “1 in 3” teachers needed - ideally - some qualification, preferably making clear the official nature of the survey, rather than assuming the figures could be taken as read
- The use within the story of many statistics with decimal points gives a false impression of exactitude; this was an issue for the survey’s own commissioners, rather than for the BBC – nevertheless, the BBC’s reporting of those figures would have been better with rather more detached language, or at least being more clear about the sourcing of the figures, rather than taking them at face value

Conclusion

Whilst the writing of any story could be improved with time, hindsight and very close attention to detail, our view is that this survey was reported properly, did not mislead the audience in any way about the nature of the findings and was entirely relevant to the narrative of the wider political debate in Wales about the morale of the teaching workforce. It did not breach – or come anywhere near breaching – the BBC’s guidelines on the reporting of opinion polls, surveys etc. There were, as far as we can ascertain, no complaints at the time about the way the story was reported by the BBC or about the way the survey itself was reported.

As was mentioned in the oral session, the BBC is carrying out its periodic review of all the Editorial Guidelines, which will involve public consultation, and this will include the section on polling and surveys.

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BMG Research, ComRes, Ipsos MORI, LucidTalk, Opinium, ORB International, Panelbase and Survation – Written evidence (PPD0014)

BMG Research, ComRes, Ipsos MORI, LucidTalk, Opinium, ORB International, Panelbase and Survation – Written evidence (PPD0014)

[Submission to be found under ComRes](#)

BrandsEye and BritainThinks – Oral evidence (QQ 38–46)

Evidence Session No. 5

Heard in Public

Questions 38 - 46

Tuesday 10 October 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Fall; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve; Lord Smith of Hindhead.

Examination of witnesses

Jean Pierre Kloppers, Chief Executive Office, BrandsEye, and Deborah Mattinson, Co-Founder, BritainThinks.

Q38 The Chairman: Welcome to this meeting of the Committee. A certain amount of formality inevitably pertains in meetings of this kind, but we try to proceed in a way that is as informal and relaxed as possible. Having said that, we are being broadcast, so do not be ruder about people than you are happy to have go out on air. Afterwards there will be a transcript, which you can correct if something has not come out as clearly as you would like. You are, however, protected by parliamentary privilege, so, if you are rude, you may cause a row, but you cannot be sued. You have in front of you a list of the interests that have been declared by members of the Committee. I do not know any that are relevant to this session.

As I remember it, when you started with focus groups, Deborah, you were always very clear that they are not opinion polls, but something separate and different. When it comes to using social media to forecast elections, there are two possible views. One is that this is a superior method to opinion polls; the other is that it is an alternative and supplementary measure that adds to understanding but is not a substitute. Perhaps you should start with this one, Jean Pierre. What is your view?

Jean Pierre Kloppers: My view certainly is that it is supplementary. Social media give a view of how the public feel about an issue that is not captured by an opinion poll, in the same way that an opinion poll captures a view about an issue that is not captured by social media. The future lies in a combination of the two approaches. Social media give the unsolicited views of people, which has value. Because you cannot ask the question, you do not know what you are getting, so the trick is in the listening: what are you listening to? That gives a view of where there is potentially something missing in an opinion poll, as we have seen in the elections gone by.

The Chairman: Do you want to add to that, Deborah?

Deborah Mattinson: Yes. I agree. I certainly would not describe it as superior. One thing that annoys me, and has annoyed me over the years, is that polling is used as a sort of catch-all. There are lots of different

sorts of methods, of which social media listening, which is how I would describe it, is one. It is very useful, but all social media are a sort of echo chamber. That is a cliché, but it is true. There is a self-selecting group of people, and a defined audience. That is quite good at helping you to understand what a particular audience is thinking, but it is not a substitute for nationally representative quantitative polling, which should also not be used on its own without qualitative research to dig deep and understand what lies behind the data. You need to use them all if you want to know what is going on.

Lord Hayward: Our background notes on BrandsEye say, “An important difference in the way BrandsEye operates is that its approach does not simply rely on algorithms—it goes further”. One of the difficulties the Committee has had is identifying what social media are and how they operate. Could you identify how you draw up the algorithms, rather than leaping on to what you do to go further than that? For our benefit, could you take it back to the start and clarify what actual work you do?

Jean Pierre Kloppers: Most of our business is corporate related, so I will use that example. If we are dealing with a corporate, typically it has 100,000 people a month speaking about it as a brand. If it is a news provider, it will be a lot more than that—it could be millions of people. The challenge for the company is, how do you listen to the people who are speaking to you who have opinions or experiences that need to be resolved? If it is a bank or a telecommunications company, it needs to understand which of its customers are unhappy and how to resolve the issues. Historically, that has been done with a call centre. I am sure that everybody here has had the experience of sitting for half an hour, at their own cost, speaking to somebody at the other end of the line.

Lord Hayward: Only half an hour?

Jean Pierre Kloppers: Social media represent the evolution of how we resolve issues with one another, not necessarily between individuals, but certainly between a company and its customers, or between a Government and the people the Government serve. Social media allow organisations to listen very clearly to what people are saying. The challenge is making sense of what people are saying. If you have 100,000 people, you cannot read that. You cannot have any group, or even a team of people you employ, to read through that; it is not cost-effective.

The alternative is to use an algorithm, but, as we know, algorithms are trained on sets of data that may or may not be relevant to the new pieces of data coming in. Typically—certainly when looking at language—algorithms are very bad at understanding humans. In the case of Brexit or somebody complaining about their telco, they are just not reliable.

I will use Brexit as an example of the way in which we process data. We had half a million people speaking on social media in the week before the referendum. We took a statistically significant sample of that half a million conversation and put it through what we call the BrandsEye crowd—people who work on our platform. Think of the Uber model—that is how it works. People apply to work on our platform. As the demand for data from our customers increases, we let more people on to our platform. They are

trained by the system. Once they have passed the training set, they are allowed to work on live data.

In this case, the live data is about the Brexit referendum. When somebody mentions something about Brexit, we select it on a key-word basis. If people are speaking about Brexit, leave or remain—whatever language they are using—we use key words to find it. If an individual mention—whether a Facebook post, a tweet or a comment on a blog somewhere—is selected by the system as part of the sample, it is sent to multiple raters within our crowd. Those are people, like anybody here, who work on our platform and earn money by competing with other people to verify the sentiment of the author. If somebody says very simplistically, “I am going to vote remain”, it is easy to understand. If somebody says, “David Beckham is voting remain, so I will, too”, there is probably a bit of sarcasm. These people compete with one another to try to understand what the author meant. An algorithm cannot do that. We have gamified the way in which data is verified by people. Because it is a crowd-sourcing platform, we have people around the world, working in many different languages, and can process vast amounts of data through humans.

We use AI. Our AI system learns from how our crowd processes data in order better to serve the crowd with relevant information. We never let that information go to the client. Whatever we send to the client or use for the kinds of work that we did on Brexit or the US elections, or that we do to try to understand churn for a multinational, comes through people. That is a critical thing that we need to understand with social media. If you are using algorithms to help you to understand how people feel, you are probably getting the wrong answers. That is why we did the Brexit work initially. Other social listening companies were saying, “It looks like it is going to be a remain vote”, based on sentiments on social media, and we were curious. We said, “Maybe it will, maybe it won’t. Let’s have a look”.

The Chairman: Jean Pierre has described his methodology. Deborah, it would be helpful, for the record, if you could describe the methodology of focus groups, particularly in politics research.

Deborah Mattinson: The example that Jean Pierre gives is interesting. I ran a lot of focus groups through the EU referendum. My judgment would be that there is no substitute for simply listening to what people say. In a focus group, you have six to eight people in a room and a very highly trained moderator. You design a series of exercises to get beneath the skin of what they are saying. People tend to offer you a very rational explanation for how they feel. We try to dig deeper to understand that, using a series of so-called projective techniques and other things.

One of the things that we discovered through that was that, when people said that David Beckham was voting one way or another, it was not a sarcastic response. In fact, they were saying, “He is a bloke who is a bit more like me than Barack Obama or an economic expert, and maybe I will take that seriously”. This is not an either/or, by the way; what Jean Pierre does and what I do are probably very complementary techniques, but I would say that there is no substitute for sitting in a room with a bunch of people who have been carefully recruited to represent a particular

demographic or set of attitudes and really understanding how they feel about things.

The Chairman: That is very helpful.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: Thank you, Mr Kloppers, for a very clear explanation. I wondered what it would reveal about rocket man and mad dotard, but that is in brackets.

Ms Mattinson, in your first answer you talked about focus groups having a “defined audience”. Who does the defining?

Deborah Mattinson: Whoever is commissioning the focus group. My practice, like Jean Pierre’s, is mainly a corporate practice.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: It just means a selected audience.

Deborah Mattinson: Yes. We do the selecting, not the audience. That is quite an important and distinctive point. Whereas in social media the audience put themselves forward, we go out and find people. We decide, with our client—whoever the client is—that we want to speak to people who have a particular demographic, have particular behaviours, have bought particular products, live in certain places or have a particular set of attitudes. We go out and find those people and recruit to that specification.

Baroness Fall: Jean Pierre, you talked about the referendum in particular, which was about one issue. To what extent do you feel that, although watching on social media guided you to people’s views on an issue, it was much more difficult to take from that a view on which party they were following? Following another election, do you think that watching social media and listening guides you towards what people feel about policies? In a more fluid political environment, is it an interesting additional tool for working out where people who identify less with a party are going?

Jean Pierre Kloppers: I will answer that in a roundabout way. Let me describe the questions that our crowd answers. The first question is, is it relevant to the issue at hand? In the case of rocket man, is it talking about the ruler of North Korea or about the movie? Being able to separate those two things is important. For different brands, the issue is of varying complexity. If you are Sky, it is hard to sift out everybody talking about “sky” on social media, because it could be anything. If it is Brexit, it is much easier, because people speak about Brexit only with respect to Brexit.

The second question is the sentiment one: what is the sentiment towards the object that we are measuring?

The third question that we ask our crowd is, what is driving sentiment? That is where it becomes very powerful, because you start to see whether it is a policy issue. For our corporate customers—Uber is a good example—we can quantify what people are worried about. Is it price? Is it safety? Is it regulation? What are the issues they care about when they speak emotively about a subject? Being able rapidly to categorise that at scale gives organisations insight into not only what the issue is now, but how that issue evolves over time and compares across a competitive set,

or across parties or regions. Being able to take the whole conversation on social media, which sometimes involves millions of people, and structure it and then look at it geographically by region, or by issue, across party lines or across customer or corporate lines, means that you start to see how issues evolve over time.

It comes back to what Deborah was saying—the ability to listen clearly, but to do so over time, to see how something evolves and changes. It gives you the signals within that to say, “This is something we need to drill into more deeply, because we do not understand it”. That is where the focus group is powerful, to help to focus that conversation. You say, “We do not understand what is happening with this particular issue. Let us try to understand it more deeply”. You cannot do that on social media, unless people are really giving you that conversation to listen to.

Q39 Lord Howarth of Newport: You have both described your methodologies as a matter of listening. I would like to ask about another kind of situation in which we are talking not about people’s unsolicited views, but about people’s prompted views—where opinion is being deliberately manipulated through social media and people are being fed suggestions, steered in their emotional responses and oriented towards a disposition to vote for a particular outcome, individual or party. Many people are extremely worried about that phenomenon, which has arisen in politics with the rise of social media. Could you talk about that?

Jean Pierre Kloppers: Those concerns are valid. To me, the analogy for social media is a knife; you can use it to serve a meal or to kill somebody. The answer to abuse of the power of social media is not no use, but correct use. Finding the correct use and bringing in regulation or penalties for organisations that abuse that power is right, because you can use it to manipulate people and to target individuals. We have to be very careful, as an organisation, never to get involved in anything like that. Our mantra as a company is that how people feel matters. If you can correctly understand how they feel, you will better serve them both with messaging and with products and services. Whether you are a Government or a corporate, that rings true.

Where companies have manipulated social media, the effects are very short-lived. It is the same as when your wife is angry because you are playing golf every weekend and you tell her that you are not going to play golf. If you then go and play golf, she will get angrier, not less angry, even though you promised her that you would stop. That is how it is with a political party. We see the same thing happen on social media. When companies do not listen first and instead use social media to manipulate or to overpromise, it is a very short-lived cycle. Very quickly, those people leave. It would be interesting to see within the UK public how people feel now about Brexit. How has that evolved over the past year? I do not know.

Q40 Lord Howarth of Newport: You raise the question of regulation. It is quite hard to conceive how that might be achieved. Will you talk about some of the relevant issues?

Jean Pierre Kloppers: That is not my area of expertise. It falls into the category of how we ensure that both those responsible for the platforms

and those using the platforms behave in a responsible manner. If somebody is peddling fake news, how do you call them to account? The platform must take some responsibility, which means that prices will go up. That is not necessarily a bad thing, because it means that the people paying for adverts think twice before they place them. Pay to play is very low at the moment, at pay point.

Regulation has a role to play, but it is not our place to say how it should happen. The networks need to bear cognisance that if they can sit in the middle of public opinion and corporates, and close that loop in an effective manner, everybody wins. The public know that they are coming on to social media and expressing a view, and that the right person is hearing that view and doing something about it. That means that more people will go to social media to express their views. That is good for the platform, the corporate and the individual who is having their problem solved. Growing mistrust, which is what we are seeing, leads to a breakdown in that feedback loop. Corporates or Governments trust social media less, so they spend less money. The platforms therefore need to put on more adverts, which puts fewer people on to the platform. The cycle breaks down. Building trust is where regulation needs to play a role, between the public and the organisations that are paying for things to happen on social networks.

Lord Howarth of Newport: For regulation to be of use, it would need to be international, would it not? There would always be weak links, as with the tax regime.

Jean Pierre Kloppers: Could you repeat the question?

Lord Howarth of Newport: I do not think that you can have regulation in one country, to coin a phrase. You would have to have an international, consistent set of regulations, which should be uniformly applied and enforced. It is hard to foresee that coming into place, because there will always be powerful motives to abuse social media in order to manipulate opinion, in the way I suggested. There will be jurisdictions where the regulation is non-existent, patchy or deliberately left vacant.

Jean Pierre Kloppers: I agree. Personally, I do not think that the answer is regulation, although it can play a role. The answer lies in closing the feedback loop. If the networks realise that it is in their interest to make sure that the people placing adverts or deriving intelligence, in whatever way, from the networks respect the voice of the user—which is at the very core of why Twitter, for example, exists—everybody wins. That is where government has a role to play. How do we make sure that the corporates are getting the value they need out of the networks and that the networks are not being steered towards ill-gotten gains in how they derive their income?

Baroness Jay of Paddington: My concerns follow those of Alan Howarth. There is a difference between what you have described as closing the loop, where you are using examples very much from the corporate sector, and the things about which, needless to say, we around this table are particularly worried—the deliberate influences of other national players in the sort of opinion manipulation we are talking about. It seems to me that it is very difficult to intervene in the malintent of

international Governments in any particular way, because the bottom-line issue, which you have talked about very well, does not apply. When we look, as we did even yesterday, at the potential that was expressed by people who had left Facebook for the way in which it had deliberately sought to influence opinion, at the behest of President Trump’s campaign, in the presidential election last year, we see that that is susceptible to very different judgments and ways of thinking from those relating to disturbance of the corporate network loop or the profit-and-loss account.

Jean Pierre Kloppers: There you need to be one step ahead. The art of war is understanding better than anybody else what the driving factors are. Foreign Governments may be manipulating how people feel or manipulating opinion. We are not involved in that, so I do not know who was involved or how it worked.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I am not suggesting that at all. I am suggesting that your model is much more applicable and, therefore, much more relevant to an exclusively corporate world than to a political one.

Jean Pierre Kloppers: In the US example, we tried to get to both the polling companies and the political parties beforehand to say, “You are missing something on social media”. What was being missed was the mistrust towards Clinton that was being expressed on social media. I do not think that fake news produced that emotion; it existed already. I think that it accelerated it, gave licence to it and probably allowed it to spiral into something much bigger, but what it was triggering was a true underlying emotion—people mistrusted the establishment.

It would be foolish to say that the reason Clinton lost was that a foreign Government meddled. The reason she lost was that she did not listen. Had she heard clearly how people felt about that issue, it could have changed the way in which the engagement happened. For me, that is the part that was missing—whether or not foreign Governments played a role. That will continue to operate, as you rightly said. The role of the people in this room is to say, “How do we listen clearly to understand what people care about?” Are they listening, as the saying goes, to the small lies, as opposed to the complex truths, which are harder to understand?

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Obviously we cannot replay the minutiae of the American election last year or, indeed, the referendum campaign. I agree with some of the points you made about the political issues, but it is important to emphasise that, effectively, the point about the American election is that there was very precise targeting, by exactly the sorts of organisations you are describing, of people in specific areas, which affected the electoral college vote. If we reflect on it for a minute, Mrs Clinton won the popular vote, but because of the targeting, by precisely the people you are describing, that was not effective in swinging the electoral college vote, where a very directed campaign by social media was effective. That is different from the opinion question that you have raised.

Jean Pierre Kloppers: I agree. The point remains that, even when we tracked the opinions shared on social media at the battleground state level, we could still see, on a representative sample, which way the vote would go. Whether or not the targeting happened, social media got it

right, when mined correctly at state level. We were not looking at the popular vote; we knew that we had to get the electoral college map right. There again, it was appealing to an underlying emotion that still existed. It was being manipulated, and false promises were made, but that emotion was still there.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I am focusing on the manipulation.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: Mr Kloppers, you referred to the responsibility of platforms. Could you unpack that for us a bit? We understand very well how a publisher can be responsible, because the law of defamation applies, and even if the author is anonymous, the publisher will be subject to that legislation. How can a platform be responsible for content that people post, particularly if they take advantage of the cloak of anonymity? Can self-regulation of platforms or platform providers work?

Jean Pierre Kloppers: I do not know whether or not it can work. It should work.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: I accept that it should.

Jean Pierre Kloppers: To use the Twitter example, it is in a difficult place right now as an organisation. Fundamentally, it exists to represent the voice of the people. We have lost clients because Twitter has said, "You may not serve that kind of client"; it believes fundamentally that we need to protect the voice of the individual. That is half of the story. You can protect someone's voice only if that voice is heard.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: But if that voice can be multiplied N-thousand times, what weight are we to give to any voice that is heard?

Jean Pierre Kloppers: If the individual can say something that can be heard by thousands of people?

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: It may be the individual who originally uttered the tweet, or whatever one does, but its multiplication is ultimately due to the use of algorithms, bots and so on.

Jean Pierre Kloppers: I do not think that is quite right. The multiplication, if it is paid for, can be because somebody is paying for it. I do not think that the algorithm necessarily determines who hears it.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: No, not necessarily. Do you think that transparency about the payments would reveal something useful?

Jean Pierre Kloppers: Possibly. Maybe that is where some of the answer lies. Again, that is not within our realm to answer. It is short-sighted for the networks not to be transparent about that, because of what we talked about earlier. If they are going to build the virtuous cycle of connecting how somebody feels with people who can make a difference about it, transparency will help. That is good for everyone.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: If that was their motivation.

Q41 **Lord Hayward:** Can I ask the two of you related but slightly different questions? The number of people who respond to telephone canvassing has gone down more and more. Therefore, you hear stories about people who answer being called any number of times, because they answer and

other people have stopped.

Deborah Mattinson: Because they have a landline.

Lord Hayward: The same applies to people who participate in online canvassing; there is the risk that they answer repetitiously and are more conscious of the political world than the ordinary population you are trying to get at. Deborah, you said that in your field you went out and got people. Do you find it as easy to find people now as you did previously, or are you in the same danger as the telephone and online people? Could you finish up with the same people in focus groups?

I have a related question for Mr Kloppers. As people get older and more used to computers, participation goes up the age demographic, but we hear stories about people not participating—coming off Facebook or whatever. Is there a tendency for you to listen to groups that, in effect, are the same people over and over again, rather than getting a renewed message?

Deborah Mattinson: You are right about polling. If you want a reliable sample, face-to-face random sampling is the only way to do it. The problem is that it is very slow and very expensive, which is why it is not done very often. It is not usually done in election campaigns, by newspapers and so on.

How we recruit for focus groups has always been an issue. We use recruiters in different locations. Very often they keep a large database. We abide by the Market Research Society rules, which say that somebody should not have been a respondent within a period of time. We add to that that they should not have been a respondent on a particular theme within a larger amount of time. I find that is not enough. There is a risk, unless you are doing something quite precise—I will come back to that in a minute—that you get repeat respondents, so we as a company keep our own database. When focus groups have been recruited, we check whether we have ever seen a particular respondent before. If we have, we do not use them. We do our best. We do as much as we can.

Often we are doing something much more precise, so it is inconceivable that somebody we have in a focus group will have done it before. We might be doing something for NHS England where we are looking at somebody who has had a particular condition. We recruit fresh every time and we use our own networks to find people—usually by face-to-face street recruitment—who fulfil the criteria, so it is not so much of an issue. We are talking about smaller numbers.

Lord Hayward: Does that apply in the political world as well?

Deborah Mattinson: The earlier point applies. Usually with political focus groups you are looking for people who have had a particular kind of voting pattern. That is quite a large group. Very often a recruiter in a particular area might use a database. We will then come back to our own method. When people have been recruited, we check their details to make sure that we have not seen them before and that they are not professional respondents.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: It must be very hard to find people who are in full-time employment to participate in that type of focused research.

Deborah Mattinson: Why?

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Because they would not have time to do it.

Deborah Mattinson: Focus groups usually take place in the evening, so it is not a problem. We also pay people.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Have you found that the recent political polling, which has been fairly inaccurate, has had an effect on your corporate customers, who are beginning to doubt the accuracy of the polling they are paying for when they see the outcome of the polling that is done on politics?

Deborah Mattinson: We do not do that kind of polling, so the answer is no.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: It is just a general thing. The only way a poll is really tested is at election time. It is very hard to test the polling that a corporate wants about a brand, a product or a focus. Because there is an outcome on polling for an election and it has been so inaccurate, has there been any wobble on the corporate side of things? Has anyone thought, “Why are we paying? Is there any need for this?”

Deborah Mattinson: I do not think so. There is also a bit of myth. For instance, people talk a lot about the polls being wrong in the referendum. Actually, they were not; they were broadly right in the referendum. More polls predicted leave than predicted remain. They did—trust me. The polls were pretty much spot on, within a margin of error, so I refute that claim. Yes, the polls were wrong in the last election, and there has been a lot of soul searching about why that was. I do not know whether you want to go into that now, but they were. For my practice, it has not made a difference, because that is not really the kind of work I do.

The Chairman: Do you want to add to that, Jean Pierre?

Jean Pierre Kloppers: Earlier, you asked how we ensure that it is a new group of people, if we want that. One of the benefits of social media is that you listen to everybody who volunteers an opinion, provided that the subject matter elicits enough opinions. In the US elections, there were 40 million conversations, from 4 million people, so you were sampling a vast number of people. What we saw in Brexit and the US elections was almost the coming of age of social media. Before then, it was perceived to be the fringes that were talking, but social media ended up being quite representative, anecdotally, of what the population felt.

Because you are listening to everybody, you can choose how you listen. How many times do you count somebody’s opinion? You can start to measure things like intensity, which polls struggle with. There is the volume of conversation from individuals versus counting someone’s opinion just once. When you listen in an ongoing way, you can work out whether it is the same people or new people talking. We did that two months after the US election, to try to see what was happening to Trump’s support base after he took office. A lot of those people just went quiet. They had been talking before, but they were not coming out to volunteer their opinions any more. We saw the wane in his support base long before Nate Silver reported it in the US, in the aggregation of polls.

We saw that in February, long before what we have seen happen over the past six months. His supporters went quiet a long time ago.

Q42 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** Deborah, given that you are not gathering statistical data, how do you achieve rigour, precision and exactitude, and draw reliable conclusions when carrying out qualitative opinion research such as focus groups?

Deborah Mattinson: You do not achieve rigour, precision and exactitude; it is not an exact science. That is the first thing. However, we do provide useful findings. It all lies in the experience of the person conducting the focus group, and the methods you use and how tried and tested they are. It is not an exact science. You would not use it on its own. You would use it alongside numbers, anyway.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Jean Pierre, is it your view that the arrival on the scene on a very big scale of social media is tending to re-engage young people with political processes? In this country, we have had considerable worries about the tendency of young people not to vote. In the last election, we saw a great increase in participation by young people. Is that connected to social media kindling re-engagement?

Jean Pierre Kloppers: I do not know whether social media are causing young people to vote, because we do not know who on social media actually voted. We are not able to tell that. What they have done is democratise opinions. They give everybody a voice. You can very easily find people who feel the same way as you, which is both good and dangerous. I am not sure whether they are getting more young people out to vote, but they are certainly getting lots of people to talk, which for me is a good starting point, because then you have something to listen to.

The Chairman: Deborah, you said that it was not an exact science. At the time you were doing focus groups for Tony Blair, critics often said that they always came up with what Tony wanted to hear. In focus groups, you can influence opinion in ways that you cannot in opinion polls. In opinion polls, somebody reads out a question, whereas you have a moderator in the room who can look encouraging at some replies and less encouraging at others. What would your answer be to the critics who said that you were only coming up with what Tony wanted?

Deborah Mattinson: I certainly never did that. Whether you are dealing with corporate clients or with politicians, you are not worth having unless you are prepared to speak the truth; there is simply no point otherwise. Clients, be they politicians or companies, receive data from market research in different ways. Some ignore it completely, some use it to verify what they already thought and some use it genuinely to get an insight into a particular audience, and then think about their programme in that light. I have worked with all three politicians in my time.

The Chairman: We will not ask you to name names.

Q43 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** I am not sure that I am not simply confused. I wonder whether you can help me on this. Deborah, you said that face-to-face randomised sampling is the only way you really get something accurate. We have heard from other people who have given evidence that, in a sense, if we could revert to the system that we had 25

or 30 years ago—which, as you have said, was very expensive, but in which you were doing that—

Deborah Mattinson: It was also time-consuming and slow.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: So you would not meet the media deadlines—certainly not the social media ones. Jean Pierre, you say that the thing that really works is the vast pool of people you have described. You have just described it again in relation to the United States. What is the truth? Is there nothing in between that works, or are we simply moving from the old-fashioned position, which was accurate, through a lot of systems that have not been particularly accurate, to another, completely different one that will produce accuracy on a different scale and in a totally different way?

Jean Pierre Kloppers: That is one for you.

Deborah Mattinson: I think it is one for you, actually.

The Chairman: It is yours, Jean Pierre, I am afraid.

Jean Pierre Kloppers: Technology is there to help us. The world has changed in how people consume information and how opinions are formed, and the tools we use to measure that need to evolve as well. To me, that is not a bad thing. It is just a reality of how the world works—how people consume information and how opinions are formed. The ways in which we listen to that need to evolve with it.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: But human beings have not really changed, although they may have changed in their attitudes. Are you really saying that the technology enables you to achieve something that, as Deborah said and as others have said many times, is only really achieved by face-to-face communication?

Jean Pierre Kloppers: Humans have not changed. The way in which people communicate has. That has been both good and bad. It has created the echo chambers we have spoken about. To me, having the tools to peer into those to see what is happening puts great power into the hands of the people in this room to understand what people care about and how better to serve them. Maybe they would not respond in the same way in a focus group or an opinion poll—I do not know. As you say, it is very expensive to do that comprehensively. There is no state-by-state poll in the US that is able to do it, just because of the costs. That is where social media give a lens into somebody's world that 20 years ago you simply would not have had.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Your judgment would be that it is a beneficial lens.

Jean Pierre Kloppers: Deborah made a really good point about the Prime Ministers she has worked with. If leaders are courageous and say, “Irrespective of how people feel, I want to hear the truth”, it is helpful. If people are trying to reinforce opinions or positions that they have held for a long time, it is not helpful. It is the truth about how people feel, whether you like it or not. For those courageous leaders who want to address the concerns of the public, it is helpful.

Baroness Fall: I want Deborah to go back to focus groups. A number of my colleagues have touched on this already. If it is true—it is an “if”—that our electorate have become more volatile politically, how do you know that they are, when you are putting together a focus group that is supposedly across a spread? Is that work in progress? Is it something you are looking at, given that there was quite a lot of fluidity in 2017, and a bit in 2015?

Deborah Mattinson: I should say a bit more about how focus groups work. You would never have a spread of opinion in a focus group. Focus groups work best when you have as homogeneous a group as possible. I decide which kinds of people and which particular opinions I want represented in a session and recruit to that, so that we have people who are as like one another as we can possibly get them. You would never have the spread, in any case.

Baroness Fall: I see.

Deborah Mattinson: It does not quite answer your question about volatility.

Baroness Fall: No, it does not, but it is an interesting point. I also want to ask you about expense. The point about a more expensive versus a less expensive type of polling, and the accuracy that comes with that, has come across in quite a lot of the written evidence that we have had. Are we seeing more polling being commissioned by newspapers that is slightly fast, especially in the run-up to an election, when they are thinking about the Sunday splash, so they say, “Let’s have another poll”? Is there something there that we need to watch? Would it be better if there were fewer polls and they were done with more time and accuracy?

Deborah Mattinson: Funnily enough, because of the experience of the last election in particular, there will probably be fewer polls. There already are, actually, because quite a lot of newspapers feel that they had their fingers burned a bit and are looking at other ways of tapping into public opinion. But it is not going to stop. You are right: there are some issues, because they are never going to be able to afford to do the kind of polling that is really reliable. It does not match their deadlines, either.

Jean Pierre Kloppers: We are not a polling company, but even using social media to infer a poll is too expensive for newspapers. Currently, we do not have any clients using our data for polling. The people who are trying to track public opinion in an election are hedge funds, not the newspapers. Those budgets are very small, which aggravates the problem. You are spending very little, and the results are—you get what you pay for.

Baroness Fall: Basically, that sort of information is being bought by extremely well-off people, or companies or hedge funds. That is an interesting point in itself.

Q44 **The Chairman:** My question follows on from that. The opinion polls have not got it right in the last two British general elections. Do the kinds of techniques that you are using give you any clues as to why the polls may be finding it more difficult, or are they completely separate?

Deborah Mattinson: I am sure that you have heard this from other people who have given evidence. There will be other people who are better placed than me to comment on why the polls were wrong, but I have one observation from my own focus groups. Historically, one of the best predictors of whether somebody was going to vote was whether they had voted in the past. In the last election, when I did political work with a newspaper group, we screened out people who had not voted previously, as did a lot of the polls. That was the single biggest error.

The problem is what you do in the future, because there is nothing in particular that says to me that the young people who voted this time will definitely vote again. We do not know that they will vote again. You might think that, now they are on the electoral register, they will. Equally, they might think, "I voted, and it made no difference, so I am not going to vote again". That is the problem. When I was doing focus groups with young people, we did not get our sampling quite right. That is definitely what happened with the polling as well.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: That was true of the referendum, too, was it not? People voted who had not voted in general elections.

Deborah Mattinson: Yes, in a different way, because that time it was not young people. You are absolutely right.

The Chairman: Did you pick up what turned out to be the huge surge in interest among younger people? Did that come through in any of your focus group work or in any of the social media work?

Deborah Mattinson: It will have come through more clearly in the social media work, I think. For the reasons that I have just given, we tended not to be listening to quite the right people—just like people doing canvassing work, by the way. That is why people in constituencies were reading it wrongly as well. Very often, they were not knocking on the doors of the people who were going to turn out to vote, as it transpired.

Jean Pierre Kloppers: There are a couple of questions. On the age question, networks do not share age demographics with us, so it is very hard for us to get whether younger people were speaking. That is an aside.

I would add two things to what Deborah said on the differences we saw in the polling. One is that the unsolicited nature of social media gives you a read on the raw emotion of people. There is no question bias. In the US, in particular, that was a big factor. It was a question not of "Are you going to vote for Trump or Clinton?" but of "Who are you not going to vote for?" That was not a question that was being asked, but we could read that negative sentiment played a very big role in the US elections.

The other thing we saw in both was the speed of social media. For us, typically that led by at least two weeks what happened in the polls. A lot happened in the week or two running up to both the election and the referendum that the polls did not have time to capture, but on social media it was in real time, so we could see it. Speed and raw emotion are two elements that can really help polls in the future, by adding what social media show.

The Chairman: That is very interesting.

- Q45 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** Will you indulge in a bit of futurology? Deborah suggested that, if political parties, newspapers or whoever want to understand the reality of political opinion, you need the mix. You need quantitative opinion research, you need qualitative research and you need to listen to the chatter on social media. Does either of you have views on how that mix may change and develop? What methods are likely to be used by political parties, in particular, given the experience we have had and the emerging technologies and facilities? Indeed, will some new element we have not talked about be added to the mix?

Deborah Mattinson: I am seeing a return to some quite old-fashioned techniques, which are working very well. We have just done a very interesting piece of work where we had people keep diaries—literally, old-fashioned diaries. That worked incredibly well and was very revealing. Ethnography, where you observe what people do, and do not just rely on what they tell you they have done, can also work very well. You can do a thing that we call mobile ethnography, where people use their phones to capture their daily routines and the things that they are doing. That is very effective. Those are some interesting things. The other thing that we use quite a lot, which is a little akin to what Jean Pierre does, is online communities. We communicate with people in an online community on an ongoing basis, so that we can track data and track behaviour change.

Jean Pierre Kloppers: All I would add is that the toolset has changed. There are some old tools, such as those Deborah described, that are still in the toolbox and are very useful, but a whole lot of new ones have been added. Researchers in the future will need to see research as a funnel: how do we deploy the most cost-effective mechanisms at the start, and then use the more specialised tool further down to drill into discrepancies? Uber is an example. Opinion polls say that more people are in favour of the ban than are against it. Social media say the opposite. To me, that flags something, so I would say, “Hang on. Which is right?” That is where a more specialised toolset would be powerful: “Let’s get these people into a room and really understand this issue, so that we come out with the right decision”.

Deborah Mattinson: Yes.

- Q46 **Lord Hayward:** Deborah, Alan asked you to look to the future. I will ask you to look to the past. You have a background of working with two Prime Ministers. Much has been made about the polls being misused or abused by the media. Do you feel that the media follow the guidelines that they have in relation to the use and abuse of the polls that they are given? Do you think that you—not you personally, but people in positions of power—are able to influence the way that polls are portrayed in the media?

Deborah Mattinson: Politicians I have worked with have paid a lot more attention to their own private polling than to published polling, anyway. Published polling is for editorial purposes—to generate a story. That is its aim. They will be looking for a sensational angle or a big headline. Politicians use polling in an entirely different way. Their only concerns about published data would be about what their own team think when they see things. They will then find ways of circumventing that.

BrandsEye and BritainThinks – Oral evidence (QQ 38–46)

You asked whether newspapers abide by the regulations and whether they have done so historically. As far as I am aware, they do, but I am really not an expert. I do not know.

The Chairman: We have reached the end of a very fruitful session, lasting just over an hour. I thank you both for being so interesting and forthright with the Committee. It will go into the mincing machine with the rest of the stuff now. Thank you both for giving up your time to be here. It has been a pleasure talking with you.

BritainThinks and BrandsEye – Oral evidence (QQ 38–46)

BritainThinks and BrandsEye – Oral evidence (QQ 38–46)

[Transcript to be found under BrandsEye](#)

British Polling Council (BPC) – Oral evidence (QQ 139–147)

Evidence Session No. 19

Heard in Public

Questions 139 - 147

[Tuesday 5 December 2017](#)

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Baroness Fall; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Janke; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve;

Examination of witnesses

Professor John Curtice and Simon Atkinson.

Q139 **The Chairman:** Good morning. Welcome to the Committee. John, I have worked out that it is exactly 35 years since you used to come into my tiny office at the *Sunday Times* with a very large box, so that I would be able to tell the readers what the local election votes meant for the national share. We are both in the same business, so we still have not been rumbled.

Professor John Curtice: I think it is slightly longer than that. It is about 37 years. Anyway, who cares about a couple of years?

The Chairman: I joined the *Sunday Times* in 1982.

Professor John Curtice: That is right.

Q140 **The Chairman:** Thank you for coming today. We are being broadcast. To that extent, you need to watch anything you say. You do not need to worry about being sued for libel if you say anything very rude, because we are protected by parliamentary privilege. You will get the transcript to correct any bits where you feel that you misspoke or wish to correct the impression that you gave. You have in front of you a full list of the interests declared by members of the Committee. That deals with the formalities. May I start with you, John? Has polling become more difficult over the years?

Professor John Curtice: Yes.

The Chairman: Why?

Professor John Curtice: The principal problem is that response rates to surveys of any kind, including public and political opinion polls, are lower. There is literature out there, on which your specialist adviser can advise you, about the extent to which that does or does not create a problem. There is probably a consensus that it potentially creates a problem for political polling in so far as it probably increases the probability that any sample that you obtain, by whatever method, contains disproportionately those who are interested in politics, and therefore contains more people than you would find in the general population who are going to vote.

This has happened at a time when turnout itself has been persistently lower than it was through to 1997. Even at the 2017 election, it was below 70%. Clearly, once turnout is lower, there is a greater probability

that you will get a differential turnout of a kind that may be relevant to understanding what the outcome of an election is going to be. It is pretty clear from the experience of both 2015 and 2017 that estimating correctly who is and who is not going to turn out, particularly the differences in turnout between different demographic groups, is now one of the principal challenges facing the polling industry. That is the first point.

The second is that, partly thanks to the Brexit referendum, although not entirely as a result of that, the social base of British politics is now different. By far and away the biggest discriminator of vote choice in the 2017 election was age. To come back to my earlier remarks, age is much more clearly correlated with turnout. The problem is that that correlation may be variable over time, even though the fact that younger people are less likely to vote is pretty much a constant.

One of the challenges that faced the polling industry during the EU referendum was that traditionally it has not been the practice of most political polling to attempt to gather information on education. Educational attainment has not usually been particularly important, once you knew somebody's occupation or class position, but in the EU referendum education mattered much more than social class. Measuring it is an issue. Just think about the myriad qualifications that exist and the arguments about equivalence of qualifications. As you can imagine, collecting data about educational attainment accurately is a relatively difficult enterprise. The widening and changing social bases of electoral choice in the UK have made things more difficult for the industry.

That said, I do not think that everything has got more difficult. Clearly, there are arguments about how internet polling should be conducted and about its relative merits as compared with telephone interviewing, but the advent of the internet has radically changed the polling industry's business model. It has been very successful at reducing costs. To that extent, at least, doing polls has become much easier for the industry than it was 25 or 30 years ago, although it is not clear whether that equates to doing polls well.

The Chairman: Polling has become more difficult. We have also had the facts of two elections where the polling industry performed rather poorly in terms of how the outcome related to its predictions, plus the EU referendum, in which, as your own paper suggests, the last polls were pretty inaccurate. Is this a problem or a crisis for polling? Should we just abandon polling altogether, because it is completely defunct?

Professor John Curtice: It is clearly an embarrassment to the polling industry that its forecasts are not as accurate as it would like them to be. I will give you an answer that is slightly more nuanced than the premise of your question. Of course, the problem in 2015 was not that the industry got everything wrong, but that unfortunately it got wrong the two things that mattered most: the Conservative and Labour results. You laugh, but hopefully you have imbibed the evidence from Professor Jennings, which explained to you why it is more likely that those two estimates will be wrong. Given our electoral system, the thing that you have to get right above all is the Conservative lead over Labour, or vice versa. That is probably the most difficult thing to get right.

Other things happened in 2015, such as the astonishing success of the Scottish National Party north of the border. Even on the eve of polling day, many people said, “Surely this cannot possibly happen”. The truth is that it was more or less exactly what happened.

In the EU referendum, it is worth bearing in mind that, if you take into account all the polls that were conducted during the official campaign period, slightly more had leave ahead than had remain ahead. One of the eternal mysteries of history is what would have happened if the referendum had been on 16 June, at which point the vast majority of opinion polls were pointing to leave being ahead. Would the polls have been regarded as a glorious success that told the country something that it was not anticipating, but that was, in fact, true? There was a bit of a swing back.

It is also true that in 2016 a lot of people assumed that the polls would be wrong, because of the evidence that in some, but not all, referendums, there tends to be a swing towards the status quo towards the end. That expectation was exaggerated. In so far as there was something of a swing back in the polls in the last week of the referendum, albeit that two polls still had leave ahead, people looked at that and said, “Aha. It is obvious that remain is going to win”. The truth is that any sensible person who looked at the final polls for the EU referendum said, “Don’t ask us who is going to win. We don’t know”.

In 2017, we had a remarkable situation, which we may want to go into in more detail later. It is very clear that the problem in 2017 was different from that in 2015. There is a historical issue with UK polling, which goes back to the 1980s. The polling industry has long been aware of it, and much of what it has been trying to do is designed to overcome it. The issue is that Labour voters are simply easier to find. There has been a tendency historically for the industry to overestimate Labour and to underestimate the Conservatives. Of course, the intriguing thing about 2017 was that the pollsters got the Conservatives spot on and underestimated Labour. That is very unusual.

You went on to say, “Given that somewhat patchy record, should we give up on opinion polls?” I would suggest to you that, even in 2017, the opinion polls told you an awful lot of things that it was rather useful to know. They told you that the public were changing their minds about the merits of the Leader of the Opposition and of the Prime Minister. They also told you that the Labour manifesto was more popular than the Conservative manifesto and that Brexit was indeed dividing voters—that voters who had voted leave were swinging towards the Conservatives and voters who had voted remain were more likely to swing towards Labour. They told you that age was becoming a major divide in British politics and that the television pictures of young voters flocking to Jeremy Corbyn’s meetings were a representation of something that was really going on in the electorate. They also told you, by the way, that the Conservative Party was going to do relatively well in areas that had voted leave and that the Labour was going to do better in places that had voted remain. For the discerning reader, there was an awful lot of political intelligence in the opinion polls.

Expecting absolute, pinpoint accuracy from the opinion polls is probably unrealistic. Most opinion polls, in most elections, get it wrong at least a bit. We should not focus purely on the pinpoint accuracy of the horserace, as opposed to whether the polls give a reasonable impression of roughly where we are at—in particular, of the way in which things are changing and of the things that are motivating voters. I would suggest to you that, even in 2017, the opinion polls told you an awful lot that it was rather useful to know.

The Chairman: You have just said that the opinion polls told you an awful lot that you needed to know, except for who was in front. Maybe the Committee should simply say that we will permit opinion polls during election periods, except for those purporting to give voting intentions, which we will ban.

Professor John Curtice: With respect, Chairman, the opinion polls did tell you which party was ahead—they just exaggerated the extent to which it was ahead. It is also true that two polling exercises in 2017 told you that the Conservative Party was at serious risk of losing its overall majority. Survation’s final poll had only a one-point lead. In an exercise that involved modelling a lot of data to work out what the outcome was going to be in seats, using a new method developed by academics, YouGov slightly underestimated the Conservative tally. Even in 2017, there was enough out there.

To be honest, I do not know why people were so surprised that the Conservatives lost their majority in 2017. Anything between the Conservatives getting a majority of about 60 and the Conservatives just losing their majority seemed to be within the range of possibilities, given the evidence that was being provided by the opinion polls. At the end of the day, the polls said that the Conservatives were seven points ahead, on average. That is exactly where they were in 2015, which only got you an overall majority of 12. Why does anybody think that that points to clear evidence that the Conservatives were heading for a safe overall majority?

Q141 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** You are being extremely helpful in illuminating something I have been concerned about throughout this inquiry—the importance of turnout, specifically the turnout issue in 2017, which you have described very effectively. You said that this had now become one of the major challenges facing the polling industry. How is it going to deal with it?

Professor John Curtice: Some of the polling industry will say that what we attempted to do in 2017—to estimate the probability of people voting merely based on what happened at the previous election—was probably a mistake. Personally, I think that they probably also misapplied some of those methods and compounded their errors, but that is another story. We will probably have to go back to relying on voters’ self-reported probability of voting. That is issue number one.

Response number two to you is that I am not saying that it is the only company to have done this, but YouGov, in particular, has said, “If we are going to run internet polls on the basis of panels of people who, in one sense or another, have been recruited to do these things in advance, we need to put much more effort into ensuring that among those panellists

are people who are not that interested in politics". YouGov, certainly, has done that; I suspect that other companies have done it, too.

Part of the answer is to improve the quality of the samples. In a sense, that comes back to the 2015 inquiry. There is no doubt that the most difficult thing in any survey or poll done about politics, before or after an election, is to get adequately right the turnout among those who are not terribly interested in politics. That is one of the challenges we have to live with.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: All of this is so easy with hindsight, but it seems to me that one of the things you could have learned between the referendum and the 2017 election was that there was differential turnout in the referendum in favour of the leave vote, involving all the factors that you have described: age, education, and so on. It was perfectly possible to make a political judgment, although not necessarily a polling one, that those who felt most angry about that result would be in a different demographic. I refer to the young, the more highly educated, et cetera, who would be attracted by the Corbyn example that you have described—the Glastonbury effect, or whatever you want to call it. It would have been perfectly possible to make that political judgment, would it not? As I say, this is very easy with hindsight, but it could have made a difference to the polling.

Professor John Curtice: That is one way of looking at it. I am now speaking in a personal capacity, rather than for the BPC. My own view, having looked at some of the detail of the polls, is that if the polls had simply assumed that the proportion of young voters in the electorate was the same as in 2015, they would not have gone as far astray as they did. Around 11% of the adult population is aged 18 to 24. According to the best estimates we have, about 9% of the electorate who voted in 2015 were 18 to 24. You could say, as some companies did, "We will attempt to weight our data so that we have only 9% of 18 to 24 year-olds". The trouble is that the proportion of 18 to 24 year-olds who contributed to some of the final estimates—I have some of the numbers here—was 4%, in one case, and 5%, in another. I also have a couple of sevens. The truth is that, in trying to deal with this, some companies overegged the pudding. As Will Jennings has pointed out to you, there is a correlation between the degree of error in the polls and the extent to which they tried to model the prior turnout.

There is another thing, which has long been in the public domain, that enables us to know that the problem in 2017 was different from that in 2015. In 2015, the most important graph in the report for which your special adviser was responsible was the one that said, "On average, the final polls said Conservative 38% and Labour 38%"—or whatever it was. If you took the unweighted data in all the opinion polls, the Conservatives were at 38% and Labour was at 38%. All the weighting and filtering that was done by the polls in 2015 ended with them back where they were.

In 2017, the picture is very different. If you take the average of the unweighted data, including no demographic data, there is a Conservative lead of one point. The truth is that, this time, the weighting and filtering drove a number of companies the other way. You could interpret the

unweighted data in 2017 as being pretty much par for the course. There was a slight tendency to underestimate the Conservative position relative to Labour, but it was reasonably okay. The truth is that the various attempts at weighting and filtering, which are partly an attempt to say, “We think that our samples are wrong. They are overestimating the number of younger people who are going to turn out and vote, and a variety of other things”, ended up overcorrecting. If they had simply corrected, they might have got themselves much closer to the outcome.

Simon Atkinson: That was also the case in the Brexit referendum, where there was a similar experience. Many of the unweighted samples performed better than the adjusted final numbers.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: How interesting.

Professor John Curtice: In the Brexit referendum, it is about half way. If you take the average of the unweighted data in the Brexit referendum, it is literally 50:50. In so far as the average of the final polls was 52:48, half of the error is to do with sampling and half of the error is to do with weighting.

I go back to your initial question about the challenges. The EU referendum was difficult, not just because of education, but because you were trying to estimate something that nobody had attempted to estimate before, if we leave aside the 1975 referendum. Whatever its ills, the polling industry tries to learn from its past mistakes. There was no past to deal with. One of the things that marked polling in the 2016 referendum was repeated developments and amendments to methodology. All of those were in the public domain; because of BPC rules, the pollsters had to be open about them. However, it happens to be true that many more of the changes were said to be pushing remain up than in the opposite direction. In a personal capacity, I wrote a blog on polling day saying, “If you strip out all the changes, there has been a 5% swing to leave during the EU referendum campaign”. Undoubtedly, the pollsters were saying, “We absolutely need to make sure that we are being as right as we can be. This is a crucial call”. Some, not necessarily all, of the attempts that they made in that direction may have led them astray. But hindsight is wonderful.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Exactly.

Q142 **Baroness Couttie:** I will make a couple of points and then ask a question. Quite rightly, you focus on the fact that the polls are perhaps less accurate as regards who is first past the post but nevertheless have a broad set of interesting data that would have been useful if people had concentrated on that. The problem is not so much the polls themselves as the way in which the media report them. Of course, the media are fascinated by first past the post, because it sells papers, et cetera. Inevitably, we have to focus on that aspect, because that is what will be reported.

Some of the polling companies talked about the way in which they adjusted their data for turnout, as we have discussed, but there was also an element of human judgment and sense-checking. If a result came out that they thought could not be quite right, it would be sense-checked, which is very difficult to quantify. The people making those judgments probably got their sense from broadcast and print media, rather than from

social media, which reflected what the young were thinking. If they had managed to have a broader picture that included all those, there might have been a better sense-check.

What is the BPC's view on that? It cannot be quantified or spelled out transparently before the poll starts, which would be a better way of doing it. It is just a finger-in-the-air judgment at the end.

Professor John Curtice: The strict answer to your question is that now, if any company changes in any way the way in which it has collected or estimated its voting intention data during an election or referendum campaign, it has to make that public. That is one of the consequences of the Sturgis report. I was able to say earlier that there were lots of methodological changes during the EU referendum because the companies said, "We've made this change, we've made this change, we've made this change".

A lot of the companies made changes between 2015 and 2017. The BPC held a conference with the National Centre for Research Methods at the British Academy in the middle of the 2017 election campaign at which we issued a report and laid out the details of how the companies had changed their methods. Some companies routinely do their final poll slightly differently. They tell us that. Simon may be able to correct me, but my impression is that, once the election campaign had kicked off, there was not a great deal of change to the methods that the companies were pursuing. That was partly because, like all of us who were involved in the election, they were on autopilot. We did not have time to think, as we were not expecting this to happen.

What you describe may have been true in the past; I will say no more than that. Before the days of the transparency of the BPC, a polling company could look at the data and say, "Do you know what? We really are short on 18 to 24 year-olds", or, "The data for the C2s looks rather at odds with everything else that we are seeing. Therefore, we need to tweak them in this way". If they are going to tweak now, they have to tell us. Therefore, you can judge whether or not it is right.

You raise a second, slightly wider, question: are opinion pollsters necessarily immune from the zeitgeist in which they live? Let me say no more than this: given that many, although not all, of the changes that were made to polling methodology in the EU referendum tended to push the polls more in the direction of remain, was there a risk that an industry that is middle class and London based, and in which the zeitgeist was, "Surely nobody's going to be daft enough to vote to leave the European Union", was caught thinking, "If we're going to call this for leave, we absolutely have to be sure that we are right. Otherwise, if we call it for leave, the London professional middle classes"—including, probably, an awful lot of people who occupy this building—"will crucify us"? That is a hypothesis on my part, but there is certainly a zeitgeist.

Of course, there was a widespread zeitgeist at the beginning of the 2017 election campaign that Theresa May was going to walk it. Personally, I was not of that opinion, but that is another matter. The truth is that the decisions about how to weight and filter the data in the 2017 election were made largely between 2015 and 2017, before the election was

called. The only consequence of the election being called when it was was that everybody was caught in midstream, in a sense, having changed their methods no more than 12 months beforehand, in most cases, without necessarily having had a great deal of opportunity to test them out. Once the election was called, if you were involved in any kind of polling exercise, it was a case of saying, "For good or ill, we have made the decisions that we have made".

Baroness Couttie: The transparency point is a good one. If people change their methodology, they have to tell you. The difficulty for the general public is that they tend to follow not what the BPC has been told but what is in the press and in reporting. They will not know that the methodology has changed, which may, of course, have influenced the swing.

Professor John Curtice: They may or may not. The internet has facilitated transparency. Basically, we operate on the fact—

Baroness Couttie: You have to be pretty interested in politics to—

Professor John Curtice: You are right, but there are some of us out there. I run a couple of websites, as do Anthony Wells and various other people, where we are sufficiently anoraky and go into these things to try to explain them to people.

Baroness Couttie: My issue is that a tiny percentage of the voting population bother to do that. Unfortunately—perhaps an education job needs to be done—most people take everything at face value. The reporting may be the thing we need to look at, but I do think that there is an issue. Transparency goes only part of the way towards solving it.

Professor John Curtice: The answer is that it will vary by journalist and newspaper. If a polling company is polling regularly for a newspaper during a referendum or election campaign and decides to change its methods, 99 times out of a 100—Simon can tell me if I am wrong—it will advise the client that it has done that. It may well be quite keen for the client to say at least somewhere in the text, "This is what has been done". However, as with the reporting of any aspect of politics, the headlines tend to get the top level; you have to look for the fine detail. Political polling is not unique in that respect.

Baroness Couttie: No. It is an issue.

Simon Atkinson: In an earlier session, you talked about the 1992 election. One of the big distinctions is that at that time the reporting of an opinion poll might be just as John has described. It was top down, if I can call it that, as it was in the newspaper. If the journalist had done the job well, they would have explained any changes or backgrounds to the poll that the reader needed to understand. There might have been some nice work on the graphics, which can really help to explain to people what is going on.

One of the big changes that we have talked about this morning is the internet, which has affected both the methodology and the dissemination of polls. Clearly, that has pros and cons. One of the pros is that there is a lot of commentary that you can go into if you are interested. One of the cons is that some of the commentary might not be quite as well informed

as some people think. A big distinction is that once the poll is released, as in the recent election, control is lost almost completely. That was not the case 25 years ago.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Professor Curtice, you said that polling had become more difficult. You explained that response rates are lower and that it is harder these days to get a handle on class in Britain. You said that we have to look rather more at education, but that education is a slippery concept, and so forth. Is not society always changing, and has not polling always been trying to hit a moving target? Has it not always been a bit vulnerable to the trap of extrapolating too much from the previous election or fighting the last war? Polling involves judgments, which are difficult to make and may be wrong. Would it be fair to say that polling is really an art masquerading as a science and that the public's expectations of it are excessive, in that people think that the polls are objective and authoritative when they are made up very significantly of judgments that are as fallible as anybody else's judgment?

Professor John Curtice: Yes. You could probably also apply that speech to any macroeconomic forecasting. At the end of the day—thank goodness, perhaps—human beings are unpredictable. Social sciences, of which this is a small part, attempt to identify the forces that influence behaviour, and with what impact, but human beings do not always do what you expect them to do. Lots of judgments are made in the course of the survey process about exactly how best to do it. It is not an uninformed judgment. There is a whole literature out there about how surveys and polls should be done, and we try to learn from experiments, et cetera. Like everything else in life, it is not a perfectly informed judgment.

Simon Atkinson: One thing that is not new is the difference between what a poll says and what the pollster, in the old days, or the blogger or whoever else is commentating on the poll says. It is not a new debate, but a question that has been evident in reviews of recent elections in Britain and around the world is whether more can and should be done to explain, "This is what the poll is saying, but the answer could be within this range. We're not too sure, because it's very fluid".

The answer that some, including perhaps some pollsters, might give is that the media will not like it if we have a line with lots of wiggly things around it that means, basically, "We don't know". As we are discussing this morning, naturally the focus goes on to the most high-profile issue—the voting intention question—as you go through the campaign, particularly in the final stage. The issue is not so much about transparency as about communications: how to communicate polls. It is not a new one, but in the new context people are having to think more about the difference between what a poll is saying and what it might mean. John's opening point was about how polling is getting more difficult. In that same way, that question is getting more difficult to answer, if not to ask.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Would you like to see people better educated, such as through citizenship education in schools, so that they can understand the polls? Would that be useful for our democracy?

Professor John Curtice: If we improved the mathematical and statistical literacy of our population, it would improve a lot of things. Opinion polling would probably not be at the top of most people’s list, but it might prove to be a beneficiary.

The Chairman: I will take questions from Onora, Barbara, Robert and Kate. Then I will switch the emphasis to regulation and whether it should be stronger.

Q143 **Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** I want to ask about the industry and membership of the British Polling Council. Our brief says that there are polling companies that are not members. Are they different in some way? What is distinctive about them?

Professor John Curtice: You will have to tell me what is in your brief in a moment.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: There was a gap there. That is what I am asking about.

Professor John Curtice: I am aware of only two organisations in the last 10 years that are based inside the United Kingdom and are not members of the British Polling Council. One is Lord Ashcroft, who is a one-man band. The other, which is the British branch of an American organisation, is Greenberg Quinlan Rosner.

As it happens, in practice both of them adhere to the transparency rules of the British Polling Council. That means that the gap that exists relates to companies based outside the UK that are asked to do opinion polling. That happens occasionally; Tony Blair’s institute used one recently, for example. Such companies are under no obligation to adhere to the BPC’s rules. Because there is not the same culture of transparency in the US as there is here, they do not routinely make available the kind of detail that any UK company will provide, although they may do so sometimes. I stand to be corrected, but I am not aware of any significant UK-based player in the polling industry that is not a member of the BPC or is not, in practice, following the BPC’s rules.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: But Lord Ashcroft’s polling is outside.

Professor John Curtice: Lord Ashcroft’s polling is outside, but he follows the rules. It is all up on his website. Greenberg Quinlan Rosner is not a member, but it puts its polls up on its website.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: I see that you have the power to expel or suspend members. Have you ever had to do so?

Professor John Curtice: No. I would suggest to you that one of the reasons the British Polling Council works is that we have very rarely had to enforce the rules. To recap briefly, we have a two-stage process. If we have a complaint, stage one is for the three officers—Simon, Nick Moon and me—to adjudicate. On four occasions, we have said, “Hang on. This isn’t right. The company should be releasing information that it has not released”. Only once—this was before my time as president—has the officers’ ruling been challenged. The complaint went to the second stage, which is an independent committee of disclosure. As it happens—I know this, because I was then a member of the committee of disclosure—the

problem was not the polling company directly, but the reluctance of the commissioner to allow the data to be put into the public domain. A BPC ruling meant that in the end the commissioner had to back down.

As well as trying to make pollsters into honest men and women, the BPC rules help to make commissioners into honest men and women, particularly when it comes to situations where parts of private polls may have been leaked. We have some pretty clear rules that if you have leaked it it is in the public domain, so the transparency rules apply. If, by the way, you have cherry-picked the findings, the whole lot has to go out into the public domain. Therefore, the rules act as a bulwark against what we might regard as sharp practice by commissioners, as well as by the polling companies themselves.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: In addition to the polling industry, there is a much broader range of organisations that conduct surveys, is there not? Can you comment on the relative size of the polling industry, as you have used the term, and the broader range of organisations that do surveys?

Simon Atkinson: In the UK, the main body of reference is the Market Research Society, which has been in existence for more than 60 years. That body covers the whole range of market research that is conducted, including for the things that we buy and the products that we consume, both for government and for the private sector. It is a classic professional body, a bit like you might have in the medical sphere, in the sense that it covers professional standards on, for example, how you conduct the research. There are obligations in relation to sampling and questionnaire design, as well as to transparency and release. The focus is particularly on good practice by the respondents and on the obligations of clients and agencies. There are things to do with transparency in the Market Research Society's code of conduct, for example. It is fair to say that the British Polling Council's rules go further, both on speed and on the level of detail that is expected if you are engaged in the practice of opinion polling, which, to respond to your initial question, is a very small sliver of the wider market research industry.

Professor John Curtice: Another community is engaged in attitudinal research, including attitudinal politics research—the social research community, which is professionally organised through the Social Research Association. I am heavily involved with NatCen Social Research, which does the British Social Attitudes survey. It takes its professional guidance and ethics from that organisation, which has ethical standards.

If you are doing work for grant bodies such as the Economic and Social Research Council and the Nuffield Foundation, they also have ethical standards that you have to be able to meet.

There is a range of bodies, depending on the funding stream or the character of the work, that deal with the ethics of the conduct of surveys and polls. The BPC is focused primarily on the issue of, "You tell us what you've done, so that anybody who wishes to do so can form their own judgment about the merits or otherwise of what you've done". That is an area that the Social Research Association and the Market Research Society do not really cover.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: Can you give us an order of magnitude view on the proportion of the spend that goes into polling, market research and attitudinal surveys?

Simon Atkinson: If you are talking about opinion polling versus the market research industry as a body, you are talking about significantly under 5%—probably under 2%. I do not have the exact numbers to hand, but it has always been a very small proportion of the broader research that is done in the commercial sector, for example.

On John's point about some of the social research that is done internationally, much more is spent on many of the international studies that are done, which are governed by organisations and codes such as WAPOR and SMR. It has always been a very particular enterprise. As John said, that is why the British Polling Council has a very specific remit with regard to the organisations that produce and publish opinion polls.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: I have a maverick last question. Do you find any bodies—in particular, any members of the polling industry—that consider or separate out whether people do or do not use social media or other digital media?

Professor John Curtice: In the last year or two, the British Social Attitudes survey has collected data on whether you have a Twitter handle. I think the British election study has done the same. I have not seen a great deal of written research coming out of that. Your specialist adviser may be able to advise on it.

Broadly speaking, what do we know from some of the stuff that has been published about activity on social media? Yes voters in the Scottish independence referendum were much more active than no voters. Labour voters tend to be more active than Conservative voters. I think that leave voters were more active than remain voters, but I may not be entirely right about that.

Simon Atkinson: And everybody is talking to each other.

Professor John Curtice: Yes. The crucial thing to know about social media is that, for the most part, the sheep talk to the sheep and the dogs talk to the dogs. In other words, most people tend to follow people of the same mind as themselves. It becomes a force, potentially, for mobilisation, but probably not for persuasion. The links between people of different views are relatively weak.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Presumably, the social media correlation with leave and Labour voters is also a correlation with age.

Professor John Curtice: In part, yes, but not entirely.

Q144 **Baroness Janke:** We have heard different things from different witnesses about regional variations. Earlier you mentioned the ubiquity of what one of my colleagues might call the London-based chattering classes, or that kind of subculture. Do you feel that the regional variations have been taken account of? Earlier we heard from someone from Bristol University who was researching at constituency level. I have forgotten his name; you will probably be able to tell me.

Baroness Janke: How well do you feel that has been covered? Do we need to look at it more closely?

Professor John Curtice: Ron Johnston. The first point, of course, is that most of the opinion polling of which people take notice is GB-wide. In so far as it is trying to come up with estimates of population parameters, it is doing so GB-wide. To achieve that objective, you are concerned to ensure that, among other things, your sample is representative by region.

Secondly, if you looked at the details of the polls during the 2017 election, it was perfectly clear that the Labour Party was going to do relatively well in London. That predates the Corbyn surge. It was clear that the Conservative Party was going to do relatively well in the north of England, particularly in leave-voting areas. That information was there in the polls, if you were willing to go through it. Those patterns were quite important in justifying the expectation early on that there might be a landslide for the Conservatives, because they needed that kind of differential geography for the electoral system to work to their advantage. Yes, the information is there.

Obviously, Scotland and Wales had their own particular interests. One of the interesting and fascinating stories about Wales was that early in the campaign we had very strong pro-Conservative figures, but then it all swung back towards the Labour Party.

In Scotland, the truth is that the political system is very different. Once again, the polls got it roughly right. They told you that the SNP was losing an awful lot of votes and that the Conservative Party was probably going to come second. They also told you, towards the end of the campaign, that the Labour Party had engaged in a degree of recovery. That was roughly right.

The innovative exercises, not so much about regional variation but about constituency variation, were two attempts—one was done for Lord Ashcroft and one was done for YouGov—that did not look at a sample of 1,000 or 2,000 people, which on its own is never enough to get a regional variation, but took very large numbers, such as 50,000 respondents, and used those to model seriously the probability that people with certain characteristics would vote Conservative, Labour or whatever. They worked out how many people with those characteristics lived in each constituency, using administrative data, and then used that to model the outcome.

In the case of YouGov, it worked very well; that is where the forecast of 304 seats for the Conservatives came from. The exercise very much took geographical variation into account. Given that YouGov had a four-point Conservative lead in its national vote share, its modelling was clearly quite important.

In the case of Lord Ashcroft, it did not help him out. The truth is that the regional dimension matters. Will you get it right? You will get it right only if the underlying polling data are at least reasonably accurate.

Baroness Janke: If you look at it by constituency, how well were the people whom the press call the left-behind represented? A lot of the areas that voted leave in the referendum, for example, were less densely

populated. Some of them were even quite peripheral. I wonder whether that dimension was not taken into account fully.

Professor John Curtice: The answer is that, other things being equal, leave voters tend to be less interested in politics. To that extent, at least, it comes back to the earlier part of our conversation, which was about the fact that there is therefore a greater probability that they will not appear in surveys.

One thing that we have to bear in mind here is that we do not yet have any high-quality estimates of turnout from random probability face-to-face surveys. Such evidence as I have seen leads me to suspect that some of the leave voters who turned out in the EU referendum, but not in 2015, did not turn out in the 2017 election. In contrast, some of the remain-inclined voters who did not vote in 2016 did turn out in 2017. However, at the moment, that is a hypothesis with some evidence, rather than something that has been fully nailed down. To that extent, at least, the left-behind were perhaps more of a problem in 2016 than in 2017.

Baroness Janke: You say that the so-called left-behind are less politically active. Is there something in the idea that the way in which we carry out these investigations and research projects makes it more difficult to get to the bottom of that? They are a factor that needs to be considered.

Professor John Curtice: Surprise, surprise—if somebody rings you up or sends you an e-mail saying, “By the way, I have this wonderful survey about what’s going on in politics”, a lot of people outside the confines of this building say, “Sorry, just not interested”.

Lord Hayward: Even within this building.

Professor John Curtice: Okay. In some senses, British Social Attitudes is an omnibus survey; it has lots of questions about lots of things. It asks questions about assisted dying, grandmothers or education, alongside some questions about politics. One thing that you tend to find is that that is somewhat more successful, although not wholly successful, at getting at the politically disengaged than those surveys that are wholly about politics. The interviewer can sell the survey by saying, “I see that you have your lovely grandchildren with you. We have these questions about grandparents”. Then they grit their teeth as they answer the questions about politics. Sometimes journalists turn up their noses when polling is done as part of an omnibus survey in which you have also asked questions about Daz and Omo. Actually, people may be more interested in Daz and Omo than they are in politics. That helps to overcome some of the problem that people’s motivation to participate is affected by the subject matter of the survey.

Baroness Janke: Does it still seem to you that, given the margin of error in the referendum in particular, we are not managing to take account of these people? Should we be thinking of other ways of getting that information? It is perhaps still a challenge to the pollsters.

Professor John Curtice: Do not push it too hard. On the best estimates of the data I have seen so far, the differential turnout may have been worth 1% of the vote to leave, but not more than that. Therefore, it was probably not crucial to the outcome.

Lord Hayward: Early in your comments you said that the majority of opinion polls showed a leave majority.

Professor John Curtice: That is the case if you take all the polls during the campaign.

Lord Hayward: Is it not correct that the majority of the last polls of each of the different companies showed a majority for remain?

Professor John Curtice: Correct—including one famous poll done by the organisation that was advising the Prime Minister during the EU referendum campaign.

Lord Hayward: This is what worries me. You identified a series of different statistics at different points and said, “If you look at lots of data in relation to 2017, we got it right”. However, the reality is that everybody believes that they, whether it be the messenger or the pollsters, got it wrong in 2017, 2016 and 2015. It is rather like an English batsman saying, “I faced 50 balls, but I made only one error. Unfortunately, it was the one that I nicked to first slip”. I am afraid that that sounds in part like the analysis we have been listening to of the last three major polling events in this country.

May I move on to an area we have not touched on?

Professor John Curtice: In fairness, will you allow me to respond to your point before going on to your question?

Lord Hayward: I thought you might want to.

Professor John Curtice: I take your point. At the end of the day, it is entirely reasonable to say, “What are the final polls? How close are they?” That is a tough test for any survey exercise to take, but it is quite reasonable for you to set it. However, I would suggest to you that one’s judgment of a situation in which four out of six polls had remain ahead and two had leave ahead should be informed by what they were saying in the week, or two or three weeks, beforehand. Given that we were talking about a very close 50:50 result, it may just be that random sampling error in the polls in the last week led them astray, whereas in the previous week they happened to be spot on. We do not know.

As regards what the polls were telling us about what the outcome would be, it is reasonable to suggest to you that to look entirely myopically at just the final polls, ignoring everything else, is probably not the most intelligent way of reading them. It is perfectly reasonable to regard as the test, “How accurate is the stuff at the end of the day? How close are the final polls? Are they randomly distributed around the true value?” In all three cases, the answer to that question is no. On that, you are absolutely right.

Q145 **Lord Hayward:** May I move on to an area you have just touched on: the question of social, rather than political, issues and polling? In effect, polls on social issues are political polls, in one form or another; they try to persuade a Government or an Administration to adopt one view or policy as against another.

Do polls conducted for organisations that are pursuing particular social policy issues throw up different issues from those in relation to political parties? If so, what are they? How do the polling organisations tackle them?

Professor John Curtice: I will let Simon answer that first.

Simon Atkinson: In a way, they do throw up some different issues. With a poll on a social issue, you move quite quickly to a question about survey design, particularly questionnaire design. Let us say that you are doing a poll of the national population. That takes you on to a slightly different, but related, wicket, because then the questions raise issues of professional practice. You expect the pollster who has designed the questionnaire to have done so in a professional manner, so that the questions are balanced. The more questions there are, the more helpful it is to anybody consuming the survey, because you get a more rounded picture than if there are just one or two questions. In that sense, it takes you into a different area.

I come back to the issue of pollsters and the British Polling Council. Certainly, the aspiration is that British Polling Council rules will apply in those circumstances. Indeed, the rules on transparency should be very helpful, because people still have to put up the questions. If people have views on the questions, on the design of the poll or on the way in which it has been interpreted, that information is in the public domain for people to comment on. As John mentioned previously, if clients will not release it, there is a problem, and that will follow the process through.

Clearly, it is a related area. One hopes that the transparency rules and the rules on disclosure and good practice on which the British Polling Council has been working will contribute in that domain.

Professor John Curtice: The honest answer is that this is a bit of a negotiated relationship. That is just as true of political polling. What makes you think that political parties, particularly if they think that they might want to publish something, will not choose particular topics and perhaps argue for particular question wording? One of the things that you discover about clients who are commissioning polling work is that they will give you question wording and think, "Of course that is what you are going to ask". They do not think it is biased, because of their perspective. Gradually, you have to say to them, "Hang on. You can't assume that everybody views the world through the prism through which you view it". I am sorry, but political parties are full of people who view the world through a particular prism. Therefore, it will be a negotiated relationship.

Newspapers, of course, have agendas. Any organisation that is doing polling or survey work will say at some point, "I am not willing to do this", but the point at which you put your foot down and say that is obviously a matter of judgment.

Rather more subtle is the question of agenda selection: what do you decide to focus on? Undoubtedly, there is a question of agenda selection, whether you are dealing with a political party, a newspaper, a campaigning organisation or, in truth, the state; government departments are not immune to this, either. People want surveys about the subjects in which they are interested or that they think will be in their interests. A

polling company cannot say, “I know that you want to do a survey about people’s attitudes towards the homeless, but I think that you should be doing a survey about landlords”. There is a limit to what you can do here.

Lord Hayward: As a conclusion, may I give you—

The Chairman: I am getting nervous, because we need to give John a chance to answer on regulation. Could we leave it there?

Lord Hayward: That is fine. I will leave it.

The Chairman: Kate will finish off this bit.

Baroness Fall: I was going to ask about regulation, so why do we not go on to that?

The Chairman: That would be a great way of starting.

Q146 **Baroness Fall:** I loved the way in which you compared polling to macroeconomic forecasting. Some of the very high-profile forecasts in the Budget, for example, are often proven not to be correct later—or, indeed, at the time. One of the things the Committee has looked at over the past few weeks is the fact that this is all so high profile, particularly coming into an election. Whatever happens, it affects the climate in which the election is run and the way in which the news is put together in the evening. Are we proactive enough about setting a gold standard for a good poll? I know that you have your rules, but do you feel, in your position or otherwise, that we adjudicate this sort of thing in a proactive way or as effectively as we should?

Professor John Curtice: There is undoubtedly one constraint on what the British Polling Council can do. This is not an organisation with thousands of pounds of resources. It has a few thousand quid. One of the simple reasons why we as a council are not in a position to say, “This poll is good. This poll is bad”, is that we cannot afford to fight a court case brought by a company that says it is bad. As an individual, I often advise journalists, “There is a bit of an issue here”. They may or may not take that advice.

Unless you are a very rich, extremely well-endowed organisation that is in a position to fight in the courts, you cannot say, “This is rubbish”. The sanction that we have, under the rules that we have, is expulsion. I will simply point out to you that, in the case of the PRCA recently, the expulsion of a member helped to ensure that that company went bankrupt. The moral suasion that we have as an organisation is potentially pretty high.

If you want to go beyond that, you have to decide who are the great, good and wise people who are able to say definitively, “This is good. This is bad”. I certainly would not want to take on that job. I may occasionally say to people, “There is an issue here”, “There is a debate here”, or, “Look at these numbers. Hang on. It does not look as if they have enough young people”. All research organisations have competitors. For the OBR, those include the National Institute of Economic and Social Research and the Bank of England. We have a plethora of economic forecasts. Therefore, we can engage in an analysis of the different assumptions that they are making, et cetera.

Equally, we have a plethora of polling companies, no two of which do the job exactly the same. At various points in time, some of them get more or less criticism. To that extent, at least, you are relying on competition and public exposure as the best form of regulation. Of course, if the companies get it wrong, criticism is heaped upon them fairly rapidly—not unreasonably.

The Chairman: Curiously enough, it is hard to see that any company suffered particularly from getting the 2017 election wrong.

We will take evidence from the other regulator, the MRS, next week, so I will now ask you to put on firmly your BPC hat and to ignore your other hats, as a professor and as the world’s leading expert on polls. Where three results in a row have been suboptimal, any organisation such as the BPC will want to reconsider its position on regulation. You have already given one powerful argument for why you may not want to go further, but are you confident that when confidence in the polling industry among the political classes is not terribly high, regulation as we have it—namely, transparency—is enough?

Professor John Curtice: The short answer is no. Of course, that is not the position that the BPC has adopted. The decision that I made in 2015 that the BPC, together with the MRS, should instigate an independent inquiry widened de facto what the BPC was about. Basically, the BPC has two purposes: one is transparency; the other is improving public understanding. In a sense, we could justify what we did under public understanding, but in practice, in 2015, the BPC took on a degree of responsibility for the collective health of the methodology of the industry. That was followed up in 2016 by a seminar, which still needs to be written up, as the election overtook us.

A similar exercise is now going on for 2017. It is a different exercise this time, partly because not all of the industry got it wrong in 2017, and partly because in 2015 we persuaded a lot of very kind people to give an awful lot of time for free to go through what the polls had done. I felt that this time around we should try a different model.

By 15 December, all the polling companies have to send me a report, in which they have been asked some specific questions, particularly about weighting and filtering, and in which they have to say what they did and what their evaluation is. We will hold a seminar, probably in February, and will publish a report.

Although it is not regulation in the sense of, “Thou must do this”, in practice we are taking on a responsibility for ensuring that there is self-reflection and a concern about the collective health of the methodology of the industry. That role has been taken on, in effect.

To be honest, before 2015, the BPC ran almost on autopilot. We would get a few complaints a year, most of which were not valid, and there was not a great deal to do.

The answer to your question is that that is the way we have approached it. We cannot go around saying, “This is right. This is wrong”. What we can do is ensure that the industry collectively is concerned about its methodological health. We will carry on with that role in the new year.

The Chairman: That is very helpful. In France, the Commission des sondages does not prescribe what methods people may use, except in certain aspects of what they must say when they publish their polls. It provides a measure of methodological guidance and clearance of questions that are being asked, so it goes beyond where you are at the moment. I know that Lord Foulkes, who, as you know, introduced a regulation Bill in the last Parliament, has been very struck by that model. How big is the difference between it and you? Do you rule out entirely the founding here of a body such as the Commission des sondages?

Professor John Curtice: You should talk to colleagues in the next session about this, because I know that they have been talking to their colleagues in France. In the meantime, let me ask you this. Let us take, for example, the way in which the exit poll is currently conducted. It makes no claim at all to be engaged in interviewing a representative sample. When the current methodology was first used in 2015, we could give you the statistical argument, but it had not been tried before. Would a Commission des sondages have said at that point, "That's fine. Go away and experiment", or would it have said, "No. We think that that is far too risky"? With the benefit of hindsight, if it had said that it was too risky, it would have made the wrong decision.

If YouGov had gone to a Commission des sondages and said, "There are a couple of bright academics at the LSE who have developed this new method of analysing opinion polls to estimate what is going to happen in each and every constituency. It is a new method. They have done various tests on previous work, but it has not been done before", would the commission have said yes or no? Actually, one of the successes of the 2017 election was one of the exercises that used that methodology.

In the wake of the 2015 election, the Commission des sondages might have said, "Do you know what? All of you need to do something right about the fact that you are not estimating the turnout differential correctly. You need to do this modelling". As a result, Survation, which was the one company that got it pretty much right, using exactly the same method as it had used in 2015, would have been told, "No. You can't do it that way".

We should be wary of assuming that the collective consensus, which, I suggest, a Commission des sondages is likely to embrace, will necessarily prove to be the right path down which to go.

The Chairman: Yes, but there are balances in all these things. I was a financial regulator at one point. Sometimes, by interfering and regulating too much, you prevented innovation that would have been good for customers; sometimes you prevented innovation that would have led to the ripping-off of customers. I am trying to establish where the precise balance lies, in the case of the BPC. The fact is that, as long as the companies that belong to you are transparent, there is nothing you can criticise them for. They can have any wild method that they want. There can be a consensus among experts that it is not very good, but, if they wish to practise it, you can do nothing, as long as they are transparent.

Professor John Curtice: We as an organisation cannot, but we provide the means for the western world collectively to say, "No. This is wrong". I

well remember Audience Selection, as it then was, engaging in an early attempt, back in 1983, to introduce telephone polls in this country. Its polls were coming up with much higher results for the then Liberal/SDP Alliance than anybody else's. What it was doing was quite widely criticised at the time. People said, "Hang on. We are not quite sure that we should be doing this". However, that was the product of professional and journalistic discussion of what Audience Selection was doing and of the apparent weaknesses of the methodology it was using.

Let us get to the point here. We have to ask ourselves, "What is the downside risk of the polls getting it wrong?" The downside risk is that you may feel that the election campaign has been framed incorrectly. Let us go back to the example where that is quoted most often, which is 2015. Let us say that in 2015, on average, the opinion polls were correct. That includes people accepting—lots of people did not accept it—that, as a result, the Liberal Democrats were going to get crucified, which was crucial to the outcome in 2015. Given that a seven-point lead gave you a majority of 12, you would have got quite a few opinion polls that said, "The lead is only two, three or four", simply because of random sampling error around that average. We would still have had speculation about whether Ed Miliband would do a deal with the SNP, if it was indeed only a two, three or four-point lead. Even in that famous example, the truth is that, if the polls had been accurate, we would still have been discussing what would happen in the event of a hung Parliament, because around half of the polls would probably have been pointing to some kind of hung Parliament.

The second thing that we have to ask ourselves is, what is the evidence that the public are influenced? If you go back to the 2015 election, there is not a great deal of evidence about the impact of the fact that the election was framed around whether Labour would do a deal with the SNP. Such evidence as we have does not substantiate the proposition that that changed voters' views.

More broadly, I would point you to the evidence in the WAPOR submission, particularly the reference to the work by Ian McAllister, which is the most elaborate work on UK polling impact. It suggests that for every occasion where you can find a bandwagon effect, you can find another occasion where there is an underdog effect. It is not clear that opinion polls have a dramatic impact on the overall outcome of general elections in any consistent fashion.

You need to think about what the downside risk is here. I would suggest to you that the downside risk of inaccurate opinion polls is probably rather less than the downside risk of inaccurate macroeconomic forecasting.

The Chairman: In the Scottish referendum, for example, the downside risk was that the Scots were given a new bonus package to stop them doing what polls said they were trying to do. That seems to me to be a pretty big downside.

Professor John Curtice: No, not at all. Let us get the Scottish independence referendum right. There were only two opinion polls that ever put the yes side ahead. One of those was self-criticised by the polling company itself, which said, "We are seriously doubtful about this. We do

not think that it is right". On the day of the famous YouGov poll that came up with 51% for yes, there was another opinion poll, by Panelbase, which had been saying that it was about 47% or 48% for the yes side ever since the referendum campaign started. On exactly the same day, it still said that it was 48%.

The truth is that everybody decided to ignore the polling company that said that nothing had changed, and took far too much notice of the other poll. Given how close that referendum was, it is not surprising that one opinion poll, among the whole lot of them, would come up with yes ahead. That was almost statistically guaranteed. The truth is that people decided to believe and put their faith in YouGov and to ignore everybody else. That was a judgment for them to make, but I do not think that it was a reasonable collective judgment on what the opinion polls were saying.

The Chairman: It is a matter of opinion whether it is a judgment that should be left entirely to the people or whether they should be advised on exactly what you have just said: namely, that this was likely to be a freak. Peter Kellner would argue to this day that that was an accurate opinion poll and that they were quite right to react in the way they did.

Professor John Curtice: He is entitled to his judgment. Let us say, for example, that there was no public opinion polling, that YouGov was asked by the no campaign to do its private polling and that it gave the same result as it gave to the *Sunday Times*. Banning the publication of polls will not stop politicians taking decisions on the basis of polling information that is available to them.

Q147 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** That takes us back to our discussion of whether we should be looking at the inaccuracy of the media and the failures of political judgment, rather than the inaccuracy of the polls. May I make an addendum to the point about the downside of polls? I know that nowadays we do not really talk about markets in such discussions, but there is quite a lot of evidence that if, for example, there were to be a snap election this spring—it would not necessarily be a snap election; perhaps it is likely to happen anyway—there would be a huge movement in the currency markets, on the basis of polling that suggested that Mr Corbyn was going to be successful.

Professor John Curtice: Perhaps, although that depends on expectations, of course. If people think that that is what is going to happen, it gets priced into the market fairly quickly. At the end of the day, the reason the pound fell following the EU referendum was that, despite the private polling that was going on on polling day, most people seem to have bet the farm that remain was going to win. Therefore, the value of the pound went down.

Historically, this is a long-standing issue. Once upon a time, the stock market used to take fright when there was a possibility of the Labour Party winning.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: It might again.

Professor John Curtice: As an aside, let us say for the purpose of argument that in a snap election the Labour Party was campaigning in favour of a second referendum or staying inside the single market. As we

know, the view of the markets on which is the worse of the two devils may be somewhat more nuanced than you are suggesting.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Yes, but if, as we have had in the last week, there are reports of Mr Corbyn making speeches in the City saying that he intends to take fairly tough action against individual banks, et cetera, it seems to me that that would be an issue in New York, at least.

Professor John Curtice: You do not escape the problem—

Baroness Jay of Paddington: No, you do not escape the problem. I am talking about the downside.

Professor John Curtice: Yes, but it does not matter whether it is public or private, unless you are going to ban entirely the taking of opinion polls. We know what happened in the EU referendum. In the EU referendum, because of the one ban that we do have, which is on publishing information about how people have actually voted, a lot of people engaged various polling companies to do private exit polls or other kinds of on-the-day exercises.

If we ban opinion polls for, let us say, seven days, the markets will have a field day. They are privately conducted, as opposed to publicly conducted, so there is no greater guarantee that the polls will be more accurate.

We will get the worst of both worlds. We will get the markets moving. When someone asks, “Why are the markets moving?” we will be told, “We have intelligence that this is the case”. We will all know that that is from opinion polls, but none of us will be in a position to be able to judge whether a poll is useless, what use we should make of it, and whether it is consistent with everything else. We will all be flying blind. I accept that there are downside risks with public polling, but the truth is that the downside risks will still be there with private polling. At least public polling is exposed to a degree of public scrutiny.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I am not challenging your point on that. I am simply challenging the point that you made earlier, which you have now slightly retracted: namely, that there were not downsides to opinion polling.

Professor John Curtice: I have accepted that the way in which election campaigns are framed can be affected by opinion polls. I am merely suggesting that people exaggerate the degree to which the 2015 election was framed by the polls. I would also question the extent to which the Scottish independence referendum was affected, other than the fact that the result was definitely much closer than most people anticipated at the beginning of the exercise. It was certainly much closer than the UK Government intended when allowing the referendum to be held in the first place.

The Chairman: We are reaching the end of the session. I will end on a quiet and dying note. In his report, Professor Sturgis recommended six changes to BPC rules. Have all those changes now been made?

Professor John Curtice: They have all been made, bar one. We are still working on confidence intervals. I hope that at our next AGM, which should be early in the new year, we will get that sorted. All companies will

be required to estimate the confidence interval within which their voting intention estimates lies. Everything else has already been done. Indeed, in the case of the recommendations on being transparent about methodological changes, the companies followed the rules before we introduced them formally.

The Chairman: It would be very helpful if you did us a one-page note saying what the position is on those inquiries. We want to get it right in our report.

Professor John Curtice: Sure; no problem.

The Chairman: Thank you very much. I know that it has been a long session for you.

Professor John Curtice: That is fine. It has been enjoyable.

The Chairman: I suppose that we would call it a lively one. We look forward to deliberating on what you have said and reflecting our conclusions on it in our report.

Professor John Curtice: Thank you very much for some excellent questions.

British Polling Council – Written evidence (PPD0007)

House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media Submission by British Polling Council

1. The House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media has, *inter alia*, indicated an interest in the regulation of opinion polls. This document outlines the work of the industry organisation that currently fulfils that role.
2. The British Polling Council (BPC) was established in 2004. Membership is open to any organisation that conducts for multiple clients polls or surveys designed to ascertain the views of a representative sample of a specified population, such as all voters in Great Britain. Currently 16 companies are registered as members; they include all of the UK-based organisations that currently conduct polls of vote intention across Great Britain/the United Kingdom as a whole apart from Lord Ashcroft. (Note that polls can be, and sometimes are, conducted by companies that do not have a base in the UK.) Those wishing to join the organisation have to demonstrate that they can satisfy the council's rules on disclosure (see below), and pay an annual membership fee.
3. BPC has two main objectives. The first is to promote transparency in the publication of polls. The second is to promote public understanding of opinion polls. These objectives are achieved by providing and enforcing a detailed specification of the information that should routinely be made available whenever a poll is published, and by promoting public events on the conduct and performance of opinion polls.
4. The council is run on a day to day basis by a team of three officers, a President, a Secretary/Treasurer, and a Committee Member. By convention, the President is someone not currently involved in commercial opinion polling and who thus can act as a neutral chair. The role has been performed since 2008 by John Curtice, Professor of Politics at the University of Strathclyde. The Secretary/Treasurer is currently Nick Moon, until recently Head of Social and Political Research at GFK, and the Committee Member is Simon Atkinson, Chief Knowledge Officer at Ipsos. All three perform their duties in a voluntary capacity. The council maintains a website at <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/>.
5. The council's rules on disclosure (which apply to all polls and surveys conducted by a member organisation, not just polls of voting intention) are in two parts. The first part specifies the information that should be published on the initial publication of a poll. Specifically, member companies are under an obligation to try to ensure that the following information is included in the initial publicity:
 - Client commissioning the survey;
 - Dates of interviewing;
 - Method of obtaining the interviews (e.g. in-person, telephone, internet)
 - The universe effectively represented (all adults, voters etc)

British Polling Council – Written evidence (PPD0007)

- The percentages upon which conclusions are based;
- Size of the sample and geographic coverage;

and, if possible:

- Complete wording of questions upon which any data that has entered the public domain are based;
- A web address where full computer tables may be viewed

The second part of the rules of disclosure places an obligation upon member companies to publish the above information on their own web site, together with the following:

- A full description of the sampling procedures adopted by the organisation
- Computer tables showing the exact questions asked in the order they were asked, all response codes and the weighted and unweighted bases for all demographics and other data that has been published
- A description of any weighting, filtering, modelling or imputation procedures that have been employed, the weighted and (where relevant) unweighted figures for all variables (demographic or otherwise) used to weight the data (irrespective of whether or not such variables appear in any tabulated analyses of the data), and the source(s) of the data used to set weighting targets.
- An e-mail address for further enquiries. It is assumed that all other reasonable requests for other data, over and above the requirements specified herein, necessary for readers of the polls to assess the validity of the data will be answered
- A link to the BPC web-site
- In the case of a poll of voting intentions for an election or referendum (including any election or referendum that has not yet been called), specify any changes to the way in which those estimates have been obtained since the company's previous poll of those voting intentions. This includes any changes to the sampling procedures, weighting and the treatment of Don't Knows and Refusals.

This information should normally be published within two working days of the initial release of the results, though for polls of vote intention conducted during election and referendum campaigns members have committed themselves to publishing this information within 18 hours. In practice, nowadays, most companies publish this information within a few hours, including outside an election period.

6. The rules on disclosure were last revised in response to the recommendations of the Independent Inquiry into the Performance of the Polls in the 2015 general election (see further below). The council is committed to introducing a further rule change that will require members to specify confidence intervals for all polls of voting intention. Work is ongoing into how this can best be effected.
7. The aim of the rules on disclosure is to provide the information necessary to permit anyone to evaluate for themselves how any particular poll has

been conducted and thus the basis (and, by implication, the robustness) of any claims made about the results of a poll or polls. The council does not itself express any views on the merits or otherwise of a particular poll, not least because it lacks the financial resource to sustain any legal action to which any such expression might give rise.

8. The rules of disclosure apply to any poll that has 'entered the public domain'. This includes not only polls that have formally been published by the commissioning organisation but also to any findings that may have been 'leaked' or otherwise made publically available by that organisation or its agents. In the event of the latter occurrence, the rules not only apply to those findings that have been made available but also to any other findings in the poll that may cast doubt on the findings that have been published.
9. The rules do not apply to 'private polls' that remain unpublished. The same is also true of polls and surveys where the member organisation has been sub-contracted to act as the fieldwork agency, with no responsibility for the design, weighting and analysis of the survey. This, inter alia, sometimes applies to polls and surveys conducted on behalf of academic research projects.
10. The council operates a complaints procedure in respect of its rules of disclosure. Any individual or organisation that has had a request for (further) information about a poll refused by a member company may complain to the council that the member has failed to meet the obligations of its membership. Such complaints are considered in the first instance by the three officers of the BPC who make an initial judgement as to whether the complaint has merit, either in whole or in part. Should it be found to have merit, the company in question is expected to make the information in question available. In the event that the company rejects the officers' ruling, the issue is referred an investigating sub-committee of three persons drawn from a Committee on Disclosure that is maintained by the BPC. This Committee consists of a mixture of those working in a polling organisation, journalists, and academics, and any investigating sub-committee is expected to comprise one person from each of these categories. The sub-committee's decision is final. If a member company fails to adhere to a panel's decision it may be suspended or expelled from membership.
11. During the last five years, the council has received under this procedure only four complaints that fell within its remit. Of these, two concerned polls that the member incorrectly thought were not covered by the BPC's rules, and one involved an administrative error by the member. In all four cases the complaint was either partially or wholly upheld by the officers and each time the member organisation made the relevant data available immediately. Since the BPC was established 13 years ago, an investigating sub-committee has only had to be convened on one occasion since the BPC was established; it upheld the initial judgement of the officers that the details of a poll should be released and the member company duly complied.

12. Most complaints arise because the complainant disagrees with the substantive finding of a poll rather than because of a disinterested wish for further information. Some occasionally seek a ruling from the BPC that a poll was in some way unprofessional or inadequate rather than constituting a request for the disclosure of information that has been refused, and thus fall outside the council's remit. Such complaints are not included in the numbers given in paragraph 11 above.
13. Since its formation, the council has sponsored a number of events on the conduct of polls, either before and/or after an election and often in collaboration with the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) at the University of Southampton. These events have been designed to enable the interested public, including not least journalists who may have to report the results of polls, to come to an informed view about the conduct and effectiveness of polling as it is currently practised, and to expose the conduct of polls to public scrutiny. Additional resources to support those interested in learning more about the polls are provided on the council's website, for example in the form of an FAQs by members of the public and a "Journalist's Guide".
14. The performance of the polls in the 2015 general election gave rise to particular concern about the accuracy and effectiveness of polls of voting intention. All the polls conducted shortly before polling day by BPC members (and most others) put the Conservatives and Labour neck and neck when, in the event, the Conservatives proved to be seven points ahead in the popular vote. In response, the BPC, together with the Market Research Society, sponsored an Independent Inquiry into the Performance of the Polls in the 2015 General Election. Chaired by Prof. Patrick Sturgis of the University of Southampton, the membership consisted of academics and survey practitioners, but excluded anyone currently involved in the conduct of polls of voting intentions. All members of the BPC co-operated with the Inquiry by providing data and information as requested. The Inquiry held two public events and issued a lengthy report with recommendations. It concluded that the main source of error lay in the fact that the samples of those interviewed were not adequately representative of those who voted.
15. The polls were also widely thought to have called the outcome of the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union incorrectly. This is more debatable. Though none of the published polls conducted just before polling day overestimated the share of the vote won by Leave, two did put Leave ahead, while amongst all of the polls conducted during the official campaign from 17 May onwards, slightly more (17) put Leave ahead than had Remain ahead (15). Still, the referendum campaign was certainly marked by considerable methodological innovation and debate as the polling industry attempted to grapple with how best to measure voting preferences that cut across traditional party lines. Consequently, in December 2016 BPC and NCRM sponsored a conference on the performance of the polls in the referendum and a brief report on the principal findings (delayed by the general election) is in preparation.

16. The sudden calling of the 2017 election meant that the polling industry was unexpectedly faced with the task of measuring general election voting intentions while still absorbing and ascertaining how best to respond to the lessons of the 2015 election (and the 2016 referendum). However, most companies had made at least some (varied) changes to the way in which they obtained and/or reported their data. During the election campaign BPC and NCRM held a public event at which these and other methodological developments since the 2015 election were presented and discussed. A report was also prepared and published detailing the changes that had been made by each company.
17. On average the 2017 polls conducted by BPC members put the Conservatives eight points ahead, when, in the event the party's lead in the Britain-wide vote was just 2.5 points. This was an unusual error in that, historically, polls have tended, as in 2015, to underestimate the Conservatives' position relative to that of Labour. Also in contrast to the position in 2015, there was considerable variation around the average, and one company actually slightly underestimated the Conservative lead. Given these differences, the BPC decided that, rather than attempting to reconvene the Independent Inquiry, all of its member companies should conduct an internal evaluation of their polling in the 2017 election, and that these evaluations should be published and presented on the occasion of a public event in December 2017.
18. The BPC welcomes the interest of the Select Committee in the work of the polling industry and the opportunity it has afforded to explain the council's current system of self-regulation. It will welcome any ideas the Committee may have for enhancing its role, commensurate with its commitment to transparency, as well as any proposals it may have for improving the accuracy and effectiveness of the commissioning, conduct and reporting of polls. However, it would also advise of the potential difficulties that might face some possible ways of extending or tightening the regulation of polls, whether by law or otherwise.
19. It might be thought desirable that not only should the publication of polls be regulated but also the way in which they are conducted. However, this is to presume that there is professional agreement about how polling should be undertaken. There is not. No two polling companies undertake their work in exactly the same way. This reflects the fact that, at any one point in time, there are significant and serious professional disagreements about the best way to undertake political polling (or indeed survey work of any kind). At the same time, the industry is constantly experimenting with new ways of undertaking polls. During the last 25 years, for example, it has witnessed at least two major changes to the mode (from face to face to telephone, and from telephone to internet) in which most polls are conducted. Equally, how best to word the questions that appear on a poll is an issue about which there is constant dispute and debate, but also one which is a matter of judgement rather than 'right' or 'wrong'. In short, regulation potentially risks the methodological experimentation, enhancement and diversity that is the lifeblood of healthy polling and survey research.

20. As might be anticipated, as an organisation that promotes transparency in the conduct and reporting of polls, the BPC is not enamoured of the idea that the publication of polls of vote intention in a UK election should be banned for some period prior to polling day. Any such ban can only apply to the publication of polls within the UK, not their publication outside the UK (including, not least, via the internet). Consequently, such a measure risks on the one hand creating a market in private polling to which only those with the required resources have access, while, on the other, potentially proving ineffective at stopping their (unregulated) publication on overseas websites that those 'in the know' are able to find. Creating inequalities in access to the results of polls whose methods would not be open to public scrutiny is not obviously a way of improving the role that opinion polling plays in our country's politics.

31 August 2017

Buzzfeed and David Cowling – Oral evidence (QQ 64–70)

Evidence Session No. 8

Heard in Public

Questions 64 - 70

[Tuesday 24 October 2017](#)

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Baroness Fall; Baroness Ford; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve; Lord Rennard; Lord Smith of Hindhead.

Examination of witnesses

David Cowling and Jim Waterson.

Q64 **The Chairman:** Good morning, gentlemen—welcome to you both. Be careful what you say by way of an aside, because the mics are on and you can be broadcast by accident—as has happened to some of our colleagues.

You have in front of you a list of interests that have been declared by members of the Committee. We are being broadcast. You will get a transcript in due course, to make any corrections where you may have misspoken or been misunderstood. You have the comfort of knowing that whatever you say is protected by parliamentary privilege—you cannot be successfully sued, whatever you say about me or anyone else.

David, I think that this applies particularly to you. You were working for the BBC, but I believe that you retain a contract with it. Could you declare that, just for the record? It is not important.

David Cowling: It is not the case. I resigned formally in 2015 and had a contract for a year afterwards. That terminated—to great applause—some time in 2016. Since then, I have not had a formal contract.

The Chairman: You are entirely free.

David Cowling: Yes.

The Chairman: I thought that should be clarified for the record. Thank you very much.

You were with the BBC for a good length of time in an important supervisory and advisory capacity. How did the Beeb's attitude to polls change over that period?

David Cowling: I was there for about 16 years. The biggest challenge the BBC had to engage with was the growth in internet polling and the issues surrounding that—methodology and reliability. Those were the industry changes that the BBC had to absorb.

There was not an enormous amount of change. Forgive me—that sounds very stodgy and complacent. I do not mean that. As I am sure you know, the BBC has a set of guidelines on polling, which are published and regularly updated. Any member of the public can see them and can judge

the BBC accordingly. Section 10 of the guidelines is currently up on the screen, if anybody wants to google them and has not seen them. In my experience, the BBC has always displayed and made its guidelines public: the advice it gives to its journalists, the way in which it tells its journalists they should cover opinion polls, and many other topics.

We have seen that updated to address different challenges that have come, but I have not seen change in the relentless pressure from chief political officers such as Anne Sloman, David Jordan and, today, Ric Bailey, in invigilating, enforcing and educating. That was always there—and persisted.

The Chairman: At some stage, I recall the BBC introducing a rule stating that you cannot lead a news bulletin with a poll. That is a major change.

David Cowling: That is certainly the case. I am trying to think quickly when that was introduced. I have a recollection that it was in place all the time I was there, but it may have been early in those 16 years. The advice in the current set-up is certainly that you do not lead news on an opinion poll, even if you have commissioned it yourself.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You refer to polls you commissioned yourself. Will you describe how a decision is made within the BBC about when to commission a poll, which poll to commission, whom to ask to do it for you, and so on?

David Cowling: The BBC guidelines to which I referred are required reading for all journalists. They set out a path for how to commission a poll and the rules that operate within the BBC.

I will add a small caveat. More than 95% of coverage of opinion polls by the media tends to be of other people's polls. Very little of it tends to be of polls that the organisation has generated. You do it, but it is a very small part. Most of the media's coverage of opinion polls is about how they cover other people's polls.

If it is an opinion poll that covers politics or major social policy, the journalist has to get in touch with, and to get the approval of, the chief political officer—currently, Ric Bailey. That is mandatory—they do not have a choice. The guidelines also say that it would be advisable to talk to the editor of political research. That was the case when I was there, because I had a background in opinion polling. Invariably, the question that came to me from programmes was, "How do you do this?" These are working journalists. They have never commissioned a poll. Why should they have? That is not their function. They often came to me. Most of the questions that I fielded were, "Whom should I speak to? Which polling company should I go to? How do I work out the question wording? I have some ideas, but what do I do with them?"

As you know, there is very big regional coverage in the BBC. A lot of the problems I had to deal with related to people who wanted to push the boundaries too far. If there was a sample of 1,000 and there were 80 respondents from the north-east, somebody in the north-east would say, "Can I present this breakdown of the north-east as evidence of what people in the north-east think?" The response was, "No, no, no. First, the

figure of 86 is too small. It is also part of a national sample. It is not there to represent the north-east”.

These are very mundane issues, but in my experience they were the issues for most working journalists. They did not sit there in the morning, with a can of lager in one hand and a fag in the other, thinking, “What can we make up now?” It tended to be much more practical stuff like, “How on earth do I do this?” There was also a lot of humility, because they wanted to get it right and knew that they were in territory in which they really had no experience.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Let us take a random example of a very left-wing editor of “Panorama”. Some people may have the perception that the editor will commission a poll to prove a point—that Theresa May is the most unpopular Prime Minister since Neville Chamberlain. What safeguards are there to stop such arbitrary commissioning?

David Cowling: The editor would have to go to the chief political officer. The hypothetical editor in the BBC might feel great passion about bringing Mrs May down. I have not met one like that, but let us create one for the purposes of today.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Some people believe they exist.

David Cowling: Indeed—and I would be impertinent if I were to say that some believe that Santa exists. I beg your pardon; that is cheeky. Some people believe that, of course. The idea that there are people anywhere in the media who are totally neutered as regards politics is an absurdity. All I can say is that I have never met any people who are there with a passion and a drum and want to bring down Governments, of whatever persuasion. They might exist, but I have never met them.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: They might be editing the *Evening Standard*, for example.

David Cowling: You might say that; I could not possibly comment.

First, they have to go to the chief political officer, so if they have a big bee in their bonnet they have to get it past somebody who does not have a big bee in their bonnet and whose prime task, as chief political officer, is to try to keep all that sort of stuff under review and to make sure that it does not happen.

The killer for me has always been that one piece of advice that is given relates to what happens if the results contradict a preconceived narrative. First, the editor has to alert the chief political officer. However, if he wants to bring Mrs May down and, to his intense horror, the entire nation rises up in this opinion poll and says that she is the best thing since sliced bread, he has to print that. He has to have it on his programme. He cannot say, “Whoops—I do not like that”. Under BBC guidelines, he has told somebody, so somebody else knows about it and will expect it to go out, regardless of what the questions say.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Who appoints the chief political officer?

David Cowling: Forgive me; I ought to know. I think that it is the director-general and, possibly, the board. I will try to get an answer for you. I ought to know, but I do not. I am sorry.

The Chairman: I am sorry, Jim, you are getting slightly left out in the BBC round. I will try to correct that later.

Q65 **Lord Hayward:** I will attempt to broaden the questions, to give both witnesses the opportunity to comment.

People generally talk about political polling that relates to elections. In fact, there is a far broader element of political polling. How do both organisations, in their different circumstances, cope with a feed that says, “80% of nurses believe the following”, or, “80% of the population oppose hunting”, or whatever it happens to be? Many of those polls are given substantial prominence, but they may not necessarily have been through the same rigorous process as general election polling.

Jim Waterson: First, we would consider who was producing the data. Special interest groups are prone to publishing only the results they would like to see in the media. The greater thing—and, hopefully, what I can bring to the Committee today—is how social media are changing and how these things are reported. The most emotional polling results are those that will get pick-up. That is the direction of travel. It is the only way it is going to go, as far as I can see. For instance, hunting is a very emotive issue. It is the one that you picked up. A poll that shows that the public do not care that much is very unlikely to get a substantial amount of pick-up online, in a world in which news travels on Facebook and Twitter according to whether people want to share it themselves, whereas a poll showing that the whole country agrees with the most active and angry political campaigners will go viral.

At BuzzFeed, we try to elevate ourselves slightly above some of the lesser websites, which are more tempted to go for the cheap hits.

Lord Hayward: Like the BBC.

Jim Waterson: No. I would certainly not put us above the BBC. However, there are definitely several different standards online. When it comes to reporting polls, we have quite a strict code of conduct that involves finding the original dataset, looking through it, running it past our data team and considering why the person is putting it out there. A lot of sites—especially as political journalism gets blurred with activism—really do not care.

Baroness Ford: People are held to different standards of regulation, depending on whether a newspaper or broadcast media are broadcasting the results. There are very different standards for online media. Would it help if everyone could be held to the same standard of regulation—not just around the reporting of polls, but around political reporting?

Jim Waterson: That moment might have passed. We are into a different world in which a random person—you or any person on the Committee—can tweet a result and get a bigger audience than an established newspaper. For example, there is a non-partisan Twitter account called Britain Elects, which is fantastic. It collates all the polling results, from anyone in the country. If you tweet a result at the moment, the online audience tends to skew very heavily left—very pro-Corbyn. On 21 September, Britain Elects tweeted a result showing a four-point Labour lead. That was retweeted almost 2,000 times, so many, many more

people have seen that. Two days later, the account tweeted a result by Opinium showing a two-point Conservative lead. That got 250 retweets.

You can see that, because, essentially, we have handed over distribution to the general public, they are choosing which polls they want to read and which they want their friends to read. The gatekeeper argument is quite hard. How do you regulate an anonymous, unregulated, non-professional outlet that is reaching hundreds of thousands of people with poll results?

Baroness Ford: That is what we are trying to grapple with, unfortunately.

Jim Waterson: I know.

David Cowling: It is like trying to saddle the wind.

Baroness Ford: You think that that ship has sailed.

Jim Waterson: My personal view is that it would be very hard. The best thing might be to try at least to educate people about why certain results show what they do. There is further evidence that I hope to bring that shows that, essentially, if you are an unscrupulous online outlet, the way to get ahead is to write poll results in an aggressive manner, to get the maximum number of clicks. Given the current online temperament, that will almost always involve saying, “Jeremy Corbyn surges into the lead”, “Corbyn is more popular than ever”, or, “Labour is surging ahead”.

Baroness Ford: Do you think that anything can be done about computational propaganda?

Jim Waterson: Computational propaganda is slightly different. This is more like slightly old-fashioned dodgy reporting—wilfully taking things a bit out of context or choosing a subset of a poll, for example.

One of the most viral poll stories of the entire general election campaign was published on 3 June in the *Independent*. It stated, “Labour ahead of Conservatives in unadjusted poll of voters”. Most members of the Committee understand that the reason you adjust polls is precisely to weight them. The top line said, “A new poll suggests Labour could be on course for a shock win at the general election—but only if all those considered least likely to vote turn out ... on Thursday”.

That was shared 40,000 times on Facebook. You could probably put a substantial multiple on that for the number of people seeing it. To make a complete guess, you might be talking of 500,000 to 1 million people in the UK who saw the headline. If we had written up, “Conservatives still ahead”, it would not have been shared anything like as much as that. Given the state of online publishing, you have an enormous incentive to sensationalise, because that is the way in which you will get your headline shared and people reading your material.

Q66 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** We have heard reference made to cheap hits and variable standards of regulation. Part of the context is the financial crisis in print journalism and the squeeze on terrestrial broadcasters—the squeeze on the licence fee, pressures on advertising, and so forth. There is huge pressure on newsrooms and it is a big challenge to find enough content, particularly to fill the 24-hour news cycle. Is that leading to more opportunism, less discrimination and a greater willingness to use as a story

whatever material may come to mind? Press releases are churned out all over the place by every organisation, but so too are opinion polls of various kinds. Do you think that, under these pressures, the media are using opinion polls less thoughtfully and responsibly than they otherwise might?

David Cowling: I was not aware of any material, significant shift in my period at the BBC. I listened to Jim’s remarks and observed myself what was happening, albeit simply as an ill-informed punter. In the broadcast media generally, I fear that what you are describing is happening, even if I have not seen it. I am not here to bang the drum for the BBC, but the BBC is a big organisation, with controls that smaller organisations do not have. Even in its present state, it can invest in controls, such as the chief political officer and the rest of it, to invigilate. However, across the piece, how can organisations sustain themselves when they are up against the tsunami that Jim identifies?

I hope that they will be able to resist it, but I think that we are sliding down the path that you have identified and that concerns you. The BBC has its licence fee and is under pressure. I know that Jim has commented on the press in the past—how their business model is now contracting and resources are draining from them. How do they hold the line when they see what is being done to them and how successful it is? I cannot give you a specific example, but I fear that what you suggest is a path we are already beginning to slide down. I just hope that we do not accelerate.

Jim Waterson: The fake news debate that we have had recently is a bit of a red herring. What you are seeing is a division of online political journalism between the highest-quality, best-resourced journalism you have ever seen on politics, for an audience that is largely elite—the people who work or live around here and are involved in Westminster culture—and the collapse of the middle ground and spread of enormously popular, very cheap, low-quality material.

I am quite defensive about online journalism. It has always been thus. There has always been terrible reporting of polls in print media. There have always been fake stories offline. The real difference, to my mind, is that, if you can find or justify a headline people want to agree with, you will be rewarded for that. That is generally the rule of thumb.

I have quoted some stats, but the top shared polling stories in the general election were, “Labour doubles poll lead over Conservatives among voters under 25, new poll shows”, “Shock poll finds Corbyn slashing Theresa May’s majority to two seats”, and, “Labour easily beating Tories among under-40s despite being 20 points behind overall”.

You get the idea of what people online wanted to read. You could find a poll story that fitted with that. You see some issues going viral where, for instance, a poll that has been produced by a pressure group is held up as evidence that “the mainstream says this is crazy, but 60% of the country agree with us”. It is a very good way of smashing through the narrative that the public do not want something. You need only one data point to do that.

Baroness Couttie: I was very interested in the fact that the BBC has a regulation whereby you cannot put polling stories number one. Why is that? Is it because the BBC believes that polls will influence people, as

they tend to coalesce around a majority, or is it a recognition that polling is not as accurate as perhaps some of the listeners and viewers may think it is from the results? Do you really believe that if it is second, rather than first, it has that much less impact?

David Cowling: Within the BBC, one of the things that I did relentlessly say to journalists, “It is not the one poll. It is the trend. What is this poll in the context of the trend?”

Baroness Couttie: That is not answered by putting it second, rather than first. The context in which you put the poll, not its position in the order of news, is the thing that would answer that.

David Cowling: It should, if you are going to have a long set—

Baroness Couttie: But it is not answered by not putting it number one. That is the point I am making.

David Cowling: Forgive me; I think that I understand. It is rather that the BBC takes the view that polling is an indication or a suggestion. All the terminology is there. Polls do not tell—they suggest. A lead item should be of the most significance to the country.

Baroness Couttie: If the viewers see the item as number two, I do not think—I might be wrong—that they see it any differently than if it had been number one. Unless you actually say in the broadcast that this is subject to inaccuracy and so on, people do not grasp that. That has been one of the difficulties with polls. It seems like a bit of a fig leaf to say, “We are putting it number two. Therefore, all these issues are solved”.

David Cowling: I think that we are beset with figures and numbers; I am sure that the Committee has been for some time. The mistake I am making is to accept that, if it is not number one, it has to be number two.

Baroness Couttie: What I am asking is, does it matter where in the order of the news it comes—even if it is number five? Will people not still believe what they believe from the report? The wording will be the same. If people are paying the same attention to item five as they paid to item one—if their attention span has not gone by then and they are still listening—they will take the same from that item. Its positioning in the news schedule is not the point—it is the context in which the poll is placed.

David Cowling: Forgive me; I am going to disappoint you. I think it is both. People who go to the news look for the bongs. They look at the top story. They rely on news people to tell them what is really newsworthy. If it is slap-bang at the head of the news, as opposed to item five, there is a difference.

Baroness Couttie: Do people scan through or listen for the things that pick up their interest?

David Cowling: They certainly do that online. Forgive me; I cannot speak for everybody. We are all individuals, and all of us have our own tastes and appetites for news, along with everything else. My only point—I am sorry for boring you to death—is that I think that for most people there is a distinction between being at the head of the news and being

lower down the news agenda. I may be wrong—God forbid—but that is what I think.

Baroness Couttie: Mostly, on the BBC—and the other broadcasters—if it is not number one, it is number two, particularly during a general election. I would have thought that had just about the same impact as being number one.

David Cowling: I shall go back and analyse it.

The Chairman: One tends to think that a newspaper's lead story is more important than stories down the page. I instinctively understand what David is saying, as an empirical fact, but you cannot prove it.

Baroness Couttie: Yes, but it is about what you take away. During a general election, people tend to be interested in stories about polling. If the story you are interested in is not the big headline, but the story next to it in a newspaper or the number two item in a broadcast, what you take away from that story is driven by its content. I certainly do not think about the importance. I do not understand a story differently just because it is not considered to be the primary story.

The Chairman: We have established the issue. There is not complete agreement on it.

Q67 **Baroness Fall:** I think you said that 95% of the polls were non-commissioned—

David Cowling: I plucked a figure out of the air, but I do not think that it is unreasonable.

Baroness Fall: Presumably, those polls are picked up by papers. In a way, we have a bit of a virtuous circle—although I am not sure that “virtuous” is the word I am looking for. That is especially true in election campaigns, when we have lots of commissioned polls. We see more and more being commissioned, probably of the less expensive variety. That is not only generating lots of polls of different quality but guiding the climate of the election campaign.

Will you talk a bit more about that? Even if you do not lead or go second on the news with a poll, especially in a campaign, the polls seem to affect the climate of the campaign. For example, in 2015 the polls were quite tight. Colleagues here might have a different view, but there was a feeling that, although momentum slipped between the two, towards the end everyone was more focused on Labour—or Labour and whom it might form a coalition with when coming into government, if that were to happen. When you are making decisions about the news and what you cover, how much do you think that the climate of the polls affects the editorial?

David Cowling: Totally. One would have had to be asleep in the 2015 election not to understand that the entire campaign was fashioned by over 90 polls published in those six weeks, nearly all of which were shaped towards there being a hung Parliament. If, God forbid, you had been in a coma and had emerged from it in the final days of the 2015 campaign, you would have thought to yourself, “I am in the middle of a Holyrood election”. There were so many references to the SNP—to what Labour

would do with the SNP, to whether Ed Miliband would betray the country with the SNP, and to Alex Salmond boasting about what he was going to do. It was absolute garbage—utter, total garbage—but six weeks of the campaign were shaped by that.

In 2017, would the Conservatives have had such a hubristic campaign if they had thought that the outcome was anywhere near what it was going to be? They thought that they could float on a thin stream of slogans, rather than get out there to re-energise people and tell them why they should vote Conservative. They relied on that because the polls told them that it was a 150-seat or a 100-seat majority. Regardless of other things that we are considering, 2015 and 2017 show us in spades how the polls totally and utterly fashion it, because we do not have an alternative. If we do not have the polls, it is down to what Jim and I might say to each other down the pub, arguably, or what somebody says on Facebook to somebody else. Where do you get the sense of that? What does it say about what the country is saying?

Baroness Jay of Paddington: The point about that, surely, is what you have said, Jim—that you look at social media. Although you cited as a sort of negative fact the *Independent* poll that deliberately said in the headline that it was not weighted, it actually reflected what happened. I cannot remember exactly what words you used, but it said, as if in parentheses, “This, of course, depends on whether or not people who usually do not vote do vote”. The whole point was that they did, in much greater numbers than had been expected by the weighted polling earlier. In a sense, it is more accurate, rather than less.

Jim Waterson: I think that that poll suggested that Labour would win if that happened.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I did not realise that it went that far.

Jim Waterson: Yes. It went a bit further than saying just that. If we had not had polling during the 2017 campaign, we would have had no indication of the very real Corbyn surge—which definitely happened, as we saw when the results came in. If we had cut off all polling at the start of the campaign, the entire thing would have been fought on the idea that this was the most doomed charge since anyone rode with the Light Brigade.

When we report on polls, we try to contextualise them and do them in the form of reporting. It was a very real thing that people were sharing stories about how Labour was doing better than expected, but that was probably influencing more people to come out and say that they were part of a big movement, that momentum—with a small “M”—was building behind them and that there was a real sense that they were building up as the campaign went along.

Online reporting will always go back to the most emotive issue. At the moment, the Conservatives do not have any substantial online social media activist base to propagate these things and to get them spread across the internet.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I understand the distinction between emotive reporting and the feeling you get from sampling social media. The

question that interests me is sampling the social media, in the context of showing up some of the inaccuracies of the more conventional polls.

David Cowling: I am not seeking a fight with Jim—

Jim Waterson: Please do.

David Cowling: I will see you outside for three rounds. If you look at the conventional polls at the beginning of the campaign and compare them with those in the latter part of the campaign, you see a very significant shift to Labour among young voters. What the polls did not show—

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Was that they would vote.

David Cowling: Jim is absolutely right. Maybe social media were a better indicator of that. However, to be fair to the traditional polls, they did show that shift. They were not sitting there totally bemused.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I understand that, but the crucial difference was the one that Jim highlighted—that they were not expected to vote.

David Cowling: No.

Jim Waterson: This is a very different issue, but a lot of dubious, unregulated polls are done with just a Facebook page or something like that. Those can go very viral on their own, and an unscrupulous site can post the results. I once went to the Russian embassy and was handed a printout of a Twitter poll that it had run on its own Twitter page asking, “Is UK criticism of Russian operations in Syria hypocrisy? Yes: 78%”. They handed that out to journalists as evidence that they had done polling of our people, who agreed that we were being hypocrites. If you stick a headline on examples like that and you are an unscrupulous site, you can spread them quite far.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: There was a throwaway line from Jim Waterson that the remedy might be education. What sort of education, and for whom? Why is it feasible?

Jim Waterson: I do not think I said it was feasible; I said it might be a potential solution. One thing I have noticed—it comes back to the idea that political journalism is splitting into two very distinct areas, high end and low end—is that there is far more access to academics and experts on political Twitter. You will be called out within minutes if you push a very dodgy poll. Embarrassing the journalists who write it and have to put their by-line on it is probably the most effective form of regulation when it comes to stopping them printing dodgy polls. If you call them out and say, “The story that you have just published is a completely preposterous interpretation of the data”, naming the website and the journalist, that is often the most effective form of regulation, because they will feel personally shamed in front of their colleagues.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: How, for example, would you alter the view that is taken of content that is retweeted or disseminated? On the whole, that seems to be quite a good metric for its being unreliable but sensational, but not a very good metric for its being reliable.

Jim Waterson: You have struck on the conundrum at the heart of all modern media on the internet. That is the world we are living in—the sensational will always go more viral. Unless Twitter and Facebook choose to redo their entire infrastructure and the entire way in which the internet works when it comes to recommending information and articles to everyone else, that is the challenge you are up against. This is the infrastructure of the internet and how it works at the moment: whatever people recommend to their friends is what people will end up seeing.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: So education will not do it.

Jim Waterson: Education is useful. Telling people not to rely on subsets of polls and calling out the people who write for more established outlets can work. At the moment you have to hope that, ultimately, people are smart enough to see through the more dubious material, because there is not really a solution that works through the infrastructure as it stands.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: I buy hope, but not education.

The Chairman: Education is the answer to everything. It is always all right.

Q68 **Lord Rennard:** If I have got this right, both witnesses agree that polls influence the outcome of elections. I think you are also both saying that there is no appropriate alternative—such as banning polls, as in France. Do you agree that the alternative might be even worse? You would then have complete speculation, without any proper information.

If we have to have polls during elections, influencing the outcome, we are concerned that there should be responsible reporting. I am interested in whether you perceive that organisations that report polls are obliged to draw attention to organisations such as Full Fact, from which we had a very effective presentation last week.

Organisations such as Full Fact challenge some of the dodgy reporting of polls. Anybody online may be accused of giving their own line. People have prejudices against the BBC—which, in my view, they should not have—and say, “Well, that is the BBC”. Do you think that people who report polls have an obligation to draw attention to independent checking of these things by organisations like Full Fact—or even to set up their own semi-independent organisations, as Channel 4 has with FactCheck—and to call out more strongly than they do at the moment people who are dodgy, to say the least, in how they report polls?

Jim Waterson: At BuzzFeed, we would not like to think that we would ever publish something that we were not happy to have go through something like a Full Fact checking process. The problem is not sites like ourselves, who would be willing to put in a link to somewhere or, at least, to allude to contacts elsewhere, but the fact that anyone can start up an activist/journalism site, get going on Facebook and build up a massive audience. Unless we start cracking down on freedom of the press and the freedom to write what you want, within the bounds of legality on the internet, there is not much that we can do about that.

That said, there are also private polls by the parties themselves, which would inevitably leak in. I have had briefings from the Liberal Democrats

in which they have insisted that they are secretly well ahead in certain constituencies. That has not always turned out to be as accurate as they have made it out to be when the by-election result has come in.

The Chairman: BuzzFeed was involved in a considerable controversy of this kind when reporting some academic research about attitudes to Europe. In the newspaper, it came out as, “28% of remain voters are in favour of sending EU people back home”. I looked to see what correction you put out. The only one I could find was to correct a mistake on the sample size, which had been made by the media outlets picking it up. Will you give us your reflections on this, which cannot have been one of the happiest experiences of your recent life?

Jim Waterson: No, it was not a fantastic moment. The one thing we would say is that we had a correction out very quickly on the sample size, which was due to a confusion with the academic involved and in the discussion with the journalist and the academic. We pride ourselves on the fact that, when we make a mistake, we are very quick to hold up our hands and say so. We are much faster than certain print outlets at getting the correction online and updating the information involved.

The Chairman: As far as I can see, you corrected only on sample size. The survey was carried out in April but was reported as being in August. There were more problems with this than was clear from your correction. Why did you not go further?

Jim Waterson: I will have to look at the exact wording of the correction on that. It is fair to say that it was not the best moment when we have had something published.

The Chairman: I do not want to put you in an embarrassing position, but I would like to ask you for a note setting out your version of what happened. It may be an example that we will use in our report.

Jim Waterson: I am sure we can provide that.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: I would like to follow the leading question from Chris with another leading question. David gave a very clear, forceful description of how polling influenced—if not decided—the outcome of the general elections in 2015 and 2017. As I understand it, you have not yet said whether both of you totally oppose any kind of regulation.

David Cowling: I know that you have thought long on this. I am sure that the Chairman and other members have done so, too. I do not see how it would work. By regulation, do you mean closing off polling in the last week, for example, or at any single point?

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Or setting up a body like Ofcom. We have regulation. My friend Baroness Ford is chairman of Scottish Television. She and all the people who work for her have to be absolutely clear. When Alex Salmond wanted to put on his own TV programme, they said, “Hey, wait a minute. Ofcom might have something to say about that”. They are subject to Ofcom. If the polling organisations are becoming more and more influential, why should they not be subject to a body that says, “These are the mechanisms that you should use. These are the arrangements for publishing, and so on”—in other words, a body that sets

the parameters within which the polls operate? Why should that not happen?

David Cowling: Strangely, for somebody who is as authoritarian as I am—I make Joe Stalin sometimes look rather cuddly—and whose instinct is towards regulation on a whole range of things, I find it very difficult to see how this would operate. The BBC has its own regulation. You have Ofcom and the other organisations we have talked about. However, what is it that you are regulating?

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: The wording of the polls. For instance, there should not be leading questions, like the one that Chris asked you—or the one that I asked you. You could say that polling organisations should always publish the sample size and the margin of error, and that any poll must be published. The body could, if necessary, decide to ban polls for the last week, as the French have done, or for the last three days. It would be a body consisting of representatives of the polling organisations, the media and the political parties.

David Cowling: To a degree, as you know, with the British Polling Council—and even preceding it—there were rules within the market research organisations and industry that you should quote the sample size and the fieldwork dates, as a minimum. That was statutory for the pollsters. Part of the problem was getting the newspapers and broadcasters to implement it. I do not think that there was a lack of will.

Secondly, as you know, you must now have all the findings up on your website within two days. All the tables, with the wording and the demographics, have to be there within two days. Those are, if you like, parts of the transparency. Not everybody signs up to them. The twilight world that Jim identified—

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Of BuzzFeed.

David Cowling: No—the twilight world that is developing, made up of individuals like Spotty from Droitwich. Anybody who knows him will tell you that his views are not worth a warm bucket of spit. However, when you give him access to a modem and a PC, he defines British political discourse. That is where the problem lies. How do you regulate that?

Part of the problem with regulation is that things are fast-moving. Can you have a body that is told that the *Daily Mail* wishes to commission a poll and to have it in two days? Do you have somebody who can look at this and turn it around? I see practical problems, but I am not sure that I see any great benefit. That may be poverty of imagination on my part, but I do not see any great benefit from the rules that already exist. I think that we should put great pressure on the media, as well as the polling companies, to honour those.

The Chairman: Sixteen of the 28 EU countries stop polling in the last few days before elections. Presumably, if that was not working, they would do something about it. That is what they do. Are we just being terribly insular and saying, “Oh God, it is impossible to do this”? Other people are managing it perfectly satisfactorily, as far as we can tell.

David Cowling: The point I would make—which will doubtless get me a thunderbolt—is that you can stop it, but I do not think that that has any impact whatsoever on the outcome. In that case, why stop it?

The Chairman: Would it not have had an impact on the outcome if the last few days before the 2015 general election had not been entirely absorbed by what was going to happen in the expected hung Parliament? That would have changed the outcome drastically.

David Cowling: I am sorry; I am not trying to play word games. The 2015 election might not be the best example. In 2015, there were 92 polls throughout the campaign, virtually all of which—from the start to the end—said there would be a hung Parliament. I am not trying to play word games with you. We could look at a general election in the past where it appears that there was a late swing. One could argue about whether polling brought that about. Was it campaigning? I do not think that there is anything horrendously and wickedly wrong with stopping polling in the last week or so. As you rightly say, plenty of countries do that. I am just a sceptic, personally, as to whether it would have the slightest impact—that somehow it would change the basis of politics, to the extent that people would act differently from how they would have acted if the polls had been there. That is a personal view. I might be wrong.

- Q69 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** You said, David, you were worried about Spotty from Droitwich. That is where the problem lies. Obviously, he can wreak a great deal of mischief. On the other hand, is there not an equal and opposite problem of herd behaviour among the media—of copycat reporting and conventional wisdom that turns out to be wrong? You described that in the context of the 2015 and 2017 elections. Should that not lead to the conclusion that the more players, the better?

The really important thing is to educate and otherwise help the audience to be more sceptical, to enter the caveats that they ought to enter and to be wary of the traps that reporting of polls can lay for them. Do you have any thoughts—particularly from your background in the media, David, and from your active life in social media, Jim—about how we can help the innocent to be better prepared to cope with this barrage?

Jim Waterson: Imagine you are a 28 year-old who is interested in politics, is smart, is reading about things and cares about the same issues that are discussed on broadcast media and in newspapers, but who has never bought a paper. This is someone who does not understand the idea of picking up a crisp copy of the *Daily Telegraph* on their way into work. For as long as they can remember, they have got all their news from Facebook or, perhaps, from Twitter. It seeps into their consciousness.

We are in an age when the average BBC1 viewer is in their mid-60s. Where people get their news from has changed dramatically for an entire generation. In that world, BuzzFeed and other established media players are the mainstream—the ones who do the proper reporting and can caveat it. However, people do not see any major difference between that and the completely context-free tweets from a mythical guy on his own with his modem who is saying, “I have some inside information that shows that Labour is surging ahead”, or, “I have some inside information that shows that the Conservatives are going ahead”.

It is very hard even to pin down what you are attempting to regulate or to educate people about. It can be fly by night. It can be incredibly popular for a month, during an election, and then cease to exist as a unit ever again.

The challenge in education—to go back to the earlier question—and regulation is, what are you trying to regulate on the internet? Quite often it will be one individual who has never claimed to have any experience. They have just worked out how to phrase something in a good way and have sent out one tweet that, suddenly, all of us and hundreds of thousands of other people are seeing. It is a real conundrum to work out what you are even trying to pin the tail on, essentially.

David Cowling: I agree that there should be efforts to educate, but a profound gloom is descending upon me, which I do not invite you to share. What Jim is saying, and has said previously, suggests that we could aim that education and hit some good people, but there are people whom we really need to hit, to get them to understand the stupidity, the crassness, the duplicity, the vulgarity—

Baroness Jay of Paddington: The mendacity.

David Cowling: Yes—the mendacity of what they are saying. As Jim said, where do you put the tail on the person who just wants to click, see it and move on?

Jim Waterson: We have been talking to people who are talking about same-day polling, which is going to come in very quickly—within the next year or so. You will start to see instant turnaround polls, based on representative samples from social media users and on push notification. You can expect that, when a speech is given, within two hours you will have 1,000 people who say that they have seen the speech giving their verdict on it, on a vaguely statistically acceptable level.

David Cowling: Vaguely statistically acceptable.

Jim Waterson: I am not saying that this is a service that we are using. I am saying that this is what the direction of travel will be.

The Chairman: We are hearing such cheering news.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I share the gloom, largely on a technical basis. We have global platforms. It is all very well talking about the potential for regulating a terrestrial broadcaster, but the notion of regulating Google or Facebook seems to be beyond our capacity, at least, in a report by the House of Lords.

On the other hand, following Onora's point about education, it seems to me that in the Communications Act 2003 a responsibility was put on Ofcom to ensure a degree of digital literacy. That has never been spelt out, but I was interested to see a report over the weekend—funnily enough, in the *New York Times*, not the British newspapers—about an Italian government initiative. They have been much more interventionist and instructive about education in digital literacy in schools and have acquired support, co-operation and, presumably, funding from Facebook. Of course, as Jim has just said, you will be very lucky even to touch some

of the tips of the icebergs around that, but is it worth at least looking at that approach?

David Cowling: I think so. My wife, who is a teacher, will doubtless beat me to death when I go home, because she will say that the curriculum is already a straitjacket. Forgive me; that is not an answer. You are talking about the sort of initiative where you get to young people as they are starting that journey towards damnation, to pose some of these things to them and to get them to think that this is not just a simple issue and that there are serious matters relating to these websites. It is about discernment and understanding. All those things are good—not only in themselves, but for you as a human being. They are the sorts of skills that one is trying to teach—to be able to choose, to select, to understand, to measure and to weigh. Before the internet, were we not taught that when we went to university or were trying to get there? You study things, you discern, you weigh, and the rest of it. Those things are intrinsically good. If we apply them and point them towards the internet, we may do some good. I am all for it. The question is whether it works.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Quite. We have to look for small glimpses of light in the darkness.

Jim Waterson: To give a glimpse of light, if you are interested in politics—and more young people are than have been for a generation, perhaps—and are learning about it online, the amount of high-quality information available is enormous, if you know where to look. If you are a young researcher here who follows the same political Twitter accounts that most people follow, you will pick up enough. You will probably have a better understanding of the failings of polls than a previous generation had, because political scientists have been very good at outreach on Twitter—often off their own bat, rather than through institutions. They have called people out and shown the flaws of choosing little subsets.

One bit of hope is that, if you really care, the information is out there and you can educate yourself very quickly. The issue is getting it to the people who have a passing interest in politics and just want to see something in their Facebook feed.

Q70 **Baroness Fall:** I want to pick up your point about education and the different generations. Does our generation, too, need to be educated? For example, in the 2010 election we had the first set of debates. You may remember that Nick Clegg was the clear winner of the first debate. There was a worm that reported support for him live during the debate. Afterwards, in the polls overnight, it suddenly looked like Nick Clegg was going to be the next Prime Minister. That went on bouncing through the debates during the campaign, but at the end of the campaign the polls looked very similar to how they had looked at the beginning.

Is part of the problem that we are measuring different things? If you have a real-time measurement on Facebook, people might not be changing how they are going to vote that day—they might just be thinking, “Yes, good speech”. Is there a context we all need to learn from here?

Jim Waterson: I am sure that all of us in this room are political obsessives, to a certain degree. We all know about things like the “shy Tory” factor and the idea that people will revert to the safe choice in the comfort of the polling booth. Those are just the facts that we pick up. Then again, the polls during the most recent general election showed the Corbyn surge. We read article after article suggesting that, when it came down to it, it would not actually happen—and then it did.

The problem is that we are trying to measure a very volatile electorate, at a time when people’s media consumption is changing so fast. That is true even if you compare the 2015 and 2017 elections, and how people acted. Media consumption changed a great deal in the intervening two years, certainly for younger voters. You could realistically say that in 2015 the pollsters were wrong to correct in the way in which they did. When they overcorrected, perhaps, in 2017, that was wrong again, because that time the young people turned out.

The problem is not only that we are trying to work out whether the polls are accurate, which adjustments we should make and which rules, essentially, we have to teach people, but that we are doing so in an age when the rules are changing at a very fast pace.

If we are trying to do education, the question is what you teach someone. If you were a sixth-former in 2015, you may have been taught that the way to interpret a poll is to assume that it will always revert to the mean. By 2017, that may not have been the case. I am very happy to leave you to try to work your way through that conundrum.

David Cowling: In the 1900 general election in Great Britain, 99% of all votes cast were Conservative, Labour or Liberal. In the 2005 general election—105 years later—95% of the votes cast in Britain were Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat. In 2015, 77% of the votes cast were Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat—an absolutely unprecedented change in attitudes towards the established political parties. It was reversed in 2017, but it is nonsense to think that we have reverted to the great, solid days of re-establishing the glaciers.

It is incredibly volatile. Look at the SNP. It had nearly 50% of the vote in 2015, but it was kicked all over the shop in 2017. Everybody concentrated on the Conservatives, but the party that was most severely mauled, without question, was the SNP. All of that happened within the space of two years. My point is not to excuse the opinion polls, but to reinforce the point that we have had an explosion not only in how people receive the media—which Jim has outlined to us—but an explosion in where people are going. The loyalties are disappearing. The certainties are going. The post-war deal whereby Governments, Conservative or Labour, delivered increasing growth—not to everybody, but to most people—has broken down for many people. We are asking the pollsters to give us 100% accurate descriptions of that fractured state of politics. This does not excuse them, but it is fair to say that life is much more complex now.

The Chairman: That is a very interesting note on which to finish. I thank you on behalf of the Committee for being both concise and—without wanting to give you sleepless nights—very quotable.

Buzzfeed – Supplementary written evidence (PPD0023)

On the morning of 11 August 2017, BuzzFeed News published an article titled "This Huge New Study Reveals What The British Public Really Want From Brexit" (https://www.buzzfeed.com/jamesball/remain-and-leave-voters-are-surprisingly-united-on-backing?utm_term=.dxkKBwAa2R#.ku5x5vQY9V), based on research conducted by academics at the London School of Economics and the University of Oxford, which had been exclusively shared ahead of formal publication.

A few hours after publication, one of the academics – Dr Sara Hobolt, of the LSE – contacted James Ball, the reporter who wrote the article, to let him know of a correction.

The original article had incorrectly stated that the researchers had based their findings on surveying 20,000 people. In fact, the researchers had based their research on 20,000 (to be precise, 19,758) "responses" – six data points each for 3,293 people. The error thus came about through a miscommunication on the meaning of "responses" between the academic and reporter.

By 4:31pm, BuzzFeed News had updated the story to amend the information, and appended a correction to the article, which read: 'The researchers collected six data points each from 3,293 people, resulting in a dataset of 19,758 choices. An earlier version of this story misstated that the researchers surveyed 20,000 people.' The key change to the copy was amending a reference in the second paragraph of "surveying almost 20,000 people" to "surveying more than 3,000 people".

That correction to the story, and an explanation of the error, was then immediately tweeted by the reporter (<https://twitter.com/jamesrbuk/status/896031897666691072>) and relayed through BuzzFeed UK's Twitter account, and BuzzFeed UK Politics' Twitter account.

This was a piece of academic analysis rather than a standard piece of polling. The fieldwork took place in April 2017 and, by academic standards, this was put out quickly: it's not uncommon for these to appear a year or more after the fieldwork. BuzzFeed referred to the study as "new" because it was the first time it was presented to the public.

This error, while regrettable, did not undermine the substance of the story. The research methodology and findings were robust, and came from a sample three times larger than standard opinion polls.

The researchers made no complaint that BuzzFeed News had misrepresented the findings of the academic research, the detailed data and methodology of which was subsequently published directly by the LSE. Indeed, the two of the authors contacted BuzzFeed News to thank and congratulate us on the publication of the article, even after the error was spotted and corrected.

Buzzfeed – Supplementary written evidence (PPD0023)

Finally, it should be noted this was not a piece of opinion polling at the time of an election. Instead, it was an attempt by academics to build a picture through “revealed preferences” on what type of Brexit the British public would prefer, when given specific instead of abstract choices. As such, the research is not directly comparable to traditional opinion polls.

25 October 2017

Cabinet Office and Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport – Oral evidence (QQ 169–179)

Evidence Session No. 23

Heard in Public

Questions 169 - 179

Tuesday 12 December 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Jay of Paddington.

Witnesses

I: Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster; Matt Hancock MP, the Minister for Digital; Peter Lee, Director of the Constitution Group.

Examination of witnesses

Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP, Matt Hancock MP and Peter Lee.

Q169 **The Chairman:** Can we make a start? We have made this room as cold as possible to ensure that the session does not last more than an hour. I know you have to appear before the AI Committee later on this afternoon.

I welcome you here. It took us a while to get the names out of the Cabinet Office, but we are particularly pleased that you have come in combination. Sir Patrick, you will be able to speak for the party side of things as well as the Government. Mr Hancock, as you know, we have digital media in our remit, so we may ask some questions about that.

I will explain a curiosity before it happens. We will try not to ask you direct questions such as, "Are you in favour of banning opinion polls?", or, "Are you in favour of such and such regulation?" The reason is that we feel it is more appropriate that the Committee comes to its decisions on those matters, and it will then be for government to respond, rather than us messing up our own route, as it were, before we have even started down it. That is why we do not ask such questions.

This is on the record and on TV. There will be a transcript. If you misspeak in any regard, it can be put right. I think you have a list of the Members' interests.

Perhaps we could make a start. Do you think that people are becoming more sceptical about opinion polls, and do you think they are right to be?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: There has always been scepticism about opinion polls. Certainly, I have always had scepticism about opinion polls. I have taken that view ever since I was told by the BBC that I had lost my by-

election, when the returning officer had told me I had won it. The BBC then tried to say that the opinion poll was right, but that the BBC had called it wrong, because of the margin of error. From that point of view, I have always looked at opinion polls with a degree of scepticism. They are guides and no more.

The Chairman: In the last two general elections, and arguably in the referendum, they have been less than good guides, have they not? In fact, they got all three disastrously wrong. Do you not think this means that we should be having another look, even if we come to the conclusion that nothing can be done about it?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: The pollsters will always argue that the opinion poll was accurate at the time they took it, and that things moved on since the opinion poll was done. There were a couple of times when some of the polls were accurate, but it was not believed that they were right. As I say, they are things that you can only use as guides, and nothing else.

The Chairman: You would not want to go on holiday in Europe with a guide that happened to be 20 years out of date. My Committee is looking at whether that has happened with opinion polls, and at whether the technology no longer provides what it used to purport to provide.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: That is an expression of view, and it is one that you are able to take. As I say, I look at them as guides. I like them when they are in my favour. I tend to put more reliance on them when they are in my favour. I see them as a bit more disruptive, and I dispute them, when they are not in my favour. As I think has been shown, even going back to the 1992 general election, they are not always accurate, and they can get it wrong. That is just how one has to view them.

Q170 **The Chairman:** Does your party do a lot of private polling in a non-election period such as at present?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: We do some private polling. I do not know what you would describe as a lot. I would have to get accurate figures, but there is obviously some private polling, as well as some individual constituency polling.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Chancellor—to give you your proper title.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: My Lord.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Touché. You presumably did some private opinion polling in the early part of 2017.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: You mean in the backdrop of the Prime Minister's decision to call the election.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Even before that, before she had decided to do so.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Something better than polling was done in early 2017: by-elections took place, which were real elections in real places. We did not expect the Copeland by-election to come when it did. Initially, the Member of Parliament for Copeland said that he was not resigning until the end of January. Then, once Stoke-on-Trent—what is his name?

The Chairman: Tristram Hunt.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Once Tristram Hunt announced his resignation, it changed the timetable a bit, but I cannot answer for the Labour Party; it called the by-election.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You were chairman at the time. Presumably you were getting private polls, advising the Prime Minister. They must have been showing a reasonable position for the Conservative Party at that time.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: The decision about calling the election was kept on a fairly tight basis, and not many people were involved in that decision-making process. The Prime Minister saw what had happened in the by-elections, and a number of people were urging her to call an early general election.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Presumably that has made you even more sceptical of polls.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I started my answers by saying that I was fairly sceptical of polling.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You did.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Sometimes it is right; sometimes it is wrong. I do not see that there is very much you can do to alter that.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: We have had evidence that one of the reasons why the outcome was not as the polls predicted was the number of young people who registered and then voted Labour. Therefore, Labour—we—did better than expected. Is that a credible scenario from your point of view?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: It is partly a credible scenario. I heard somebody from the Electoral Commission say that many of those who polled quite late re-registered; they were already registered in certain areas. I think that accounted for some 40%. I see Lord Hayward is nodding in agreement; he will probably get a better figure. My understanding was that many people were re-registering at their university but were still on the electoral register at their home.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You have not sacked your private pollsters and brought in new ones since the election, have you?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I could not possibly comment on such questions. I know of no sackings that have taken place.

Q171 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** Following the point about the young turning out in the 2015 election, one of the things that has fascinated me in the course of our conversations with many experts in the polling field during this inquiry is the emphasis they now put on the variation in turnout. We had a very interesting session last week with Professor John Curtice, who, as you know, has a reputation for being accurate on the basis of exit polls. He said that turnout was becoming the most difficult issue for pollsters in the current situation, together of course with the influence of social media. Both of those seemed to us, in the course of the discussions that we have had with people, to be variables with very little intervention possible, politically, technically or in any other way. I do not know what your observation is, Chancellor, or Mr Hancock, on that matter, but it is an

interesting fact that polling is seen to be getting so much more difficult, when one might have thought that the technical capacity would have made it easier.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I have not had time to see what Professor Curtice said to you. The interesting thing is that, overall, the turnout was not up by very much. It was slightly up.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: It was differential turnout.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Yes. Overall, the turnout was slightly up, but it was certainly differential.

When I first saw the exit polls on polling night, I must admit that I wondered whether sufficient weight had been given to postal voting, which increased substantially in the election. I am told that those who had conducted the exit poll said that it did not really have a bearing impact, in that the polling they had done on exit was reflected in the postal voting.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: There was also the question about the referendum. One of the memorable moments that I recall from watching the results programme was when Mr Duncan Smith, who was obviously keen for there to be a particular answer in the referendum, said that he was encouraged by the fact that a large number of votes were being recorded on particular rather depressed council estates. That again reflects the problem for the pollsters that we heard about: you cannot build into your model people who have not voted before. Therefore, turnout of a particular group was significant.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: That is certainly true. There is a difference between a referendum, where every vote is of equal weight, and a parliamentary by-election, where constituencies are much smaller than the national count. That is something else. In a way, although I can see why you might want to look at that, a referendum is a separate, different beast from a general election as regards polling and the results of polling.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I do not want to delay the Committee, but I wonder if Mr Hancock could comment on the particular additional problem of the social media factor as a hazard for polling, as opposed to something that, on the face of it, you might think would be helpful.

Matt Hancock: Social media have of course changed the way that communication happens, in politics as in many other walks of life. They change the way that political engagement occurs. They were around for all three recent national political events. It is difficult to see a direct link from the existence of social media through to the accuracy or otherwise of political polling over the 2015 and 2017 general elections and the referendum.

You have to be slightly careful about a line of questioning where the implication is that the polls were always wrong in the run-up to the election this year. After all, we had by-elections before the election was called. Then, half way through the general election campaign, we had a massive, real polling event, with one of the strongest sets of local council results for the Conservatives in recent years. Polls move, as well as being wrong or right.

Q172 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** Unless I misheard our Chairman or I am misquoting him, I think he referred in his opening remarks to the disasters of opinion polling at the last election, and perhaps on previous occasions. From the Government's point of view, would you endorse that characterisation? Do you think there really is a problem? The pollsters do their best, it seems to me, to get their results right. They refine their methodologies, and they try to learn lessons. There does not appear to be powerful evidence that opinion polls affect voting behaviour. They may, however, affect what political parties choose to do.

From the Government's point of view, is there a problem? Is there a scandal? Is there a case for government intervention, for stronger regulation? Have you considered that? If so, have you rejected it, or do you expect to do something about opinion polling?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I am not sure that there is a scandal. It depends on your definition of scandal. The pollsters got it wrong. Of course they try to get it right. I am sure you have spoken to the polling companies, and I think they would say that political polling is a very small part of their overall business. If they can get it right, it enhances their reputation as regards other business that is available to them. It is as much in their interest to be as accurate as they possibly can, but things happen during election campaigns, and people change their minds. Pollsters may not always get that.

Baroness Jay was talking earlier about people in different areas voting, whereas, in the past, they may not have done so. During the general election campaign, I was campaigning in places such as Mansfield, which is not somewhere that Conservative Party chairmen would normally be seen canvassing, but it was very enjoyable.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Digital media are in our terms of reference. I am not sure that there is any very close link between political polling and digital media, but if there is not a scandal and there is not a significant problem with political polling, there may be with digital media. There is quite widespread apprehension among our fellow citizens that social media, unregulated as they are, have a very powerful impact on the processes of our democracy, and that may not necessarily be for good. It is an aspect of free speech, and people ought to be free to find new ways to express themselves and influence the debate.

On the other hand, if it amounts to manipulation of emotions, and thence of opinions, in ways that people do not understand because they do not see what is going on, and if it is being done to them by very powerful corporate entities based outside this country, are we facing a new systemic crisis? Is there a case for government intervention, for regulation of the operation of digital media as they impact on our democracy? If so, how on earth is it to be done?

Matt Hancock: That is a very important and a very big question. The potential for manipulation in this space comes not only from big corporates but from other actors. There has been a significant change over a relatively short period in the way that media are digested, in the UK and across the world. Whereas, historically, we had a highly regulated broadcast sector and a self-regulated press, we now have a highly

regulated broadcast sector and, essentially, a self-regulated press, with a small part under Impress with the royal charter, but mostly self-regulated through IPSO, and then huge, vibrant and largely unregulated social media.

The analysis of that is difficult, because there is a mix between the three. You have only to follow the BBC news on Twitter to be engaging in two. If you watch a video on the *Telegraph* feed on Facebook, you are looking across all three. The separate forms of regulation in the two that have a regulatory structure have grown up separately.

Where does that leave us? We are concerned about the rise of what is called fake news. It is reassuring that people's trust of broadcast media is much higher, according to the reports. Radio is the most trusted source of news, followed by TV broadcasting, with social media at the bottom of the heap as regards trust. There is a lot of work to do to ensure that we have reasonable, objective information underpinning our democratic discourse. Surely the basis of a free democracy is an agreed objective basis of fact on which to have political disagreements. Politics is a rough business, and there will always be disagreements over the facts, but having that objective reality, which I maintain exists, on which to have the argument is incredibly important, although the fact that I have to say that is something of a disappointment. Thankfully, in the UK, we have a regulated broadcast sector, which provides a very significant proportion of trusted news.

Getting a handle on the unregulated space is very difficult, because we need to approach the solution to the problem in a way that does not undermine the very values by which we are trying to govern the country.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Possibly you could tell us a little more about how you are approaching the problem. The Electoral Commission gave evidence to us this morning and seemed to me to offer almost a counsel of despair. The witnesses made the point, perfectly correctly, that their remit does not run to regulating organisations that are not in this country. They acknowledged that the impact of the digital media providers is very large and important, but there is nothing that they could do.

However, they suggested that all kinds of conversations are going on, and that people are thinking about the problem. Could you tell us a bit more about how, in government, you seek to ensure that, in the future, we will be able to conduct our democracy such that we have elections on a free and fair basis, and they are suitably transparent and contained within some sort of acceptable legal framework?

Matt Hancock: We have a manifesto commitment to ensure that there is sustainable, high-quality journalism. There is action that can be taken, so I would not give a counsel of despair. As for what we can and should do, communicating with the public is the generally agreed legal definition of what matters. Whether or not you are communicating from abroad to the UK, if you are communicating with the UK public, that is what matters.

A number of things can be done. The first is that the big platforms themselves can take action, and in some cases are taking action, to ensure that people have to hand information about the veracity and the source of news and information, as well as the news itself. The moves in

that direction by the big social media companies are welcome, but there is much more to do.

The second thing that we can improve, and are improving, is how we teach young people to engage with this sort of information, and how they should think about their use of data online and the veracity and sources of news media. That is incredibly important, but it is a generational challenge to improve that sort of education.

We have to be careful to split legal disinformation from questions of cybersecurity. Sometimes, people accidentally mix the two. Conceptually, it is simple to deal with illegal cybersecurity challenges that are part of the democratic process. Thankfully, there is no evidence of successful such challenges here in the UK. They are conceptually straightforward, in that they are wrong, and we have an agency, the National Cyber Security Centre, to deal with them. The harder things to deal with conceptually are those that are fake news, especially intentional fake news, which is perfectly legal but undermines political discourse.

Q173 **The Chairman:** I have a specific question about the control of electoral expenditure, which is done by the Electoral Commission, and some of the digital media and social media techniques. Are you satisfied that all expenditure by political parties is being correctly caught, when some of that expenditure may be on developing social media ways of targeting voters?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: In the regulated period, I do not think there is a problem. There is an interesting question as to the build-up of that before the regulated period. It would depend, to a degree, on the kind of information that individuals have managed to acquire over a period of time.

When a snap election is called, there is a bit of a problem with the regulated period, bearing in mind that it starts 12 months before a general election. When you do not necessarily expect a general election to be called, that funding is quite difficult to challenge, particularly if other big events happen during that time, be it the possibility of referendums being called or referendums taking place during that period. Furthermore, as Mr Hancock mentioned a little while ago, there is the fact that, five weeks before the general election, there were local and mayoral elections across the country.

The Chairman: Last month, the Electoral Commission raised a number of concerns about the level of fines levied on people who broke the regulations. Are those matters that the Government are looking at with the Electoral Commission, or are you happy with the situation as it stands?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: We always look at recommendations that come out, but the point is to be clear about what regulations regulating bodies put on political parties. None of the parties sets out to be on the wrong side of the regulations put forward.

The Chairman: If they are not setting out to do so, it sometimes seems as if, on too many occasions, they end up at least under suspicion of having bent the regulations.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Is that an observation?

The Chairman: It was an observation with an interrogation mark at the end.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I am not sure that I can respond to your observation. I will take it on board, but that is as far as I can go.

Q174 **Baroness Couttie:** I want to raise a couple of very different points. First, I want to pick up on something that you said, Matt, about social media and what the platforms are doing. As I understand the evidence we have had so far, which may not be exhaustive, the platforms are mainly focused on transparency, and even that is only transparency at the first level—naming the sponsor of an advert, an editorial or something like that—rather than naming the funding behind it, which may of course come from a totally different source, particularly the malign disinformation that is going on to the internet to influence elections.

The second point you made is that they were also looking at veracity. That is something that, according to the evidence we have received, they are not doing. I would be interested to know what you have heard that we have not.

Matt Hancock: What I mean by that is that many institutions are now putting more effort into what are essentially fact-checking mechanisms or organisations.

Baroness Couttie: When you say institutions, that is not the platforms.

Matt Hancock: Yes. Google is doing that, but so are the BBC, Channel 4 and others. Fact checking can only go so far. It has its value, but it can only go so far in persuading people, not least because, as the old adage goes, a falsehood can get half way around the world before the truth gets its boots on.

Part of a successful political campaign involves making sure that you get your side of the argument out fast. A robust political campaign between two sides, in my experience, which is not as great as Patrick's, always involves trying to make sure that you get your side of the argument out as well. There will always be a robust element, and we should not be looking for perfection, but we can look for a reasonably agreed basis of fact, as well as more clarity about the source of information.

Baroness Couttie: Your answer goes to the heart of some of the problems we face with social media. You are right that there is only so much you can do with fact checking. The fact-checking organisations are relatively small, certainly in this country. They can only do a certain amount. You may have figures that I do not have, but I am not aware of significant funding that platforms such as Google, Twitter and Facebook are putting into actual fact checking.

Matt Hancock: Well—

Baroness Couttie: Sorry. Could I just finish the question? The other point is that the way these platforms work is that, if you show, in your interactions with other people in chatrooms, et cetera, a predisposition towards a certain point of view, the platform sends you more that

reinforces that point of view, so your opportunity to put the counterargument is extremely limited, because it just does not get through unless the person proactively looks for it. Given that the younger generation, who are well into their 30s and even older, nowadays have social media, such as chatrooms, as their main source of information, it presents a real issue to us.

You made a comment earlier about radio being the most trusted source of information, followed by newspapers, et cetera.

Matt Hancock: Yes.

Baroness Couttie: Correct me if I am wrong, but I do not think that is true of the younger generation. I think it is true for the population as a whole, but the younger generation mostly get their information from social media, and they trust the information they get.

Matt Hancock: I refer you to the latest research by Radiocentre, which shows that approximately 90% of people listen to the radio every week in the UK. Do not rely on that as a precise figure—I am doing this from my memory of the brilliant launch event that it had last month—but the evidence about trust is important. The evidence provided by that research demonstrates, first, that a very high proportion of people still listen to broadcast media, especially radio. TV penetration is still very high, too. Secondly, those sources of news are more trusted.

That is the case for good news. I say all that only to balance the challenge that you rightly raise, which is that there is an alternative source of news media. The nature of many of the algorithms for many of the social media companies is that they pass on information that might be of interest, and they work out what is of interest by looking at what people have looked at previously. In fact, some of the platforms are looking at ways to ensure that counterpoised points of view are inserted in people's feeds. They are looking at interesting ways to solve this, but I do not think that enough has been done.

I would also give this caution. The social media companies themselves do not want to be the arbiters of truth. While I am unapologetic in thinking that objective reality exists, the best way to find it is through challenge. I merely raise the question: would you want the big social media platforms themselves to decide what is and is not true, and not allow things that they deem untrue to be put on their platforms, or, in other people's language, published?

Baroness Couttie: I agree; we probably do not want social media platforms to be the arbiter of truth, but there is a role for social media to be more responsible in making sure that a more balanced approach is available to people using their networks. Particularly when external or international forces seek to get involved in our political debate, using fronts—so it is not entirely transparent—they need to do more about identifying that.

Matt Hancock: My question in response would be, "Where is the role for Government?" Both with broadcast media and with the element of the press that is not purely self-regulated through the royal charter, we go through hoops to ensure that, in the UK, a regulatory structure exists that

is not directed by the democratically elected Government of the day. We do that for very important reasons: we want a free press and free broadcasters. The challenge is right, but the questions are, “What is the role for government?”, and, “How do you get there?” As we all saw five years ago, in a very different press environment, when the whole Leveson debate was going on, getting to an answer is extremely difficult.

Baroness Couttie: I agree that it is extremely complicated, but there is a role for government—probably working with other Governments across the world, as this is an international issue—in putting enormous pressure on those platforms to be slightly more responsible about the way they treat their network. That is as a minimum; then we can look at other roles.

I have a completely different area of questioning, which is probably much briefer. One of the issues that I think—

The Chairman: Sorry, George and Alan are trying to get in.

Baroness Couttie: Am I taking over too much? Sorry.

The Chairman: You are not taking over too much, but if I could let George and Alan have a go, you can come back after that, Pippa.

Q175 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** I want to follow up on what Alan said earlier. He may have inadvertently misrepresented what our Chairman thinks about polling. The pollsters certainly seem to strive to be as accurate as possible within the constraints on them.

Incidentally, the BBC does not commission polls during election campaigns; I do not think that Sky does either. They are all commissioned by newspapers with a particular agenda and with a particular deadline. Do you not think that tends to skew the way polls are seen? When the newspapers present them, they sometimes present them in a misleading way.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I am not sure I have an answer for that. You are expressing a view, but it is not necessarily one that I share. I do not think that all the polls are commissioned by newspapers. There is much wider commissioning of polls throughout the election period. Once they go into the public domain, newspapers use them, whether they have been directly commissioned for them or not.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: That can be at the start of an election. You were chairman during the 2015 election.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: No.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You were a Minister in the Cabinet, anyway.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I was Transport Secretary.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: If you go back to that, you will remember that the polls, which subsequently turned out to be wrong, indicated that the Conservatives and Labour were running neck and neck. All the coverage in the newspapers and all the debates on television were about the horse race.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: No, I do not think they were. If one goes back to the 2015 election, one of the great things about being a candidate in a general election, which you may have forgotten in the House of Lords, is that you do not get to see very much of the news. It is the last thing you get to see. From my recollection, it was more about what coalition was going to emerge after the 2015 election, as opposed to a majority election.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Yes, that is correct. You are quite right.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: The truth about the 2017 election is that it was by what margin the Prime Minister was going to win. Was it going to be 150, 120 or 90? That was the way the debate was framed, whether or not it was framed just as a result of the opinion polls.

As Matt was saying a little earlier, five weeks before 8 June we had the local government election results. We took a number of county councils that we had never taken control of, as well as some of the big mayoral elections. It is interesting that, at those mayoral elections, turnout was only around 25% or 26%.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You have helpfully reminded me—

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Oh dear, I did not mean to do that.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Thank you. In 2015, there was the threat of a coalition, with first Salmond and then Sturgeon controlling Ed Miliband. There was a very clever poster, which your advisers obviously advised you about, of Ed Miliband in Salmond's top pocket and then of Sturgeon pulling the strings. That was based on incorrect polls, yet it probably helped to determine the outcome of the election. Do you not think that is an unhelpful way to use polls?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: At the end of the day, it was a message that we were determined to get across, and it was a very effective message. It was about the consequences of a party losing seats. In that election campaign, I travelled around quite a lot of the country as Transport Secretary, and we were trying to say that the way to get a Conservative Government was to vote Conservative. That was particularly true in the south-west, where we did incredibly well. When I went to Colchester I was asked about it by the BBC. The opening question was that the then Liberal Democrat candidate was complaining that many Conservative Cabinet Ministers were going there, and I was asked why that was. It was getting that message across. You do not know the result until you start hearing it.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You did not think it was just the newspapers that were commissioning polls, although from what we have heard I think it is predominantly.

There has been a relatively recent entry into polling by one of my former colleagues, Lord Ashcroft. We invited him to come along, and he politely declined. What do you think his motivation might be for spending all that money on polling?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: He is just very interested in elections and their results. He is free to spend money. It is his money.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You do not think he is trying to help influence the outcome of elections.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: He puts most of those polls on his website, so that anybody can see the information and take information from them. My understanding was that the Labour Party also looked at those particular polls and drew conclusions from them.

The Chairman: Robert, I missed you off my list. We will have Robert, Alan and Pippa. We may then be out of time.

Q176 **Lord Hayward:** I want to ask two questions, Matt. The first is in relation to a comment you made earlier. You said that the best way of solving the problem regarding social media was through education. In general, politicians resort to saying, “We must educate people”, when they cannot think of anything else. The reality, for the vast majority of the population, is that that education process will not work, because people do not participate in it and do not pay attention to it. It might work for people around this table; before we started, we admitted our inadequacies in the subject. Is it not the case that education does not solve the vast majority of problems of comprehension of what is going on in social media?

Matt Hancock: I gave education as one of a number of different pieces of government action. Education has a role to play. In the short term, it is of course much harder than pulling a regulatory lever, but regulatory levers often have significant, unintended consequences.

Lord Hayward: I was not arguing for regulatory levers.

Matt Hancock: No, but, going back to the last exchange, saying that newspapers make something of an opinion poll and that newspapers have a political view is a perfectly reasonable complaint, but if you ask what the government action is it is hard to see it. I believe in a free press, and politics is robust.

Of course education has a role to play. It is a long-term part of the solution, but it is undoubtedly part of the solution.

Lord Hayward: You made reference to the gains in early May. I should clarify that they also applied in Scotland and Wales, as you referred only to the English side.

A different aspect of polling and political pressure is that of social issues, whether they be capital punishment, hunting, dignity in dying or whatever it happens to be. Do you perceive that social campaigns use political polling, and political pressures, in a different way, through the media, the broadcasters, et cetera?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I am not quite sure what you are trying to get at.

Lord Hayward: There is a clear line. We all understand political polls, but quite often we see on the front page of a national newspaper or hear in a broadcast that 80% favour a particular point of view, or 60% favour another point of view. There are a fair number of people who think that some of those statements come from relatively loaded questions, relative to the standard, “Are you going to vote Conservative, Labour, Lib Dem or SNP?”, or whatever, because they are caveated, partly through lack of

understanding, by, “This is what happens in France”, or, “This is what has happened up to now because of the lack of legislation”. I wondered whether, given your ministerial experiences and discussions, you have found yourself feeling slightly differently pressed on social issues, and the use and abuse of opinion polls.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I do not know if this is the right sort of answer, and I do not quite know what the opinion polls were saying, but to take assisted dying—an issue on which there was a totally free vote recently in the House of Commons, and I think in your House as well—overall, there was almost a persuasion that allowing some sort of assisted dying was acceptable, but the House of Commons vote was overwhelmingly against it. Once that vote had taken place, it did not come back. People thought that the issue was finished for that Parliament. Now we are in a separate Parliament.

Members of Parliament take their own view on those kinds of issues, not necessarily reflected in opinion polls, and are prepared to defend their point of view after taking the vote. Is that the sort of thing you are going for?

Lord Hayward: That is fine. Yes.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: That is the most recent issue that I can think of where Members of Parliament had a totally free vote and came out in the way they did. I was surprised. I was against assisted dying, but I was surprised at the overwhelming vote that took place.

Q177 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** I come back to social media. I wonder whether you would take the view that it is in the nature of these media and their commercial models that, far from unifying us in a participatory, shared internet culture as the evangelists of the internet originally suggested might happen, they tend to fragment us into a multitude of niche communities and to divide us, and indeed to foment antagonism. If that is the case, there may be nothing that the Government can or should do about it except to promote better education. But if that effect is compounded by malevolent interventions emanating from the Kremlin, ISIS or wherever it may be, systematically setting out to intensify the divisive tendencies in our society, is there not then a role for government?

Matt Hancock: There is a role for government to worry about this and to support action to ensure that we have high-quality democratic discourse. One of the most significant things we have in the UK to protect us against the problem that you understandably describe is the BBC. The plurality of public service broadcasters across the piece is important. The fact that we have a well-regulated broadcast sector is a very good antidote.

The case for high-quality BBC news and for the licence fee has significantly strengthened over the last decade or so, with the rise of social media. That might surprise people. If we look back to discussions a decade ago, people might have asked whether it was necessary, with the rise of this technology, to have a highly regulated news outlet paid for by what is in effect a tax. The unambiguous answer, I think, is yes.

Some of the surveys demonstrate that roughly 50% of news consumption in the UK is ultimately from BBC sources. That is a very high proportion,

and it provides a bulwark against fake news. It also means that it is incumbent on the BBC to be objective and to reflect the country as a whole, not just the internal tendencies of the BBC, and to make sure that it is muscularly objective in the unalloyed pursuit of the truth.

There is one example where a clear government policy leans against the challenge that you raise. Should we also be leaning actively against direct manipulation? It is too early, as regards evidence gathering, to analyse exactly what the effect has been. There is no evidence that there has been a successful cyber incident affecting UK elections. We know that there have been attempts at cyberattack on institutions that have an involvement in elections, but there are many organisations, and it is impossible to know clearly what the motivation for such attacks is.

We are looking at fake news and disinformation, as is the DCMS Select Committee in the Commons. There are a number of credible third-party studies of it, but it is too early to know how significant it is or the extent to which there has been the sort of interference you fear.

Q178 **Baroness Couttie:** We have touched on the impact of media coverage of polls that are wrong. What impact might they have on the policies of parties? I am thinking of a politically neutral one, the Scottish referendum, where, in the final days, when it looked really close and as if Scottish independence and the SNP might win, a whole raft of new gifts were given. What is your view on how political polls influence the policies of parties in the run-up to elections, and do you think it is a real danger?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: A referendum is different. You have to put referendums on a different scale. I was not actively involved in the decisions—

Baroness Couttie: I was thinking of politically neutral things.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I was not chairman of the party when that was taking place, and it was not really a party matter anyway.

Baroness Couttie: Quite. Exactly.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: It was much more a cross-party decision. The Prime Minister of the day was in touch with the former Prime Minister, deciding what needed to be done as far as that was concerned. There were obviously changes, and things were done as a result of that particular referendum.

In the course of an election campaign, you get other feedback; it is not just from political opinion polls. You get candidate feedback and canvass feedback, which tells you if you have to try to change or moderate a policy or be a bit more specific on what you mean in a policy. Opinion polls alone do not do that. There are many other methods of communication during an election campaign.

Baroness Couttie: It is not something that we should be particularly concerned about, because there are broader sources of information.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I do not think you should be. I cannot think of a case where an opinion poll has made me or others change our mind.

Q179 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** I come back to what you discussed with

several people around the table about the way in which government, if appropriate, can intervene in the organisation and development of social media. We have generally agreed that education is a generational project, which can take a long time. From the specifics of the United Kingdom, the BBC provides a valuable touchstone.

If we are talking about any real direct influence by the UK Government, say, on multinational corporations based in Palo Alto that have a very different business, political and values model, whatever you want to call it, from west-coast America than may be applicable here or even in the rest of western Europe, how can we effectively get involved in that? It is all very well saying, as we were saying earlier, that we could have international pressure put on them and so on, but how effective is that realistically?

Matt Hancock: I would strongly caution against the idea that, just because the global internet platform companies are global, we have no influence. That is not the attitude we take in the UK Government at all. I will give you a couple of examples. The approach that we take as a whole to the internet and internet companies is encompassed in what we call the digital charter. Essentially, that is about changing the attitude towards what happens online from a libertarian view that the more people connect in the world, the better, and that Governments should have no view, which was probably the founding political philosophy of the internet, to a liberal values view whereby you support and promote the freedom that the internet brings while ensuring that that freedom does not trample on the freedom of others. That involves mitigating harms.

That attitudinal shift, which is taking place but needs to go further, covers all the different companies, and it covers all sorts of different areas. It is the underpinning philosophy behind the action we take, for instance, to tackle child pornography online, where the Internet Watch Foundation, based in Cambridge, UK, is essentially the world-leading organisation for ensuring that child abuse images online are taken down right across the world.

In January this year, when we in the UK Government hosted and organised an agreement between music producers and the big platforms to ensure that pirated music was not returned in search returns, that change, which has been very effective, was implemented worldwide by the platforms. They changed their algorithms worldwide, thanks to the work of the UK Government, and of Lucy Neville-Rolfe in particular. We can and we do affect the platforms globally.

Nevertheless, if we want to take domestic action, we are a nation state and we do so; for instance, we passed the Digital Economy Act earlier this year, which brings in age verification for the viewing of adult material for the UK. As it happens, some of the biggest global porn websites will bring in that age verification globally as a result of action that this Parliament took. Do not think for one minute that we are powerless in the face of the big institutions. We are in fact leading the world in ensuring that the internet is ultimately a force for good in the world, rather than a free-for-all.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: We had a good example of that in this House yesterday, when we debated the government amendment to the Data Protection Bill on protecting people under 16. My leading question has led you to give an instructive and helpful answer.

Matt Hancock: Yes, I forgot about the most recent intervention in this debate, which was yesterday, and which I am absolutely thrilled about. That is another example—

Lord Hayward: Of the Lords.

Matt Hancock: It is another example of how our constitution allows us as a nation state, certainly here and potentially globally, to lead the world. After all, many of the big internet companies were started by visionaries who wanted to make the world a better place. They started Google with the goal of democratising the world's information, not to help terrorists blow people up. When we put it like that to those organisations, as long as we do it in a reasonable and practical way, and explain the big, values-based motivation and not just have a go at them on each individual issue—although we do that—those organisations variously, and with different levels of enthusiasm, get it. Some of them are late to the table and need a bigger stick.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: And are perhaps being a bit naive.

Matt Hancock: This is work in progress. They have a lot more to do. We as a Government are articulating this through the digital charter in a way that nobody has engaged with before. It is the work of a generation to ensure that this amazing new technology allows for the flourishing of humanity rather than its undermining. It is no smaller than that.

The Chairman: We have run out of time. It was just a week ago, Matt, that you and I were both at a YouTube presentation where they were trying to show the social good that YouTube does, with a number of bands. I was personally not terribly familiar with their cultural work.

Matt Hancock: It was also striking that the managing director of Google UK, Ronan Harris, opened that event by saying, "We know that YouTube also causes problems, and we're going to fix it". That is an example of their rhetoric having changed significantly in just a year. We look forward to seeing the action that follows the rhetoric.

The Chairman: I was going to say that, and that it is perfectly apparent, if you observe it, that these companies are deeply worried, as well as deeply bullish. If they are given a lead, they can provide much of the resource and the things we need in order to prevent these excesses spilling over and get it all back under some sort of hat where they are doing the right good.

As at all the best dinner parties, the conversation we have been having around the table has concluded on a very amicable note. On behalf of the Committee, I thank you for coming and talking to us frankly and freely, and for giving us much to chew on. Thank you very much indeed.

Cabinet Office – Written evidence (PPD0028)

CHRIS SKIDMORE MP
Minister for the Constitution

Our Ref: MFC/1054

Lord Lipsey
Chair of the Political Polling
And Digital Media Select Committee House of Lords
London SW1A OPW

20th November 2017

Thank you for your letter of 23rd October concerning your committee's inquiry into Political Polling and Digital Media. I apologise if we have appeared in any way unhelpful in responding to your work.

My understanding is that we prepared an information note for the Committee's use at the start of its deliberations so that you could be clear where Cabinet Office responsibilities lie. As we indicated then, polling methods and their impact on accuracy is a technical area, which is primarily a matter of debate for academics rather than Government. We also indicated that media coverage and influence - either digital or traditional - is not an issue for which Cabinet Office Ministers have responsibility.

I note that Lord Bridges of Headley, then a Cabinet Office Minister, did respond to your short debate on Opinion Polling on 18th June 2015 and on the following day to Lord Foulkes of Cumnock's Bill on Regulation of Political Opinion Polling. Our position is the same as it was then. We have no plans for intervention in the private polling industry and no current view, for example, on questions of minimum standards required to operate in the polling industry.

However, we recognise the value of parliamentary select committees such as yours in that you are able to collate evidence from experts on subjects such as this and formulate evidence-based recommendations and conclusions. In this case this will inform the debate on the effects of political polling and digital media on politics. I note you have held several sessions so far and may be travelling overseas to make an international comparison.

Having had the chance to discuss your request with colleagues, I am delighted to say that in order to support your inquiry, Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, will be available to give oral evidence in December. He is individually well placed to provide evidence in both his capacity as Conservative Party Chairman and as a Minister, which will allow him to share a party political perspective in response to your questions as well as separately the Government's own position.

Cabinet Office – Written evidence (PPD0028)

I am, of course, content for your Committee to publish this letter as part of your evidence.

I am copying this letter to the Minister of State for Digital and the Leader of the House of Lords.

CHRIS SKIDMORE MP

20 November 2017

La Commission des Sondages – Written evidence (PPD0027)

1 – How is the Commission des Sondages funded?

The Commission des Sondages [Polling Commission] is financed from State funds (Ministry of Justice).

Its costs are modest. It has only one permanent secretary and three experts who are paid on an ad hoc basis (135 euros per file). The Commission has two offices which are made available to it by the Conseil d'État [Council of State] and it holds its meetings at those premises.

2 – How is the Commission governed and to whom is it accountable?

When it was created in 1977, the Commission comprised nine members appointed by decree, made up of three members, or former members, of each of the highest courts (the *Conseil d'Etat*, *Cour de cassation* [Court of Cassation], and *Cour des comptes* [Court of Auditors]), one of whom was a President of section or chamber. The President of the Commission was always the President of section at the *Conseil d'Etat*. Since the most recent statutory amendment (Law no 2016-508 of 25 April 2016), the Commission has comprised only two members, or former members, of each of the three highest courts and three qualified persons. The President is now elected from within by the members of the Commission.

The Commission is wholly independent and is not required to give an account of its decisions to any authority, and its decisions may be appealed only to the *Conseil d'Etat*. It publishes an annual report detailing its activities.

3 – What are the main functions and duties of the Commission? Do you set rules on what methodological guidelines should be adhered to?

The main function of the Commission is to ensure that polls on the electoral debate which are made public are not tainted by any methodological error or manipulation which may affect the fairness of the election to which they relate. The Commission exercises ex-post systematic supervision of all published electoral polls.

Its only duty is to ensure the reliability and correctness of the results of polls relating to the electoral debate.

The main rules of which the Commission ensures observance are statistical ones. It also requires that polling organisations which organise successive polls use methods which are stable and traceable.

4 – What are your rules and guidelines on transparency of funding and commissioning of polls?

The *Commission des Sondages* is publicly funded, and transparency is ensured in same way as for any government department.

5 – In the UK, the majority of polls are funded by newspapers, is this also the case in France? Are there any other funders of political polls?

In France as well, most polls are funded by newspapers and the digital press. Sometimes, in local elections, municipal for example, a party or candidate might finance a poll and then, depending on how advantageous it is, offer it to the media or put it online in campaign media.

6 – What sanctions does the Commission have and frequently are you required to apply sanctions? How many times have sanctions been enforced?

The Commission's main power is to issue a warning in the press that one particular poll is to be treated with caution. The Commission does this by means of notices (known as '*mises au point*' [clarifications]), published after due hearing of the polling organisation and, where appropriate, of the publishing organ.

Sometimes, a *mise au point* might lead the concerned polling organisation, or the director of the study, to leave the poll sector. It might also lead the media to terminate contracts with targeted polling organisations.

In the event of a criminal offence, the Commission may seize the Public Prosecutor. It uses this power sparingly, inter alia in the event that an organisation or organ breaches the prohibition on publishing fresh polls the day before, or on the day of, an election.

During the 2012 presidential elections, the Commission issued 7 *mises au point*, and none in 2017.

7 – Are you able to outline the most common methodological approaches used by the polling industry in France? Does the Commission apply any restrictions to the methodological approaches taken by polling companies?

In respect of polls relating to major elections (regional, parliamentary, presidential elections or referenda), all the organisations now operate online. They qualify their sample, adjusting it by reference to a past result. In collecting their published data, they use people who say they are reasonably certain that they are going to vote, and who are reasonably sure of their voting intentions. Those two elements may vary according to how near the

election is. The polling organisations are free to choose the methods they wish to use. The Commission merely satisfies itself that those methods are not inherently biased, and that the samples are sufficiently numerous and representative. It also satisfies itself as to the traceability of the methods used.

8 – Is the regulation of polling in France equipped to deal with polls and surveys that are shared across social media sites?

The *Commission des Sondages* only operates by reference to one specific technique, that is to say, polls. Studies measuring candidates' 'political weight' in digital terms, based on the frequency of their appearances on the internet, or the behaviour of social media users, are not within its area of competence.

However, sometimes such 'studies' have been published, together with electoral predictions wrongly classified as polls. (An instance of this is provided, for example, by the publication on the Sputniknews website of a study by 'Brand Analytics'.) That prompted the Commission to point out that such studies do not constitute 'polls' for the purposes of the Law of 19 July 1977 and may on no account be presented as such. The Commission therefore issued a statement alerting public opinion to the fact that such studies are unrepresentative. (<http://www.commission-des-sondages.fr/hist/communiqués/communiqué-enquête-opinions-reseaux-sociaux-31-mars-2017.htm>)

9 – The Committee has heard that the level of regulation of polling in France may restrict creativity and innovation in the industry? What is the Commission's view of this?

Polling organisations, which are private undertakings, wish to avoid the risk of receiving a *mise au point*. They are content in the knowledge that their methods are compatible with the Commission's views. They have become accustomed to asking the Commission what they may or may not do.

Currently, no organisation has any pending request relating to the introduction of a new practice.

It should be noted that during the most recent presidential elections the last polls published by the main organisations produced results very close to the election result itself.

10 – Do you have a sense of how the level of regulation of polling in France compares with other countries?

The French system is certainly unusual. On the Commission's website you will find (p. 17) the report of a seminar which took place in 2013 (www.commission-des-sondages.fr/hist/colloque.htm) showing the most recent comparative-law study on the subject.

27 December 2017

ComRes, BMG Research, Ipsos MORI, LucidTalk, Opinium, ORB International, Panelbase, and Survation – Written evidence (PPD0014)

Introduction

As research companies that together represent a substantial proportion of the UK's polling industry, we are pleased to be able to offer our joint views in response to the Select Committee's call for evidence.

The polling industry has of course been the subject of various reviews over the past few years, most notably the publication just last year of the Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 General Election Opinion Polls, led by Professor Patrick Sturgis. As member companies of the British Polling Council, one of the bodies on whose behalf the Sturgis Inquiry was conducted, we warmly welcomed that Report. Indeed, as BPC member companies we pursued changes in the wake of that Report, showing our ability to examine our work and make improvements.

The questions posted by the Select Committee should be considered in light of two fundamentally important factors which together have a profound impact on the context in which political polling is conducted in 2017.

First, voter dynamics in the UK are more complex and fluid than at any time any of us can recall. The 2017 General Election showed this in several ways – for example in the return to the 1970 level of vote share gained by the two main parties and, most spectacularly, the shift during the campaign from a 25-year high Conservative lead over Labour to a photo finish on the night (a change of electoral fortunes reflected in polling throughout the campaign).

Second, the Internet makes the world far more transparent a place than ever before. With the exception perhaps of Kim Jong-un's North Korea, it is impossible in 2017 to censor information from voters. The idea of restricting or censoring publication of opinion polls in the run-up to elections, while (perhaps surprisingly) still taken seriously in some quarters, is therefore an attempt to close the stable door some 40 years after the horse has bolted. This approach also undermines democratic freedoms including that of the press. Citizens should have the right to know what their fellow citizens think and the restriction of independent and reputable research serves only to erase polling as an important counterpoint to subjective and/or partisan information.

Rather than the dead hand of statutory regulation, we strongly advocate encouraging competitive forces, where each of us - and the other UK political pollsters - invest our own funds in, test and adjust our methodologies in order to be as accurate as possible. Statutory regulation would doubtless serve to stifle innovation, reduce transparency and mean basic information is denied to voters while others (such as hedge funds) would have privileged access to that same information from which they would profit financially.

The 21st Century solution to concerns over accuracy of polling and any other information of public importance is further transparency - not censorship. We

want the media and others to be able to scrutinise our work and for readers, voters and commentators to draw their own conclusions.

Committee Inquiry questions:

Polling methods and accuracy

1. What are the most significant challenges for conducting political opinion polling and achieving accurate results? What measures could be taken which might improve the accuracy of political opinion polling?

Political polling, even more so than other forms of opinion polling, is notoriously complex. Voting Intention and attitudinal research is not just a 'dip test' of public opinion but rather a nuanced methodology which takes into account a variety of factors, including past behaviour recall and a matrix of interlocking demographics. Voting Intention research does not just cover the top line figures of party vote shares but also includes information vital to understanding the wider societal picture, including the images of political parties, policy issues and perceptions of political leaders.

Voting Intention research, specifically pre-election, is unusual when compared to other opinion polling as there is an objective measure of 'accuracy'. 'Achieving accurate results' is generally taken as meaning predicting behaviour from attitudes measured; inevitably a difficult task. The relationship between attitudes (voting intention) and behaviour (voting) is not a simple or necessarily linear one. As such political polling should be better understood in terms of the story it tells, relating to changes throughout election campaigns.

The Joint Inquiry led by Professor Patrick Sturgis into political polling¹⁵ (specifically pre-election Voting Intention research) after the 2015 General Election identified that the main cause of polling error was unrepresentative samples. As such one of the most pressing issues for the industry to tackle has been to improve the quality of their sample, an undertaking pursued across the membership of the British Polling Council. As part of the transparency rules of the British Polling Council, member organisations have detailed¹⁶ the ways in which we have improved the representativeness of our samples in the run up to the 2017 General Election.

One of the most notable elements of the 2017 General Election from the perspective of the polling industry was the divergence between how different companies interpreted voter turnout. Considering the historic problems with the predictive power of self-stated turnout, some companies elected to use demographic weighting to replicate turnout from the 2015 General Election which took into account variable propensities to vote, based on regression analysis using actual behavioural data. Other companies used political engagement weighting to reflect turnout patterns, whereas other companies

¹⁵ Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British general election opinion polls
http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/3789/1/Report_final_revised.pdf

¹⁶ British Polling Council <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/how-have-the-polls-changed-since-2015/>

retained pre-2015 methods. Innovation, and transparency within that, is vital for polling companies to better understand voter turnout, and the only way for this to be facilitated is in a competitive and free market space.

2. How does the accuracy of political opinion polling compare to other forms of opinion surveys, such as polling on behalf of advocacy groups or official surveys?

Political polling is different from and incomparable to other forms of opinion surveys partly because most forms of opinion research are not pointed towards a single event; neither are most other forms of opinion research scrutinised in such detail. Political polling is generally remarkably accurate given the scope of the research challenge in question, the volatility of the survey universe and the resources allocated to it. Indeed, research by Professor Will Jennings¹⁷ looking at polling's accuracy internationally demonstrates the accuracy of the industry as a whole. It is often remarkably good value.

Throughout the 2017 General Election campaign, different pollsters (encompassing lots of different methods) saw roughly equal falls in the proportionate Conservative lead – with most pollsters seeing the Conservative position degrade by around two thirds in relation to the Labour vote share¹⁸. Indeed, average error in the Conservative lead (among members of the BPC) in 2017 was 4 percentage points¹⁹, compared to 6 percentage points in 2015. The average error for vote share across Labour, the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and the SNP was 1.6% in 2017, lower than the 2% average in 2015.

As mentioned above, political polling is effective at telling the story of an election campaign beyond the simple two-horse race narrative and 2017 was no different. Across the industry, companies saw a dramatic upswing in popularity for Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party as well as the development of key dynamics such as voting by age group and the electoral collapse of UKIP.

There is a commercial imperative on companies that conduct public opinion research to be as accurate and rigorous as possible, an imperative that applies equally to political polling. The need for high professional standards and a commitment to high quality research is a vital part of the commercial identity of the polling industry and as such mitigates the potential role of client influence, whomever the client may be, whether a campaigning organisation or a public body.

3. What new methods have had the most impact on political opinion polling? Can technological innovation help to improve the accuracy of polling? What is your assessment of polls that produce constituency level estimates of voting intention?

¹⁷ Will Jennings <https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/polling/polls2017.php>

¹⁸ Calculations authors own, based on British Polling Council member's published headline Voting Intention figures

¹⁹ Electoral Calculus http://www.electoralcalculus.co.uk/trackrecord_17errors.html#opinionerror

Turnout modelling, as explained above, had a significant impact in terms of the output of headline voting intention figures. Research by Professor Patrick Sturgis and Professor Will Jennings²⁰ elucidates the divergence between different companies' approaches to understanding turnout patterns, highlighting the impact that it has had.

As in 2015, and indeed in the wake of previous elections, most if not all of the polling companies undertake continuous methodological reviews in order to better refine and understand the role of turnout in Voting Intention research. This effort is not solely inclusive of traditional research techniques but also new and alternative innovations including qualitative research, neuroscience techniques and social media analysis.

During the 2017 General Election campaign several polling companies employed statistical techniques to produce constituency-level result projections. This was largely done through multiple level regression and post stratification analysis (MRP) using very large datasets. These approaches proved remarkably accurate, particularly when compared to Lord Ashcroft's constituency polling from the 2015 General Election. It remains the case, though, that a margin of error of less than +/-2% requires exponentially more resource. To compare constituency level estimates of voting intention with national voting intention polls is to compare apples with pears. It is worth noting however, that the output of said modelling, although distinct in nature from Voting Intention, is still reliant on the accuracy of the polls informing it.

4. Does the public have confidence in the accuracy of political opinion polls? How, if at all, has public confidence in the accuracy of opinion polls changed?

Ipsos MORI's Veracity Index tracks the levels of trust the public have in pollsters, which in the latest data²¹ shows that 49% of the public trust pollsters to tell the truth. This is broadly similar to the proportion in 2014 (51%) and as such shows the limited impact the 2015 General Election had on voter confidence in polling. It is worth noting that although distrust in pollsters has risen slightly to 42% from 34%, this is commensurate with other professions' increase in distrust. Although this data does not include the EU Referendum in its timescale, it does highlight a broadly consistent public attitude to the industry. Previous Ipsos MORI research²² has shown that the perception of the industry does not translate into an appetite for state regulation, with only 17% of the public wanting to ban polls in 2010 (a similar proportion to those who say the same of party Political Broadcasts). What we can definitively say is that there is no public clamour for State intervention.

5. Can polls be influenced by those who commission them and, if so, in what ways? What controls are there on the output of results, for example to prevent 'cherry picking' of results?

²⁰ Southampton University <https://sotonpolitics.org/2017/06/04/will-turnout-weighting-prove-to-be-the-pollsters-achilles-heel-in-ge2017/>

²¹ Ipsos MORI <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/enough-experts-ipsos-mori-veracity-index-2016>

²² Ipsos MORI <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/banning-election-coverage-and-opinion-polls-trends-support-1979-2010>

As professional researchers, we of course have a veto over client research questions. For political polling, our media clients expect us as the experts to make recommendations about the wording of voting intention polls and the questions needed to construct our respective election modelling. For questions beyond those used for modelling voting intention it is commonly a partnership effort between polling company and media client. Indeed, part of our professional identity and commercial success comes from our professional question design, which specifically counters bias and ensures unambiguity and objectivity in questions.

For other types of polling, for instance on issues of public policy, it is a hazard of the job that clients or other actors often have a political axe to grind and that those who take the opposite view will object to whatever result does not correspond with their opinion. Recent polling history is littered with examples of pollsters being criticised by their clients' political opponents who simply do not like the results. That some may seek to close down the views of those with whom they disagree should not mean that the research integrity of polling companies is called into question, but the BPC's requirement for transparency means that fair-minded observers draw their own conclusions. On our part, BPC rules and often company terms and conditions require checks on the presentation of data, so as to combat 'cherry picking'.

Influence of polls

6. What impact do political opinion polls have on voters, politicians and political parties during election campaigns? To what extent does the publication of voting intention polls affect voters' decisions, for example, in terms of turnout or party choice? What are the implications for election campaigns if polls are inaccurate?

Opinion polls help to inform the context and the narrative of elections and only very rarely have a notable impact on public discourse. In fact, polling serves an important democratic function in informing citizens about what the wider public thinks. The examples of where polls may have influenced an election campaign have largely come from what many believe to be outlier polls. In these cases, such as the Scottish Referendum Campaign, it was perhaps more a question of over-reaction not so much by voters as by the political elites.

Indeed voters explicitly reject the notion of polling influencing their vote. Recent research shows that the vast majority of the public (87%)²³ reject the idea of tactical voting, with the corollary being that the influence of the sort of information necessary to make decisions about tactical voting, most notably polling, is negligible.

Further adding to this point, and bucking the historical trend that election campaigns change very little, the lead that Theresa May and the Conservatives enjoyed in the polls at the beginning of the campaign vanished over the course

²³ ComRes <http://www.comresglobal.com/polls/independent-sunday-mirror-may-2017-voting-intention-and-political-poll648941/>

of the campaign. The public's shifting political sentiments undermine any accusation that polling sets the agenda or in any way 'wags the dog' of public opinion.

International

7. How does the conduct and accuracy of political opinion polling in the UK compare internationally? Are there lessons to be learnt for polling in the UK from other political contexts?

Although British polling performs broadly in line in terms of accuracy with other countries²⁴, there are lessons to be learned, as part of an ever-innovating industry, from polling companies in our international peers. Indeed, in the aftermath of the EU Referendum and the US General Election, some French pollsters applied models which took into account the dynamics in those elections, which led to a successful election in polling terms in 2017.

Resting on their laurels isn't an option for the polling industry and particular attention is paid to international examples which can be learnt from. Notably, the US offers many lessons for the UK industry; the nature of US democracy means that the multitude of electoral contests provides opportunity for new techniques to be developed. However, it is worth noting the success of political polling relates to the polity in which it exists, and as such other methods should not be imported wholesale into Britain.

Regulation

8. Is the polling industry's current model of self-regulation fit for purpose? Is there a case for changing the way political opinion polling is regulated? What regulatory changes, if any, would you recommend and what challenges are there to greater regulation?

In short, yes, the current model of self-regulation is fit for purpose. The key issue with regards to political polling is transparency; the core tenet of the current self-regulatory system. In much the same way that transparency protects from client-level influence, the system of transparency and self-regulation protects the industry from influence at the regulatory level, thus enhancing the industry's motivation and capacity to innovate and pursue professional rigour. Any further regulatory changes would end up proving counterproductive to the developments already made by the industry in tackling cherry picking and misrepresentation of results. It would also represent a step backward in democratic terms; restricting the public's access to high quality information about their society, allowing for a greater role for less rigorous forms of data and presenting the beginnings of a slippery slope, with, for example, the same logic being as relevant to the reporting of party canvass returns.

9. Are there lessons to be learned for the regulation of UK political polling from other countries and political contexts? For example,

²⁴ Will Jennings <https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/polling/polls2017.php>

should the publication of political opinion polls be restricted in the run-up to elections and referendums?

There has been much discussion about the possibility of restricting polling in the run up to the polling day, similarly to the regulatory framework in France, where electioneering (including political polling) is banned for 32 hours before polling day; this period is longer still at five days in Spain. There are however serious problems with this approach. Into the vacuum of where polling once was, less rigorous and more spurious forms of research, conducted without professional rigour would gain coverage, in so doing diluting the quality of public dialogue. Indeed the period of election silence in France has in fact been shortened in the past on the grounds of a restriction of a freedom of expression, including the right to hold an opinion. Restricting public access to thorough and transparent voting intention research restricts the public's ability to hold an informed opinion and in so doing dilutes the potency of our democracy.

Perhaps pollsters' strongest defence against restriction is that no one else does better. In 2012 Peggy Noonan, an American columnist, contended that Mitt Romney would defeat Mr Obama because she had seen more Romney yard signs. Other commentators have based election predictions on nothing more than attendance at rallies or the volume of partisan posts on social media, with the effect on public dialogue being inevitably detrimental. Reliance on other data sources such as betting odds has also proven less reliable than polling.

In a UK context there would be further practical problems. Some polls harness 'the wisdom of crowds' as a means of modelling voting intention, while others employ more of a 'dipstick model'. Would a censorship ban apply to a survey of voters' expectations or only their voting intentions? Would other types of modelling, such as Multiple Regression and Post-stratification analysis, be covered? What of other attempts to correlate voters' views with election outcome forecasts – perhaps using perceptions of leadership qualities?

In short, censorship bans on the publication of opinion polls are not only anti-democratic, they are also likely to be unworkable because of the Internet, would help financial speculators make a profit at the expense of the free flow of information to ordinary voters, and have to be so widely drawn as to prevent many other types of political surveys from being published too.

10. Should there be more transparency of the use of private polling by financial institutions? Does such polling require further regulation?

Similarly to any censorship of polling data ahead of an election, it would be inappropriate to seek to constrain or force publication of private polling by financial institutions. Firstly, what private institutions do with data from research they commission is their own business until it falls into the public domain, at which point the existing BPC rules on disclosure would kick in. Also, the existence of international subsidiaries and sister organisations overseas would make enforcement impossible. Again, to regulate this area would be to impose a solution for a problem which does not exist.

Media coverage of polling

11. Does the media report on opinion polls appropriately? What steps could be taken to improve how the media reports the results of political opinion polls? For example, should standards be set in relation to the reporting of political opinion polls, or should a code of conduct be introduced?

Generally speaking, the media report on opinion polls appropriately. There are many fine political journalists working today who properly recognise, understand and even contribute to the world of political polling. Recent rises in the popularity of data journalism add credence to this trend for responsible journalism. However, there are doubtless occasions when a newspaper may lead with a story based on a single opinion poll finding which then leads others to act where they otherwise might not have. Other occasions have seen papers reporting 'voodoo' polls (such as unscientific readership surveys) with the same reverence as BPC members' polling. As outlined above, experience tells us that it tends to be political parties and leaders, rather than voters, who are the most sensitive to such reporting.

Although considerable efforts are made to ensure fair representation of data on our part (including briefing our media clients and promoting data literacy), it is up to readers of all media to decide whether and what to believe. To regulate the publication of opinion polls rather than any other type of information disseminated via newspapers is to under-estimate the ability of readers to determine such matters for themselves.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that regulatory intervention or even a code of conduct for reporting political polling would represent an overbearing sledgehammer to crack a nut, let alone that the ramifications for democracy would be wholly negative.

12. Has increased media demand for political opinion polls, or the speed of their reporting, had an impact on accuracy?

It would be misguided to accuse media appetite for affecting the accuracy or quality of polling. However, media appetite can lead to undue attention being placed on small (and often therefore statistically insignificant) movements in vote shares. This often manifests in a misunderstanding of elections as horseraces and misses out on the other data provided by polls.

Concurrent to increased demand has been the increase in the supply of polling, with new entrants in the market in recent years. It should be noted that increased supply from the same reputable companies should have no impact on accuracy. Although it could be argued that because the market is becoming easier to enter, this raises the possibility of less accurate polls being produced by less professional new entrants, there is little sign of this having happened in practice. The best preventative measure to this is the ready supply of good quality polling from trusted sources making it difficult for less reliable suppliers to gain any foothold in the market.

Digital and social media

13. What impact is the increased use of digital media channels having on the way in which the public engages with political opinion polling? How is political opinion polling shared across social media platforms and what impact does social media have on the accuracy and reliability of political opinion polling?

It has become something of a trope that each of the past few general elections has been described in its time as the 'first' social media general election. While generally overblown, it seems nonetheless irrefutable that social media played a significant role in the 2017 General Election. But the extent and precise nature of this role is not yet clear and is therefore liable to overstatement.

Research by the Centre for Analysis of Social Media²⁵ suggests there is significant evidence that Twitter serves as an 'echo chamber', with different party-supporting users seldom interacting with each other. In tandem with this, Labour supporters are far more prominent on Twitter than Conservatives²⁶, which makes gauging public opinion over social media data cumbersome at best and extremely difficult at worst. The role social media played in respect of unsure or floating voters is unclear.

One direct impact of social media on the use of opinion polling has been the rapid dissemination of results and, inevitably, a vast increase in commentary about opinion polls. One very positive result of this is that when a BPC Member publishes a political poll, the full data tables are usually posted online at the time of publication. The number of voters with access to full opinion poll data (as well as multiple media sources conveying this data) is therefore vastly higher than was the case pre-Internet. However, it is worth noting that social media can exhibit the same problems that the media sometimes does in the sense of undue focus on outliers or single figures. However, this is a failing not of polling's making.

14. Can social media and other new forms of data successfully predict election outcomes? What are the challenges associated with using new forms of data to predict elections?

As discussed above, social media data can be misleading with regards to movements in public opinion and should be treated with caution. Similarly to the infamous Literary Digest poll in 1936, 'social media polls' are methodologically flawed and are not comparable to the output of BPC members. The predictive power of social media data with regards to voting intention is limited, although it forms a constituent element of interesting new developments (including big data and neuroscience) which offer opportunity to polling. However, this should not stand in the way of innovation, as there may well be pertinent insight and applicable models to Voting Intention in social media and other new forms of data. It is worth repeating polls do not predict election results but rather can help explain the story of the campaign and provide insight into public opinion

²⁵ The Social Media Election 2017 <https://www.demos.co.uk/project/the-social-media-election/>

²⁶ LSE <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurocrisispress/2017/06/05/how-the-general-election-2017-campaign-is-shaping-up-on-twitter/>

1 September 2017

David Cowling and BuzzFeed – Oral evidence (QQ 64–70)

David Cowling and BuzzFeed – Oral evidence (QQ 64–70)

[Transcript to be found under BuzzFeed](#)

Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and Cabinet Office – Oral evidence (QQ 169–179)

Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and Cabinet Office – Oral evidence (QQ 169–179)

[Transcript to be found under Cabinet Office](#)

The Electoral Commission – Oral evidence (QQ 163–168)

Evidence Session No. 22

Heard in Public

Questions 163 - 168

Tuesday 12 December 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Couttie; Baroness Fall; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Lord Smith of Hindhead.

Witnesses

I: Claire Bassett, Chief Executive, Electoral Commission; Bob Posner, Director of Political Finance and Regulation and Legal Counsel, Electoral Commission.

Examination of witnesses

Claire Bassett and Bob Posner.

Q163 **The Chairman:** Welcome to this session of the Committee. You are freezing cold because the people who want to get this House totally refurbished have decided to turn off the heating until we all agree to their £3 billion plans. I expect that they will succeed. We have been here for an hour and a half already, so if you hear our teeth chattering, please forgive us.

I will go through the formalities. You are being broadcast. However, you are protected by the rules on parliamentary procedure. Whatever you say, you cannot be sued, although you may lose some friends. You will get a transcript afterwards. If you have misspoken or wish to put something slightly differently, you will be able to correct that. You have been given a list of Members' interests.

There was a debate about whether you would come before us. That was quite understandable. I hope that the Committee has a reasonable grasp of what the Electoral Commission does. We are not going to ask you to tell us your view on whether opinion polling should be regulated or anything like that. We will concentrate on what you actually do. We may recommend some additions to what you do, but I hope that we will not put you into positions that are beyond where it would be appropriate for you to respond.

I will start us off on what you do. In the summer—in June, I think—your chairman, Sir John Holmes, set out quite an agenda of things that he

thought you should be doing, including regulation of certain kinds of expenditure that you do not clearly regulate at the moment. I wonder whether we could go through what he said and the progress that you have made on that since.

Claire Bassett: I apologise, but I am not sure exactly what you are referring to from June. I imagine that it was one of the articles that Sir John Holmes wrote when he started. I am very happy to talk about what we regulate and some of the changes that we have requested. I suspect that that was the main part of what he said.

The Chairman: I am sorry. I made a mistake; I should have said, “the June election”. It is the statement that he made in November about regulation.

Claire Bassett: Right. That probably tied in with some of our reports on the June election. We reported on outcomes from the election and some of the improvements that we would like to see. The one that is most relevant here is probably around imprints on social media. You will be well aware that, on print and other media, there has to be an imprint that shows where something comes from. It is not the same for social media. Interestingly, it was in the Scottish referendum. That rule was applied there, and it worked well.

The other area where we would like to see change is around the reporting of spending. That is broken down into categories. We would like to see those categories broken down in a bit more detail, so that there is more granular evidence that can be analysed by us and others who are interested.

The Chairman: Can I focus for a moment on social media, which have been a matter of considerable concern to the Committee? In my mind, there is a question of what you would have to say when you use social media in order to spread what is essentially party propaganda. Would you have to say, “This is a paid-for piece”, or, “This is a generated piece”, or would you say, “This was paid for by Mr Putin”? Have you got into any details as to the kind of identification that you would want a piece to have?

Claire Bassett: We are very open to discussing that, to looking at what works and, indeed, to speaking to the social media companies about some of the changes that they are prepared to make. It varies depending on the form of social media. With something like Twitter, it is quite easy, because you can link back to the owner of the tweets and have their page say who they are and where the funding is coming from. You can do the same on Facebook. Bob, do you want to add anything?

Bob Posner: You can draw a parallel with campaigning in the normal way, using leaflets. There you would show the promoter—the person who is promoting the piece of material. You would expect to see that on social media as well, if you had a parallel.

The Chairman: Philip has a follow-up question.

Q164 **Lord Smith of Hindhead:** We have all learned some new things on this Committee, through the huge amount of evidence that we have had. I have

learned all about bots—manned and unmanned bots. As a Conservative Party treasurer and a fundraiser, I thought, “Wouldn’t it be great if I could spend £2 million or £3 million on bots? Those things could just send out simple messages the whole time”. It seems to me that a bot is a gift that gives for ever. It does not have to have an imprint. It has an impact on social media and the way in which people might think. It can change people’s views, particularly the views of those who are not always the first to get to the ballot box, by sending out simple messages supporting things that it recognises as being pro and attacking anybody who is putting out a message it may not agree with. How does that get an imprint on it? How will you ever regulate that?

Claire Bassett: As a member of a party that wants to fund that, you will know that that is regulated already, because it needs to be reported in your spending.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Okay. Let me put the question in a different way. I am not a Conservative Peer or a Conservative Party treasurer; I am just a person out there who has £2 million or £3 million to spend, but I have a specific issue. I am very keen on one particular issue, and I am going to put some money into bots. That will definitely have an effect, because it will attack all the different social media platforms. It will absolutely have an effect. It is not the same as having a battle bus. How are you going to deal with that?

Claire Bassett: There are two aspects to that. The first one is the imprint. One of the changes that we are recommending is that, if it is on Twitter and Facebook, there should be an imprint by law. We would therefore have the same route that we have with adverts in newspapers—for example, some of the wraparounds that featured in the referendum.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: That is not how a bot works, is it? If I have a bot, it will keep sending out the messages.

Claire Bassett: Yes, but a bot still needs a Twitter or Facebook account. That account would need to say who it was sponsored by.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: But it is not sending out a particular message. This is not a party-political thing; it is just a bot that will attack anybody who expresses a view about a particular field or will support anybody who expresses a view of which it is supportive. It is not a regular campaign.

Claire Bassett: Under the rules as they exist, it would be a non-party campaigner.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: How would you recognise it as such?

Claire Bassett: In the same way as we do with other activity. For example, non-party campaigners seek to influence opinion in a whole range of ways. We have live active monitoring during the electoral period to identify that. There are a number of very motivated groups out there that will look for these things and report them to us as soon as they find them. If you are talking about a high volume of tweets or bot activity on a very specific issue that really matters, the chances are that there is an interest group on the other side that is looking for and seeking to identify that.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: So you will be looking for that, or do other people look for it and bring it to your attention?

Claire Bassett: We look for it, within the limits of our resources. We monitor live social media and look for people who are particularly active, to see where they are coming from—those sides of it.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Did you do that at the last election?

Claire Bassett: Yes.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Did you find anything that caused you concern?

Bob Posner: I will build on what Claire has said. Campaigning has a wide definition, whether you are a party or a non-party campaigner. If you are seeking to influence voters for or against, it is campaigning, under our law. There is quite a low threshold of spending where our regulation comes in. For the referendum, for example, spending of upwards of £10,000 brought it within our regulatory remit, if you were campaigning. For the election, in parts of the UK, it was £10,000; in England, it was £20,000. We monitor that.

Bots are a form of amplification of a message. They are a very effective way of amplifying something, but it is still campaigning, at root. The challenge that you are raising is how you spot it. That goes into our live monitoring and into other people observing things and reporting them to us, but we recognise that it is a challenge. Part of what we are doing at the moment is talking to the main social media platform providers and looking forward, to see where there can be improvements.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Let us say that you have gone through the campaign and found that there is a bot that you think is sending out a message. If you go to the people and say, “What’s happening?”, that bot will just disappear; they will cancel it. It could be foreign money; it does not have to be UK based. What are you going to do about that?

Claire Bassett: There is nothing that we can do, if it is outside the UK.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: That is what I wanted to establish. There is nothing that you can do about it.

Claire Bassett: No. We are absolutely open about that. As a UK-based regulator, applying UK-based laws, there is nothing that we can do about activity on the internet that is taking place outside the UK.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Which will affect our democratic process.

Claire Bassett: Yes. That is why we are really keen that the security services are involved and active in this. Where appropriate, we link into them. We can make recommendations around that. The last thing that we want to see is democratic processes undermined or, indeed, public confidence impacted, which I think is a bigger risk at the moment. However, as a UK-based organisation, with powers that apply only in the UK, there is nothing that we can do about an organisation based in Russia, for example, that is purely within Russia and acting out of Russia. If such organisations are seeking to fund activity in the UK, there are things that we can do, because of the rules on the permissibility of

donations and funding to parties or campaigners in the UK. However, I am not sure how we could do it outside the UK.

The other point is that this issue goes much beyond elections. That is why it is within the remit of the security services.

Baroness Couttie: You talked about imprints and naming the promoter, but I was not sure exactly whom you were naming. We have been told about instances where there is a source that is not reflective of where the funding comes from. Sometimes it is a totally fake source. Recently we had an example of a Russian-funded account that purported to be a mid-western, very right-wing American. When you talk about the imprint, what is that? Does it dig down behind what it appears to be on the surface?

Claire Bassett: It does not. As Bob said, it is the sponsor. However, where that is a campaigner that needs to be registered with us, it has to report where its funding comes from. We come back to the permissibility issue. The example that you have just given is of someone from one foreign country purporting to be someone from another foreign country and doing something on the internet. Again, we come across the issue that we are UK limited.

Baroness Couttie: I know. However, in so far as it is being promoted in the UK and you are requiring there to be imprints on it, there is a role for you. You may not have the powers now, but regulation could come in to require a little more sophistication than just putting down who someone claims to be when they put something on.

I see that there is absolutely nothing that you can do about bodies outside the UK trying to influence our electoral process. However, you could be in a position to send out alerts. Although you have no teeth to attack the people doing it, there may be a role for the Electoral Commission in putting out an alert, which would be publicised widely, saying that a story or Twitter account is clearly not what it purports to be.

Claire Bassett: That is certainly something we could give some thought to. There is a fine line when it comes to having really clear evidence of that. We would not have that. It would come from the security services, and we would need them to share it with us. There is also a point about the content of campaigning, which we do not cover. We have to be really careful not to cross that line.

Q165 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** I wonder whether you have not just given us a counsel of despair. You said that there is nothing that you can do to regulate activity that occurs outside this country, yet it is becoming increasingly clear that activity originating outside this country is having an extremely powerful influence on democratic processes within it. That problem is not limited to this country. In the past, we have looked to the Electoral Commission to help us to ensure that we have elections that are free and fair, in which there is due transparency and that are conducted in accordance with election law. Are you really putting your hands up and saying that that era is now over? Are you saying that, while you can continue to regulate for a steam age, there is nothing useful that you can do in a digital age? That is profoundly worrying. Maybe that is it.

Earlier, you said that you were in conversation with social media companies or providers about “changes that they are prepared to make”. Are we absolutely at their mercy?

Claire Bassett: There are two things to say here. First, we recognise the seriousness of the situation. Of course, we want to do everything that we can. That is why we have launched the inquiries that we have, looking at the scope for change and what we can get the social media companies to do straightaway. We recognise the importance of that.

Secondly, there is a much bigger issue, which is about regulation of the internet. A lot of the issues we are talking about are not limited to elections; they go to sexual exploitation and incitement to violence online. There is a whole range of issues that we are all tackling and where we all face the challenge of activity that is happening outside the country and outside the remit of organisations such as ours. It is very serious, and we take it very seriously. That is why we are really keen to work with others, where we can, to do what we can. That includes ongoing conversations with the security services and the work that we are doing in the inquiries with social media providers. However, at the end of the day, our powers are those that Parliament has chosen to give us. It would be wrong for me to sit here and pretend that the laws that we have and by which we regulate would work outside the UK. Unfortunately, they do not.

We are very keen to think about how we can make a difference there, by contributing our expertise and working with others. There are things such as the use of data and data analytics, where we are working with the Information Commissioner. We are being as active as we can. However, this is a serious problem that faces us all.

Lord Howarth of Newport: I accept that it is part of the bigger picture that you have just sketched. However, do you envisage that there could be changes in the powers with which our own legislators have provided you that would be helpful and that you would seek? Are you also in discussion with election regulators in other countries? Is there a possibility of developing not just a concordat but some internationally binding set of arrangements that would enable democracies to gain better purchase on the processes that the social and digital media providers are operating?

Claire Bassett: I will let Bob answer that question. We are in conversation with the Americans and with others. Indeed, Bob returned from those conversations just recently.

Bob Posner: Obviously, we are not the only country where these debates are going on. We read a lot about America and are making contact with the authorities over there. Within Europe, intercountry discussions are already going on between regulators along these lines. I cannot pretend that anyone has come up with a great solution for the moment, but there are common interests and concerns, and discussions are going on.

I come back to an earlier point. The point that we mentioned on imprints is about transparency. It is about the voter being informed as well as possible about sources of campaigning material. The issue of who the true source is is a concern, but UK law currently requires the true source to be named. Certainly, with flows of money, we would expect to get the true

source, even if it is overseas, and we just have to name it and cannot do anything about it. If anyone in the UK who is campaigning has taken overseas money, they are committing a criminal offence. There are current laws that work to a certain extent, but that is not to underestimate the problem.

Q166 **Lord Hayward:** The previous questions have covered a range of things that I was going to pursue. Like Alan, I am in a position of despair, basically. There are so many ways around our law by campaigning from outside that it almost becomes questionable whether there is any point in having controls inside. However, given that there may be, can I ask a question about expenditure in general, particularly digital expenditure? Are you satisfied that the political parties disclose their expenditure and are adequately regulated in that respect on what is, in effect, a hidden side? After all, the rules were originally drawn up for print media and the historical way of campaigning, with which, sadly, some of us grew up and which we feel we almost predate. Campaigning has changed, but the law and the costings have not.

Claire Bassett: In this area, the law works to ensure transparency. Although the categories of spend that are reported are a bit broader than we would like—we would like them to be more specific—they are categories of reported spend in the public domain that go down to individual invoice level. We also have powers, which we exercise, to go in and work with people. For example, in the run-up to the last election, we engaged with the main political parties during the campaigns to look at how they were spending money. Bob may want to add something.

Bob Posner: It relates to that point. The laws, as written, are broad enough. What is not quite there yet is the level of detail in reporting that would pick up the social media side of things and make it easier to see it. There are broad headings, but we would prefer there to be more detailed headings, so that we can understand that better.

Lord Hayward: I turn to a question of extreme detail. All the political parties use private polling. Notionally, it is private, but—lo and behold—certain parts of it appear in the media. Is that included in their expenditure?

Bob Posner: Forgive me if I am telling you what you know. Exit polls—how people actually voted—cannot be published until the polls have closed: it is a criminal offence to publish them. There is no law against private polls of people’s intentions by political parties, and no law about whether such polling is open. If a political party’s market research, involving that sort of polling, is part of its campaign, it has to be reported to us, whether or not it is private.

Claire Bassett: If they use information gained privately to structure their further campaign activity, it will be reported.

Q167 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** Claire, as you were talking earlier, I was thinking that your experience on the Parole Board and the Criminal Cases Review Commission was becoming increasingly useful for you in the work of the Electoral Commission.

I want to pick up the point about dealing with influence from outside the United Kingdom. I am not quite as despairing as my colleagues. Have you thought of asking the Government to raise this through the Council of Europe—not the European Union, Alan—which includes Russia? The Council of Europe can make decisions and issue suggestions to the 46 member countries as to how the laws in their countries can be tightened up.

Claire Bassett: That is a really good idea. We are still gathering the spending returns for June’s election. We will do the reports from that in the new year, so it would be something that would come through there. We have followed that route before, in part. Before the European referendum, there was some concern that there would be attempts by different parts of Europe to influence the outcome of the referendum by spending money in Europe. We wrote to the European Commission on that occasion; in fact, we asked the Foreign Office to do so. We did that quite effectively.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: By happy chance, I am on the appropriate committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. I have a motion, which is being tabled, to do precisely what I have just suggested you take up with the Government, because we need to come at this from all directions. There needs to be some multinational approach. It will not solve the problem, but it will help to deal with it. The Council of Europe consists of the Governments. The Parliamentary Assembly has representatives from every Parliament. I am one of the representatives from the UK Parliament, so we could reinforce it.

Chairman, it would also reinforce it if we recommended that it be taken up. It is clear from the Electoral Commission’s evidence that it cannot be dealt with just on a UK basis—it must be taken up on a wider basis.

The Chairman: May I explore one particular aspect and then go to something more general? The particular aspect is this: there is a lot of talk about polling that is actually push polling—ringing somebody and purporting to ask how they intend to vote, but then either putting the questions in such a way that they are essentially propaganda or getting in touch with them later, on the basis of the information you have had from them, to target them for certain kinds of messages. Does that expenditure count not just for the party’s national expenditure but within each individual constituency limit?

Claire Bassett: There are occasions when it is not legal to do that, either.

Bob Posner: There are a number of levels. The Information Commissioner is looking at the use of data by political parties. That encompasses activities of this sort, involving people’s personal data and how that can be used. That is a very good thing. We are working closely with the Information Commissioner on that.

If the activity itself strays into campaigning activity, as opposed to market research, that is exactly what it is. It may be within the law, but it needs to be recognised and reported as such. If, as a consequence, spending limits are breached, either at the national level or, more probably, at the local candidate level, it is an offence.

The Chairman: Could we recommend anything that would strengthen your hand in trying to get a proper grip on this?

Claire Bassett: The main one is the sanction that we have for offences, where things go wrong. Our chair has suggested that our maximum fine of £20,000 can be seen as a cost of doing business. Having a stronger deterrent, in line with other regulators, would be better.

Q168 **The Chairman:** That is helpful; now for something completely different. At the moment, in so far as there is regulation of opinion polling in this country, it is through the British Polling Council, which concentrates on transparency, and the Market Research Society, from which we have just heard. It is perfectly possible that the Committee will decide to recommend some further regulation. In France, for example, there is a Commission des sondages, which has responsibility for approving the wording of opinion poll questions. Since none of us these days likes setting up new organisations, do you feel that could be included in your remit, if Parliament so wished, or is it in some way mixing oil and water?

Claire Bassett: There are two things. First, we have general powers to make recommendations and to look forward, but we also have very specific regulatory powers. Those specific powers are focused almost entirely on campaigning, parties and money. That is where our expertise sits. Our infrastructure is set up to deliver that. The regulation of polling would require quite a different set-up. Although it would be practically feasible, it would be about creating a new bit within the Electoral Commission to do that, rather than building on the particular skills that we have.

I touched on the other point earlier. We are very wary of getting involved in the content of campaigning, or getting anywhere near being a truth commission. That is not what Parliament intended us to be. It would make our regulatory activity in relation to parties very difficult if we were also opining on the content of their campaigning; it would create a conflict. That would be the biggest risk. That would need to be taken seriously into consideration if Parliament was thinking of this.

The Chairman: That would depend very much on what we recommended and on what Parliament wanted to do. If we said, "You should vet for truth every party's advertisements before they appear on the billboards", that would be a huge extension, beyond anything that you have done. If we said, "You should monitor the techniques that they use for sampling, for example, and give advice to parties", that would go into the category not of monitoring content but of monitoring techniques, which is what the Commission des sondages does. Would that be feasible?

Claire Bassett: It would be a totally new piece of work for us to do.

The Chairman: I understand that.

Claire Bassett: I guess that the question would be whether we would do it any better than the self-regulatory model, if it was very much about applying a set of standards that could then be audited and checked.

The Chairman: Except that the self-regulatory model, as it exists at the moment, is focused entirely on transparency. That is true of the BPC, at

least. It would be possible to move beyond that without moving into regulation of content, or very strict regulation of that kind. As I hear you, you are not saying that you could not do that, although it would clearly be an extension of your present remit.

I will say something that you might think flattering. Your commission has a decent reputation for impartiality, fair dealing and so on, which it would be nice to build on if you were going into this area. A new commission would not have that.

Claire Bassett: I come back to the concern that I expressed earlier. If it ever got to the content, that would be a real challenge for us. I would not want to endanger our good reputation by entering that field.

The Chairman: We note that caveat and would want to include it, if we were to go down this line. I am not saying that we will. Do Members have any more questions?

Lord Hayward: We have been frozen into submission.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: I have a point of clarification on the issue you have just been asked about. You would take on new staff with different backgrounds and experiences.

Claire Bassett: Yes—and all the practical bits that go with that.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You would need more resources.

Claire Bassett: Oh, yes.

Lord Hayward: There is a thing called a money resolution.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: That is what I thought.

The Chairman: We have covered the ground that we hoped to cover with you. We are very grateful to you for your clear and concise replies. It has been a very useful session for us. Thank you for coming. It has been nice to see you.

Facebook – Written evidence (PPD0030)

Dear Lord Lipsey,

We are pleased to be able to make a contribution to the work of your committee.

Your letter of 24 November 2017 set out several questions relating to four topics: the transparency of advertising, particularly political advertising; how we deal with fake accounts; the extent to which people source their news from our platform; and the role of fact-checkers. Each of these is addressed in turn below.

Advertising Transparency

Facebook's Advertising Policies

All advertising on Facebook is subject to our Advertising Policies (<https://www.facebook.com/policies/ads/>) which makes it clear that “Adverts must clearly represent the company, product, service or brand that is being advertised.”

All advertising is clearly identified as such, typically in a person's News Feed, like the example below which is clearly marked 'Sponsored':



The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook advertisement. At the top left is the profile picture and name of 'Saïd Business School, University of Oxford', with a 'Sponsored' label and a 'Like Page' button. Below this is the text 'Explore the effects of blockchain technology on your business strategy.' The main image of the ad features a grid of padlock icons on a dark background, with a white diagonal banner in the top right corner that says 'ONLINE'. Below the image, the text reads 'Oxford Blockchain Strategy Programme' and '6 weeks. Online.' At the bottom left is the URL 'GETSMARTER.SBS.OX.AC.UK' and at the bottom right is a 'Learn More' button.

Furthermore our policies make it clear that “Advertisers are responsible for understanding and complying with all applicable laws and regulations.” Facebook has relationships with advertising industry regulators in many countries, including the UK, such that we can and will work with the Advertising Standards Authority raises a concern with us.

Facebook – Written evidence (PPD0030)

Facebook does not require advertisers to provide information about how adverts are financed and therefore Facebook is not in a position to provide that information to people using Facebook.

Political advertising

You asked about the steps Facebook is taking in respect of political advertising.

In September, our CEO Mark Zuckerberg spoke about the initial steps (<https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10104052907253171>) we taking to help protect the integrity of elections, both in the United States and around the world. Our VP of Public Policy Joel Kaplan provided additional details the following month (<https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/10/improving-enforcement-and-transparency/>) on what we're doing to make advertising more transparent, increasing requirements for authenticity and strengthening our enforcement against ads that violate our policies.

In late 2017 we started a test in Canada of a new feature which will enable anyone to see the ads being run by a Page.

We know how important it is that we get this feature right — and so we're first rolling it out in only one country. Testing in one market allows us to learn the various ways an entire population uses the feature at a scale that allows us to learn and iterate. Starting in Canada was a natural choice as this aligns with our election integrity work already underway there.

We are also going to require more thorough documentation from advertisers who want to run election-related ads. We are starting with federal elections in the US, and will progress from there to additional contests and elections in other countries and jurisdictions. As part of the documentation process, advertisers may be required to identify that they are running election-related advertising and verify both their entity and location.

Once verified, these advertisers will have to include a disclosure in their election-related ads, which reads: "Paid for by." When you click on the disclosure, you will be able to see details about the advertiser. Like other ads on Facebook, you will also be able to see an explanation of why you saw that particular ad.

For political advertisers that do not proactively disclose themselves, we are building machine learning tools that will help us find them and require them to verify their identity.

We remain deeply committed to helping protect the integrity of the electoral process on Facebook. And we will continue to work with our industry partners, lawmakers and our entire community to better ensure transparency and accountability in our advertising products.

Foreign Interference

Last year Facebook Ireland conducted an investigation - as requested by the Electoral Commission - into campaign activity funded from Russia during the EU Referendum regulated period. We focused this investigation on a cluster of accounts that had already been identified as being run by a group known as the Internet Research Agency based in Russia. The outcome of this investigation was that we found a minimal amount of UK-related activity. We are however now conducting a further investigation to see if there were similar clusters engaged in coordinated activity around the Brexit Referendum that were not identified previously. We will have the outcomes of this investigation by the end of February and would be very happy to provide those to the committee and to brief the chair of the committee on the methodology - as we will be doing with the DCMS commons select committee.

As you know we have been in correspondence with the DCMS Commons Select Committee and I am happy to attach that for your information.

Fake accounts

You asked about the actions we are taking to deal with fake accounts. From the beginning, we have always believed that Facebook is a place for authentic dialogue, and that the best way to ensure authenticity is to require people to use the names they are known by.

Fake accounts undermine this objective and are closely related to the creation and spread of inauthentic communication such as spam — as well as used to carry out disinformation campaigns. We build and update technical systems every day to better identify and remove inauthentic accounts, which also helps reduce the distribution of material that can be spread by accounts that violate our policies.

Each day, we block millions of fake accounts at registration. Our systems examine thousands of account attributes and focus on detecting behaviors that are very difficult for bad actors to fake, including their connections to others on our platform. By constantly improving our techniques, we also aim to reduce the incentives for bad actors who rely on distribution to make their efforts worthwhile.

In the run up to the French elections in 2017, we removed over 30,000 fake accounts using new technological tools that were also used to similar effect in the run up to the UK General Election last summer.

News Consumption

You asked whether Facebook has carried out its own assessment of how many users rely on the site as their main source of news. We do not have this analysis, but the Committee is no doubt aware of independent academic analysis of this issue most notably by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism - (<http://www.digitalnewsreport.org>).

Fact-Checking and media literacy

Facebook – Written evidence (PPD0030)

Facebook worked with Full Fact during the 2017 UK General Election to provide tips on spotting false news both via articles in News Feed and through adds in mainstream media publications. This campaign was seen by around 28m people in the UK.

Later this year will begin partnering with third-party fact checkers in the UK to help improve the quality of content in people's News Feeds. If our partners assess that a piece of news being shared on Facebook is false, we down-rank it so that the audience for it will be much reduced. We will show a warning sign to those who try to share it (ie that the veracity of this story is disputed), but we allow it to stay on Facebook so people can have conversations about it – including debunking it. Facebook does not have a policy of removing false news from the platform entirely.

To help better equip young people in the UK to spot false news, become more media savvy and improve their digital literacy, we have come together with the APPG on Literacy; the National Literacy Trust; First News and The Day to launch the Commission on Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy Skills in Schools. As part of this project, we are working with these partners to survey young people on their experiences of fake news and help evidence gathering in this area.

I hope that this information is useful.

15 February 2018

Full Fact and Professor Helen Margetts - Oral evidence (QQ 47–55)

Evidence Session No. 6

Heard in Public

Questions 47 - 55

Tuesday 17 October 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Baroness Jay of Paddington (The Chairman); Baroness Couttie; Baroness Fall; Baroness Ford; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Howarth of Newport; Lord Lipsey; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve; Lord Rennard; Lord Smith of Hindhead.

Witnesses

I: Will Moy, Director, Full Fact; Professor Helen Margetts, Director, Oxford Internet Institute.

Examination of witnesses

Will Moy and Professor Helen Margetts.

Q47 **Baroness Jay of Paddington (The Chairman):** Good morning. Thank you very much for coming. You have been alerted to the fact that I am the substitute Chair for this session. I am Margaret Jay. You will meet the other Members of the Committee as the evidence session progresses.

I think you have seen the background to the Committee's inquiry. We have seen your background, so we can begin on reasonably firm ground about where we all are.

If you have seen some of the transcripts of the evidence, you will know that we have been particularly interested in the whole area of the accuracy of polling—more significantly, the degree to which that is now affected by the growth of digital media and the way in which, if possible, any form of intervention to influence that, whether by Governments or by anybody else, can be foreseen in the future. We recognise that the two of you have slightly different interests in this, and we are very grateful to you for coming.

This evidence session is broadcast on the parliamentary network, so everything is on the record. There will also be a transcript, which you will have an opportunity to correct, if you wish. We know your names and background, so you do not need to go into that.

I was intrigued by the section on your website, Mr Moy, called "Polls, Damn Polls and Statistics". Will you explain the role of your organisation during elections and how you feel it has impacted on polling, or on the election itself?

Will Moy: Thank you very much for the invitation. It is an honour to be here beside Professor Margetts, whose institute does excellent work.

Full Fact is the UK's independent fact-checking charity. At election time, we effectively have two roles: to give voters the best-quality information we are capable of finding and supplying; and to challenge inaccurate information and, where possible, to take it out of circulation or to get it corrected.

On the first side of that, we work with organisations such as the Office for National Statistics, the House of Commons Library and the Economic and Social Research Council to identify gaps in public knowledge and to fill them with reliable information. The 2015 election was our first general election; we have had a few major public votes since. During the election, we ran an 18-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week rapid-response centre that monitored what was being said in public debate by the parties, by the media and online. We tried to make sure that a reliable baseline of substantiated information was supplied by ourselves and expert partners such as the Migration Observatory at Oxford, the National Foundation for Educational Research and the Nuffield Trust, and to challenge inaccurate information. Perhaps the most vivid example in 2015 was when "Newsnight" made a mistake at the top of its programme. We were able to identify that, because we were monitoring it, and to get it to broadcast a correction in the same programme. That is the impact that, broadly, Full Fact tries to make.

Lots of claims are made about polling at election time, and we have seen a wide variety of nonsense about polls. Let me give a few categories. One is unrepresentative surveys done by media outlets. The *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mirror* hosted their own polls on their own websites and reported them as if they were representative polls. We fact-checked that and pointed it out.

We also saw reporting that, rather than look at the full breadth of the polling evidence, took individual polls out of context to produce the classic, "It is on a knife-edge", when in fact the polling evidence was much broader than that earlier this year. The *Mail on Sunday* compared two different polls, from two different companies, using two different methods, to claim a bombshell showing "May plummeting by 11 points".

After the election, we heard the claim that there was a 72% turnout among 18 to 25 year-olds. It is fairly obvious that there is no good basis by which that could possibly be known. The claim, which was made very prominently by a Member of Parliament, was eventually traced to a tweet by a blogger at *Huffington Post*, who said it was only an indication. That indication was, according to the original blogger, based on campaigners doing headcounts at polling stations and on conversations.

We fact-check everything from very high-quality research that is being misunderstood and misinterpreted to very poor-quality research that is being put out there with all the authority that our media outlets can give.

Baroness Jay of Paddington (The Chairman): It sounds as though your criticisms are directed mostly at the media—the way in which the information is reported—rather than at the methods of getting the facts in the first place.

Will Moy: That is very often true. We are all familiar with the ability to generate evidence in support of almost any position. That is a feature of

our public life. It is done by campaign groups and media outlets with agendas.

We are one of the rare organisations that have taken up the industry's own self-regulatory system. We have gone to the British Polling Council to make complaints about various issues. In my experience, the council and its members have been very responsive when we have raised things against their own standards. The BPC's code of practice requires its members to publish the details of surveys that are used in public, including the questions, the order of the questions and so on.

To take one example—not at election time—I remember ringing up the CEO of ComRes on Easter Saturday and saying, "Your poll is currently being used on the front page of a newspaper. Where is it?" Within about three or four hours, that was made public by the company. To the extent that the British Polling Council code of practice sets standards, my experience is that it has been pretty efficient in trying to meet them when issues are raised.

The other body that has a self-regulatory role in the polling industry is the Market Research Society. That is less developed. Unlike the BPC, which regulates companies, the Market Research Society regulates individual researchers. When we first contacted the MRS many years ago—I imagine it was in 2011—I remember it saying, "We don't really have a procedure for handling complaints". That was, therefore, more a notional idea than a practical one. To the best of my recollection, we have not raised an issue with the MRS in recent years, so I am not able to comment on how the system works now.

Q48 **Baroness Couttie:** You touched on some of the issues we faced in the reporting of polls in the media. Although they sometimes exaggerate and give the wrong picture, they are at least regulated in a way that means that they can write retractions, et cetera. There is possibly more of an issue with the internet, which is not regulated under media regulations. Do you find, as I would expect, far more distortion of polls—far more straw polls being used as fact—and misinformation on the internet? If so, what should we look at to try to rectify it? Do you think that your organisation is widely enough known so that, when you put out corrections, the right people—those who are using the internet, rather than the normal media—get that information and get the truth?

Will Moy: It is probably wrong to say that the media are regulated; only the broadcast media are regulated. The press is variably self-regulated—some of it very little—and those institutions do not work fast enough to work at election time. If the media publish something that is inaccurate at election time, by and large it is unlikely to be corrected before people vote. Media consumption is still skewed towards traditional media. When Ofcom asks people, "What is your main source of news about what is happening in the UK today?" two-thirds of people say, "Television".

Baroness Couttie: That is interesting. I read something recently that said that the main source of news information for the younger generation is not even online newspapers, but chatrooms and such like.

Will Moy: Exactly. I am sure that Professor Margetts will be able to comment in detail. My favourite description of the changing landscape is,

“Television—exit pursued by a snail”. Television remains dominant, but it is clear what is happening. I defer to the genuine expert at the table, but from the point of view of an organisation that tries to get its message out there I can say that television is where we reach most people—or what reaches most people—at the moment. However, if you are talking about the younger demographic, you are looking online. If you are wondering where we will be in 20 years’ time, the answer is definitely online.

When it comes to online media, traditional sources of information are still dominant. The people most likely to be spreading misleading claims at election time are candidates in the election. That is not to say that we should smear politicians with the idea that they all lie constantly—that is not Full Fact’s experience—but candidates have a need to push their case. Some of them do it very aggressively and some of them do it inaccurately, either wilfully—possibly—or just accidentally; we have seen plenty of mistakes.

Fascinatingly, they now have the ability to communicate directly with the public in their millions. That communication used to be intermediated by the media and was at least open to challenge. The political parties put out claims that are, of course, tendentious—that is their job—and unscrutinised. The claims go directly to the public, backed by massive online advertising campaigns with highly targeted information, and with limited or no scrutiny or public visibility to people who are not targeted by those campaigns. That is a deeply concerning phenomenon, if you believe that an effective election campaign should be a debate between different people on different sides. If it is actually two conversations, in two different places without interaction, that is something to be worried about. We need greater transparency on that. The same set of tools can be used by anyone, from partisan campaigns to foreign states. For all those reasons, we should be very concerned about that, structurally.

For our fact-checking in 2017, we did a joint project with First Draft, who are global experts on the spread of misinformation online and through user-generated content, as it is known. We brought in a team of verification specialists to look at what was trending online, what was spreading and what was going to spread, and wrote two daily emails to major newsrooms saying, “Here is what is going on online. Here is what we know about how accurate it is”.

In this election, more than in previous ones—I exclude the referendum from that—we began to see genuinely grass-roots material having a significant impact. One of the last and biggest fact-checks we did was of a grass-roots-made table comparing public spending when the Conservatives first entered government with public spending in 2017 or in the latest data—the case being that the Government had not cut as much as people said. The figures were not accurate in various ways, and we fact-checked that. However, the table had had massive exposure, and we had been asked all over the shop to fact-check it.

That suggests there is a new set of players in election campaigns who are not just the traditional voices. It is much more ad hoc and is not subject to the same structures as the mainstream media and professional polling companies, so there is much less opportunity—leaving aside the question

of whether it would be at all desirable—for central regulation of acceptable behaviour at election time. By and large, our election law is going to look very out of date very quickly. It is badly in need of a complete overhaul.

Professor Helen Margetts: May I pick up on the point about younger age groups, because age is emerging as the demographic that shapes political behaviour? In general, we have seen a reduction in the role of demographics in shaping the way in which people decide to vote or to participate politically, but age is tremendously important. I believe that the reason for that is the ubiquitous use of social media, the non-watching of television and the non-reading of newspapers among younger age groups. There is sharing of items from newspapers and of political advertising, sometimes by media outlets or by other bodies using media outlets, but, in general, social media is where young people spend their political lives.

That has an effect on all the things Will has been talking about. It particularly affects young people's perception of opinion polls. An opinion poll is a piece of social information—a bit of information about what other people think they are going to do. We know from decades of social science research that that affects the way in which we behave. If we think that other people like something, we are more likely to like it ourselves. We see that everywhere, but on social media that social information effect is very strongly reinforced all over the place—and it is completely ubiquitous social information. I do not know whether you use Facebook or Twitter— young people do not; they use other platforms—but some of their characteristics are the same: you see what other people have liked, what they have shared, whom they follow and what they have disliked. You see all this information about what other people are doing, which is a bit like a poll. That influences how you, I or any of us behaves all the time.

A poll is just one thing among many like that. I have a PhD in political science, but I find it difficult to understand what are and are not good polls—particularly in 2017, when the most respected polls looked like random number generators, to be honest. How can you tell the difference between a poll that is based on some rigorous sampling technique and a few questions in a little snap poll on Twitter asking how many people think Labour will win? That kind of confusion is just going to be a fact of life.

Q49 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** We are all grappling with the concept of alternative facts. Mr Moy, what is a fact?

Will Moy: Your fellow Committee Member, the award-winning philosopher Onora O'Neill, is perhaps better placed to answer that question. I know my limits.

Baroness Jay of Paddington (The Chairman): We cannot have cross-Committee evidence, I am afraid.

Will Moy: A wonderful comment was made by Brian Cox, if I remember right: you can fly a plane in a post-truth way, but you cannot land it in a post-truth way. There are facts about the world. What has been said in this meeting is a fact about the world. There are also facts about the world that are not knowable, and things that are purely matters of judgment and opinion. In recognising the spectrum of knowability and factualness—to coin two words badly—it is important to hold on to the fact

that there are facts about the real world. If we get in a post-modernist funk that says that there is no such thing as reality, we end up in a very difficult place. Those who live in less privileged countries, where the political debate is far less grounded in reality and official statistics are less trustworthy, quickly come to recognise the value of knowing whether prices are actually changing accurately. Facts are what happens in the real world; facts are not always knowable; and some things that are debated as matters of fact are truly matters of judgment or opinion.

Lord Howarth of Newport: You have embarked on a heroic undertaking. You told us that you are fact-checking everything, which is an impressive claim—not least in the face of the scale of disinformation and partiality we have been told about. Do you believe that there is a kind of Gresham’s law in this area—that good facts drive out bad facts? How are you coping? How many of you are there in your organisation?

Will Moy: If I said that we are fact-checking everything, that was certainly mistaken. We are currently a team of 11 and are trying to expand to a team of 20. We have been lucky to be joined by secondees from the Government Statistical Service, the Office for National Statistics and, recently, the Bank of England, so we augment our research base with some outside specialists. We are able to achieve quite significant reach. We have worked with all the big broadcasters—the BBC, ITV, Sky and CNN—to fact-check TV debates live. During this year’s election we had a daily column in the *Evening Standard* and were regularly in the media. We reach millions of people online directly.

That is all skewed towards people with an abnormal level of interest in politics. A hard problem to solve is how we talk about serious issues in public debate with people who, by and large, are not thinking about politics. We can differentiate the politics of “Who is up? Who is down?” from the politics of “How is my school? How is my hospital?” A much larger group of people are interested in the issues, if not the “sports” news of politics. However, that is still probably less than half the people, according to evidence from places such as the audit of political engagement.

We are not an organisation that is trying to correct mass public misperceptions. If we were, we would have to be much bigger and to adopt different tactics. This is a strategic question. What we have been until now is an organisation that tries to stop people in positions of power and influence in public life using unreliable information, so that we stop the two harmful effects: bad information leading to bad decisions, and bad information used by people in positions of power leading to distrust among the rest of the public.

We know that there is a not entirely justified but massive lack of trust among the public in everything that politicians and journalists generally say and do. We know that there is encouraging news when we look at your local MP, rather than MPs generally—more people are willing to trust them—but that gap of trust needs to be fixed. It needs to be recognised that the public choice not to trust politicians and journalists is a rational reaction—not to the idea that politicians and journalists lie constantly, but to the idea that enough of what people hear from politicians and

journalists is inaccurate and that simply trusting it all would not be a sensible way to behave. People are left with a terrible choice between blind faith and blind cynicism. Full Fact is trying to give a better alternative—the information to make up your own mind about important claims.

Some people read our stuff regularly and are abnormally interested in politics, but most people who come to Full Fact find us by search or by friends sharing things because they are interested in one particular issue—it may be sharia courts or how much we pay to the EU—and want to find reliable information on it. Whatever the topic is, we give people a source of reliable information that they can check for themselves and can make their own judgments on. That is the public service. The other service is holding to account people in positions of influence.

Q50 **Baroness Fall:** I will follow on from Lord Howarth’s very good question. The question that worries me is, “Are facts out of fashion?” rather than, “Are there good facts and bad facts?” In the referendum campaign one side criticised experts like both of you. There is a sense of reinforced bad facts, because people go to a site where they get a bad fact or simply a statistic that has been massaged. Surely that is more difficult to break. Professor Margetts, how does one break that cycle of reinforced views, prejudices and so-called bad facts on the internet? How does one fight against the idea that experts are not worth listening to?

Professor Helen Margetts: It has to be a multilevel approach. Full Fact and other organisations like it do a brilliant job, but it has to be completely multilevel. Facebook, for example, has just employed an extra 3,000 fact-checkers.

Will Moy: Something like that.

Professor Helen Margetts: That is one of the things that must happen. The big internet corporations and social media platforms have to do something. They must stop saying that it is not their problem, which is what we have seen until now. We are beginning to see some movement on that.

Unreliable information comes from all sorts of different sources and is distributed by people for different reasons—be it the cliché of a teenager in a darkened bedroom trying to make a few bucks or a politician seeking to get false information out. There are all sorts of different reasons, and they need tackling in different ways. One of those levels has to be the social media platforms themselves. We need public, political and, potentially, legal pressure to make sure that they carry on with the initial effort to employ fact-checkers and to block bogus accounts, which are responsible for disseminating false information—in some countries, to a huge extent.

There have to be legal efforts as well, particularly in the case of political advertising. There is a grey area here between the pathologies. I am sure you have talked about computational propaganda, political advertising and humans disseminating on social media. There is quite a grey area between those things. If a human is loading thousands and thousands of false tweets on to TweetDeck, are they a person or a computer? It is difficult to say. There has to be a completely multilevel approach.

That does not have to be viewed completely negatively, because people themselves, given the right context, have shown themselves to be willing to do all sorts of things online that we would not have expected. Millions of people have been involved in identifying planets, for example, on the citizen science platform Zooniverse. We used to think that only scientists could do that, so it is not beyond the realms of imagination that you should crowdsource fact-checking. We are beginning to see some examples of that.

Q51 **Baroness Jay of Paddington (The Chairman):** Going beyond that, you say that you need to legislate. The problem, which you have talked about already, is that there are many different countries, with different legal and political systems. How on earth do you begin to intervene internationally?

Professor Helen Margetts: Political advertising has been mentioned. In some cases, it is an example of doing something about the law as it stands, which is not fit for purpose.

Baroness Jay of Paddington (The Chairman): That is here. If its origin is Ukraine, for example, it becomes more difficult.

Professor Helen Margetts: Yes. There are examples for which there will not be a legal solution—where the solution has to come from the social media platforms themselves, for example, by blocking accounts relating to hate or incitement to violence. It has to be a multilevel solution.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: I want to follow up on exactly that. This shows the value of the Select Committee. We started off majoring on political polling, and we have now moved on to social media. Have you read Carl Miller’s evidence? He really alerted us to the dangers, the misinformation and the “disinformation and manipulation”—to use his words—by social media, using bots and false accounts. I had not realised how extensive that was. Now we are finding out more about Russia, and Hillary Clinton talked about it on TV the other day.

With no disrespect to your organisation, there is an old saying that lies are half way around the world before truth has got its boots on. That is the trouble. I was at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe’s Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media last week. Every member state is concerned about this. We were discussing it there, with Ukraine and a number of other countries, although Russia is not there at the moment. Carl Miller said that legislation, we as parliamentarians and Governments are not keeping up with it. Could you come up with a series of suggestions on how we can deal with what is a major worry?

Professor Helen Margetts: As I said, there will not be one solution—it has to be a multilevel approach. You cannot treat social media platforms as separate from all this, because they are global and are outside it. They are very much involved in any solution, so it has to involve talking to them.

There is a lot that we do not know about computational propaganda. We get a lot of moral panic about computational propaganda and fake news. In the 2017 election in Britain, there is evidence to suggest that four out of five pieces of news reported just on Twitter—which is perhaps the most

famous for fake news—were professional news reporting. Only one in five was not, so the situation is rather different from that in the US.

We know about Twitter because it is possible to get data from Twitter. We know incredibly little about other platforms. For example, 60% of 15 to 34 year-olds are on Snapchat—a huge number—yet there is virtually no research on it. You cannot get data from it. You cannot get data, in the main, from Facebook or Instagram, which is the other platform used by young people.

Part of the solution has to be finding out what is happening on those platforms and understanding the problem a bit better, because I think that it has been hugely exaggerated. It is quite different on Snapchat from what it is on Twitter and Facebook. That is one important thing to say. We should not get completely carried away with distress about this completely pernicious environment, because it is not quite like that.

Baroness Jay of Paddington (The Chairman): It might become so.

Professor Helen Margetts: Except that—as I think we are both saying—there are all sorts of ways in which it can be tackled, from all sorts of different directions. It is not inevitable—

Will Moy: I agree with everything that Professor Margetts is saying. The other optimistic note I would sound is that there is time. At the moment, we are not a country in which everybody's main source of news is social media. We know that is coming. There is a short window for Parliament to catch up with the changes that have happened in the world and to bring election law into the 21st century. Historically, Parliament has always been rubbish at changing technology. Ever since licensing of the printing presses, it has been very difficult. Human fertilisation and embryology is one of the shining exceptions, but by and large this is hard. You get it right by establishing a good, coherent intellectual framework for what you are trying to achieve and then seeing how it applies to the real world.

Actually, this is more than a regulatory issue, as most good legislative responses are—if I can make such a sweeping statement. It is also not an issue that is completely international. Over the last few years, we have had elections in France, Germany, the UK and the US. They have had very different experiences of this phenomenon. Our partner First Draft, with which we worked on the election project, has also worked on CrossCheck in France, an award-winning multi-newsroom collaboration, and on WahlCheck in Germany. It found very different experiences of the level of exposure to and spread of misinformation online. This is a cultural thing, not just a fact about how the internet works.

Obviously, there is a question of education underpinning that. If you really want to think about the long term—where we want to be in 50 years—there are urgent questions about how we educate a generation that, for the first time, does not have dominant sources of news, is exposed to an absolute proliferation of information sources and has to make very difficult judgments very quickly between them.

There is also the question of whether we are providing a strong source of reliable information for people. It is appalling that we as a country spend a treasure on the Office for National Statistics, the House of Commons

Library and the Economic and Social Research Council—three bodies that collectively spend hundreds of millions of pounds to inform our public life and public debate—but they are then told to sit down and shut up at election time, due to purdah rules. It is the most obviously self-defeating way to behave. We could significantly improve the supply of high-quality, trusted information in public debate.

By the way, we are going to have to fight for that trust with every new generation. There needs to be more emphasis on how those bodies communicate with the public to earn the trust of a young and sceptical generation, because the trust and deference of previous generations cannot be relied on in the same way.

We must also be willing to challenge misinformation—absolutely. That is for the second part. We must supply good information and challenge misinformation. That means the media and the behaviour of political parties. There is a question—on which you are the leaders—about whether people are willing to challenge misuse of information by people on their own side in an argument. That is a question not just of regulation but of culture. A small charity like Full Fact cannot impose it from the outside, but we will come here and make the case to you that you are the leaders of our public debate. What you stand up and say and where you draw the lines are important to what happens next.

The third element—I will come back to the social media companies in a second—is that most people believe that politicians generally cannot be trusted to tell the truth. Why on earth should politicians not live down to those expectations? There is an easy response to fake news—distrust everything. The really hard question for the coming generation is: how do we persuade people to trust anything? How do we get people to believe things that are not palatable, are not welcome and do not come from people they like? The real challenge for the future is, “How do we build trust?”, not “How do we apply distrust where it is called for?”

Q52 Lord Rennard: Mr Moy, you have talked powerfully and persuasively about some of the problems. You have explained that you are a small charity that is trying to combat some of them. Will you explain a little more about the scale and budget of the organisation? For example, what was the budget in 2017? How does that compare with other things?

Do you and Professor Margetts think that there is a case for extending public funding to the sort of work that Full Fact is doing? The Government admit that the cost to taxpayers of the 2017 snap general election was £140 million. The political parties spent at least £60 million on their campaigns. You could say that rich newspaper proprietors spent a lot more on propagating what they wanted to do. Look at the cost of all the media operations during the election. Yours is a relatively small organisation that is trying to combat some of the misinformation that appears in those things. What is the scale of the organisation? Could you do with more resources? Do both of you think that there is a case for some form of support for the work that you are doing from the taxpayer?

Professor Helen Margetts: On your second question, the key is education. That would be a place to put resources.

Let us look at one positive point. In an era when people like me—and, probably, people like you—bemoan the fact that young people are not interested in and engaged with politics, we see that young people are engaged with politics and are more interested. We have been measuring the wrong things. If we look at what is going on, we see a rise in interest in and engagement with politics among young people. That is partly because of digital media, because in digital politics they can do little bits of politics as they go about their daily lives. Politics has become less lumpy. You do not have to go to a long meeting or join a political party—you can do little bits of politics when you are on your phone. That is a good thing.

The trouble is that our education system has not in any way adapted to that. Many children are blocked from using the internet and social media at school. With resources, they could be educated to understand what they look at and whether it is a fact or unreliable information—to look at the source and think about where it comes from. Building digital media into any sort of civic education, and ramping up civic education, would be one way of tackling that. It is definitely a place to put resources.

Will Moy: At that stage you cannot just mean education in schools. If you educate only people under the age of 18, educating the bulk of voters will take 50 years. In many ways, the problem with information online is people who have not grown up as digital natives trying to navigate a very unfamiliar landscape with very sophisticated—for want of a better word—adversaries. If you are talking about public education, it needs to be on a much wider basis.

If you are serious about civic education, you have to ask questions like, “Why does nobody have a sense of the scale of the economy?” and, “Why does nobody have a sense of what proportion of people in the UK are immigrants?” There is good evidence from the Ipsos MORI perception polls of a lack of basic factual information among the general public.

I am tempted, Lord Rennard, to take the bait that you kindly scattered in the water. I do not suggest that Full Fact is the answer to the problem of misinformation in public life. To answer your question directly, Full Fact started in 2010, on a budget of about £150,000, with about three staff. We have grown over time. Last year we were at £500,000, with 11 staff. This year we are growing to £1 million and are in the process of doubling, up to 20 staff. Most of our money comes from charitable trusts, but this is a good opportunity to declare some interests. For the first time this year, we got funding from both Google and Facebook, and a donation of advertising from Twitter, for our election campaign. That is all declared on our website and is publicly available. Last year we had a donation of £1,000 from Ipsos MORI to our crowdfunder. It has also seconded staff to us in the past. YouGov very kindly donated questions to us, to help us to track our own effectiveness. We have interests, therefore, in some of the subjects of this inquiry. I should make that clear.

On where public money could do the most good and a larger solution, I think that Full Fact has a role to play. One of the things I am proudest of Full Fact having done is to be a catalyst for other organisations to step up further. By and large, we have an extraordinarily rich canvas of academic

expertise in this country, ranging from the likes of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which is well respected in public policy circles, to organisations such as the National Foundation for Educational Research, which is much more focused at the front line of teaching. All of them wonder how they can engage with the next generation of communication and contribute best to the wider public debate. By and large, they lack the resources and, in some ways, the capabilities and skills to make that jump.

Academic funding, as it is currently done, will never fill that gap. The research councils fund research, not communication. By and large, they do not fund researchers to answer simple questions like, “How much money is spent on the health service?” We can have long answers to complicated questions, but nobody is filling in the gaps by providing simple answers to simple questions, which is what most people want to know.

There are inspirations in places like Germany, where there are thoroughgoing civic education campaigns—some of which a public body might be able to do. The watchdog role, which Full Fact performs, should not be government funded, because that would clearly be a conflict of interest, but the Office for National Statistics, the House of Commons Library and the Economic and Social Research Council are three organisations whose leaderships have embraced the agenda of encouraging and chastening. Encouraging research institutions to step up, helping to train journalists, to give them skills to be more confident in a world where data is increasingly driving journalism, and training and giving skills to the public, are all roles that are not necessarily the purview of Full Fact or that need to be done just by Full Fact. I think we can contribute, but we should be looking to fulfil all those functions in the best places, with much larger-scale funding.

In seven years, Full Fact—growing as we have—has reached 3% public name recognition. That is not nothing; it is 1.5 million people—and it was hard work. It is also scraping the surface. We know that. Those of you who have worked in this field know that, if you want to launch a major brand the public knows about, talk £10 million as a starting point and go from there. I think that there is a role for civic education, but let us not underestimate the scale of the challenge to reach the general public.

Q53 Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: I have a question for both of you. Each of you has skirted the question of whether it would be possible for legislation or regulation to address this range of problems. You have slightly suggested that it is not feasible and that you need the collaboration of the major actors—the social media companies, the internet service providers and the data analytics companies, presumably. Do you have any reason to think that self-regulation will work? I noted what Mr Zuckerberg said recently, which was, of course, encouraging but was relatively minimal. I think that it was to be transparent about the sources—at least, the proximate sources—of advertisements. However, the problem is larger than that. If legislation and regulation will not do it, what sort of remedy do you see here that could be effective?

Professor Helen Margetts: Self-regulation clearly has not worked, but only quite recently have we seen even any self-regulation. Until quite

recently, there was nothing. Now there are moves from Facebook, in particular, and Twitter to introduce some sort of transparency in advertising, but it is very limited. I think that it is completely inadequate. That would be the place at which to direct regulation.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: The question that everybody is now discussing is whether the social media companies, in particular, should be regulated as publishers, not as platforms. Is that feasible? Many of the less political things people worry about most, such as radicalisation or grooming of young people and hate speech, happen via these platforms. If they were publishers, it would count as defamation and they would be liable. Can it be done?

Professor Helen Margetts: Yes, but the most worrying things that happen online are already illegal. How would it be policed? That is the point.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: The difference I am looking to is that anonymous content is apparently no one's responsibility. A great deal that happens is based on it being impossible for the ordinary person to know whose speech it is—who said that. It seems to me that their being a publisher would at least give an answer to that question, in that a publisher cannot say, "Oh well, I did not know the name of the author". It appears that not knowing the name of the author exempts them from action on defamation, for example, or hate speech. They take it down—sometimes—but they carry no liability for having done it.

Will Moy: This is a wide-ranging debate. It goes much wider than election law. I cannot claim any expertise in the hate speech elements or many other aspects of it. I am also aware of how young the internet is and how many things have come and gone already. It is not impossible to imagine that in a few years' time we will not be talking about Facebook. In a few decades' time, certainly, that is an entirely feasible supposition. One of the challenges of thinking about the structures in this area is that we do not know how or whether they are going to settle down.

I do not for a moment believe—speaking of electoral law—that this is not an area where regulation can be effective. It is obvious that it cannot be the same regulation as in the past. You will be familiar with the provisions of the Representation of the People Act relating to Lord Haw-Haw, which say that you cannot broadcast to influence an election from a foreign place into the UK. That is now hilarious, as YouTube videos are a huge part of how social media election campaigning works. The provisions are now completely redundant and out of the way. However, the idea that we would allow the rules for our elections to be determined by the terms and conditions of US social media platforms strikes me as an enormously significant thing for Parliament to be willing to say. If Parliament is really willing to let the rules of elections be determined in that way, first, what is it doing and, secondly, where is the accountability?

Q54 **Baroness Ford:** You exhort us passionately to do something about it, but then you say, "It is all a bit difficult". Will you help us to understand how best to deal with this? Professor Margetts, you were quite sanguine about computational propaganda. I am far less sanguine about it. I deal with it in my day job and see a huge growth in it. We are naive to think that

somehow the continent is just better at and more ethical on this. It is not. There is not the same internet take-up, but it will come there as well, in the same way as online shopping is happening. Online use is changing all the time there.

I would like to understand how, technically, we can deal with computational propaganda, where that is being misused. Is it the platforms that we have to address, is it the companies, or can someone outside those see it and deal with it? How, technically, do you get under the skin of that and deal with it, where abuse is happening? I am really struggling to understand how we deal with it technically and practically, and how the regulation would have to be shaped to enable that to happen.

Professor Helen Margetts: I did not mean to be sanguine at all. At the Oxford Internet Institute, we have one of the largest European Research Council projects studying computational propaganda. My colleagues would kill me if they thought that I had said that.

Baroness Ford: To be fair to you, you said that we should keep it in proportion. “Sanguine” was my word.

Professor Helen Margetts: I believe that. We need to break it down, because it comes from all sorts of different sources, with different motivations, which have to be tackled differently. A big part of tackling it must come from the social media platforms. Of course, they are becoming better and better. The platforms themselves have to become better and better at working out—

Baroness Ford: I am asking about the technical level, where you can see the algorithms and bots. Where is that visible? That is what I am struggling with. At what point does it become visible to people like you and me?

Professor Helen Margetts: It is visible, for example, if something posts an item in an impossibly short time. Then, it is obviously a bot. On Twitter at the moment, if something does not have a photograph or has hardly any information, it is probably a bot. However, that is only a temporary thing.

Baroness Ford: It is becoming very sophisticated.

Professor Helen Margetts: It is going to become more and more sophisticated. Twitter is particularly vulnerable to this, because it is so easy to set up an account on it. As I understand it, Twitter is addressing that. All the platforms will have to think about how easy it is to set up an account and to be anonymous. It is much more difficult to be anonymous on Facebook, for example. In part, the key to the solutions will be how transparent it is, what the procedures are and what is being done to tackle it, because we know so little about that. Whenever I am in discussions like this, I always think back to the last discussion I had with people from Silicon Valley. You realise that a lot of these decisions are being made by engineers, basically. I often talk about this, but the people who are making the decisions are doing so in relative isolation. Somehow, we have to bring those worlds together.

Will Moy: That is one reason why democratic accountability in this debate—not just conversations among tech companies—is crucial. Full Fact is one of the world’s pioneers of automated fact-checking technologies, which are very directly in this area. As Helen has described, the computational propaganda element of that is tracking the misuse of agents online. That is becoming increasingly sophisticated. If you are dealing with a network of 10,000 bots, you can create very realistic-seeming network effects, whereas trying just to fake one thing is much more noticeable.

We are trying to create technology that can automatically recognise the repeating of claims that we have checked and found to be wrong, and begin to check certain kinds of claims that can be checked automatically. There are many claims that cannot be checked automatically and that no realistic future technology will be able to check, but some types of claims—statistical claims, for example—are more susceptible to automated checking.

We are focusing on what is being said on television, in Parliament and on major news websites, and then on social media. One of the risks of conversations like these is that you end up accidentally sidling into a conversation about how we check the modern equivalent of every pub conversation. There is no reason that we should want to do that. The question in my mind is, always, not, “Where is the speech, and where is it inaccurate?”—people have been wandering around saying wrong things at the kitchen table throughout history—but, “Where is the power?”

Baroness Ford: To my mind, there is a big difference between an individual tweeting something that is just a rant or their opinion, and a concentrated, orchestrated effort, with thousands and thousands, seemingly, of opinions behind it. As you said, quite rightly, at the start, we are all influenced by that, because it is a kind of opinion poll. That is insidious. We have to take it hugely seriously.

Will Moy: I could not agree more. That is what I mean by concentrations of power. A lot of debate about free speech is obscured in its relationship to access to public platforms—or, to put it another way, access to audience attention. In many ways, the real commodity—particularly in political speech—is access to people’s attention. That is why historically the broadcast media have been considered worthy of regulation and why the standards of the press have been considered worthy of seven or eight royal commissions and inquiries since the Second World War, to whatever effect. Those have power, because they concentrate attention.

Whatever we describe the Facebooks and Twitters of this world as—for my money, I wonder whether we need a new conceptual category, rather than the old ones, but I do not have a sophisticated view on that—they do not concentrate attention on one thing in the way in which a newspaper front page does. However, they are capable of directing attention towards lots of things and of being used to drive attention—sometimes in automated ways, sometimes in adversarial ways. We need to look at who is collecting mass attention, how we look at their behaviour and how they can abuse the attention of the public, not at what members of the public are saying to one another and whether we like it.

Baroness Jay of Paddington (The Chairman): We could go on for many hours about that, but I am afraid that we are running out of time for this session. I know that Lord Smith wants to ask a question or to make a comment. I will then ask you quickly to summarise anything we have not touched on. We have touched on a great deal, but I am sure that you have points that you want to make.

Q55 **Lord Smith of Hindhead:** The noble Lord, Lord Foulkes, stole my question—not for the first time, I have to say. Lord Rennard asked the second question I had thought of, which happens.

At the beginning of the session Professor Margetts said that people like to follow others—if they see that that is the direction in which things are going, they like to be part of it, in a social media context. The Committee has been slightly concerned that polls can affect the way in which people vote, so incorrect polls are a real concern. Mr Moy, as you are the dragon slayer of false facts and dodgy polls, I will ask a question about funding. We always want to find out who pays for the polls and, if the polls are incorrect, what their direction might be. Who is the largest funder of Full Fact?

Will Moy: Until very recently, it was the Nuffield Foundation, which funds social science research. Most of our funding came from Nuffield, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the Legal Education Foundation and Barrow Cadbury Trust.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Those three—the Nuffield, Joseph Rowntree and the other one that you mentioned—all have clear political opinions at times.

Will Moy: I do not think that the Nuffield Foundation would accept that point of view. It is a social science funder.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Okay. Let us just leave it for the other two. The Joseph Rowntree Trust had clear political views at one point. As an organisation—by the way, I think that you do a great job—you also have political people on your board. Is there not a danger sometimes that, if you try to correct a fact, those who do not like your doing so will say, “They would say that, wouldn’t they? They are being funded by people who have certain views”? I know that some people in my party might sometimes regard the Joseph Rowntree Trust as a quasi-communist organisation. I would not go that far, but you take my point.

Will Moy: Absolutely.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: You fall into the trap of, “Who is checking the fact-checker?”

Will Moy: Anybody who looks at all our funding—all of which is published on our website—will see that we have funders ranging from the City of London Corporation, St James’s Place Wealth Management and other FTSE companies through to, until recently, the trade union Community and members of 38 Degrees, which is very much a left-wing, grass-roots campaign group. Most of our funding comes from charitable trusts.

There is no such thing as neutral funding, as one of our trustees pointed out. Therefore, the only thing that you can do to give reassurance to

people that you are not coming with a particular agenda is to have a wide range of funding. Our chairman, the Conservative donor Michael Samuel, and one of our trustees, Lord Lipsey, the Labour peer, do not have much in common except for a joint commitment to the idea that politics and journalism are important and deserve to be done well. You can expand that out to the other eight members of our board of trustees, who include distinguished researchers, distinguished journalists and distinguished members of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties.

What we have not constructed is an organisation of distinguished people who have never had an opinion in their lives. We have constructed an organisation of people who have nothing in common except for the idea that it is worth trying to fight for a public debate that is informed as well as possible. Historically, every political party has used our work and been criticised by us. David Cameron, when Prime Minister, stood up in the House of Commons and told a Labour Member that she should listen to Full Fact and that she was wrong. Three months later, we had him print a correction in *Hansard* in the House of Commons. We have been quoted on both sides of a referendum. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. I invite people to look at our work, to see that we link to all our sources, to look at the sources and to reach their own judgment.

Lord Lipsey: May I correct one slight error that crept in there?

Will Moy: I am sorry.

Lord Lipsey: Will said that the funding came from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. I think that that is distinct from what used to be called the Reform Trust, which is regarded as left wing by those in Lord Smith's party. They are quite distinct. The Charitable Trust is kosher, like Nuffield.

Baroness Jay of Paddington (The Chairman): That is a very useful correction on the record. I am afraid that we have now reached the limit of this session, unless Lord Smith wants to make a supplementary point.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: No.

Baroness Jay of Paddington (The Chairman): I am sorry that we do not have time, as I thought we might, to ask you to give some additional thoughts. Of course, there is the opportunity, if you have the energy and the time, to write to the Committee with anything you feel we have not covered appropriately.

Professor Margetts, I was intrigued by your statement that "there is an urgent need for redesigning democratic institutions". Perhaps we should look at that more, and more broadly, in our parliamentary capacity. You touched on it, but we have not met it head on this morning.

We are very grateful to both of you for your very valuable, interesting and wide-ranging contributions. Thank you for your time.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Hear, hear.

Will Moy: Thank you very much.

Google – Written evidence (PPD0029)

1. Introduction

1.1 Google welcomes the House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media's inquiry into the effects of political polling and digital media on politics, and we appreciate the opportunity to provide input.

1.2 Google's mission is to organise the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful. Our products are primarily information discovery tools where consumers are looking for answers to questions, including around political information.

1.3 Political advertising has long served an inclusive function in democracies; it has enabled citizens and groups of all kinds to take positions they care about and attempt to persuade others. Adverts, petitions, fundraising appeals, and calls to action have existed for generations. With the arrival of the internet, it has become possible for citizens to make use of these tools to greater effect — and entities from charities to trade unions to NGOs have made use of online campaigns.

1.4 Google believes it is important that groups have the ability to communicate and make themselves heard, and we believe that political advertising on our platforms - a tool that is equally open to individuals as it is to organised groups - plays a positive, inclusive and informative role.

1.5 However, political adverts on our platforms must meet the same high standards on transparency and integrity as all other adverts on our platform. As well as adhering to industry regulations - ensuring they are legal, decent, honest and truthful - political adverts are also subject to our policies on advertising content and targeting practices. For example, advertisers are prevented from targeting ads on the basis of sensitive information such as people's political party affiliation or political beliefs.

1.6 Google has also been working to address concerns regarding the accuracy and partisanship of some emerging media sources - particularly in relation to their role in influencing elections. Google wants to make it easier for people to get their news from legitimate and verified sources to help tackle misinformation. We are also looking to tackle the issue of misinformation through a series of measures, including removing advertising from sites that misrepresent content, promoting trusted and vetted news sources, and supporting fact-checking organisations that can provide independent verification of news items.

2. Advertising and sponsored content

2.1 Advertising is integral to Google's work and has enabled the internet to become a largely free, open and accessible space - allowing anyone with a device and an internet connection to access news and information and make their voice heard all over the world. It has also helped to level the playing field

Google – Written evidence (PPD0029)

between small and large businesses, the individual and the collective - enabling people to find an audience where they would not have been able to previously.

2.2 There are two broad categories of Google ads: search ads and display ads. Search ads appear in response to a search by a user in Google Search. By contrast, display ads are image or video ads typically embedded in some other content on a publisher's web page.

3. Our policies on political advertising

3.1 Google believes it is important that people have platforms to communicate and make themselves heard, and election advertising has long served a positive and inclusive role in elections.

3.2 However, all political adverts are subject to our policies on advertising content and targeting practices, and we require all political ads and landing pages to comply with the local campaign and election laws.

3.3 Advertisers are not able to use sensitive interest categories, including political belief or political party affiliation, to promote products or services. When promoting political content, advertisers must also comply with:

- Applicable laws and industry standards for any location that a campaign targets.
- Any applicable election 'silence periods'.
- Google's country-specific requirements.

3.4 Political advertising is also not permitted on all of Google's ad networks. For example, it is not permitted on:

- Call extensions
- Location Extensions
- Review extensions
- Consumer ratings annotations
- Seller ratings annotations
- Dynamic remarketing ads
- Social ads

4. Tackling Malicious Content

4.1 As a company, we've been tackling malicious actions directed at our users or services for many years. This has included:

- In 2007, we introduced our Safe Browsing tool, which helps protect our users from phishing, malware, or other attacks; today it is used on more than 3B devices worldwide.

Google – Written evidence (PPD0029)

- When we detect that a user's account has been targeted by a government-backed attacker, we show a warning that includes proactive steps the user can take to increase the security of the account.

5 Ensuring user transparency

5.1 Google wants to support the proper functioning of the ad-supported ecosystem, and people's trust in it. That means serving ads that are relevant, that respect users' privacy, and that users can trust. Google never sells its users' personal data to any advertisers - nor do we let advertisers access users' personal data.

5.2 As part of this, we strive to provide users with transparency into (and control over) all ads they see on our platforms.

- 'Why this ad' is a tool that gives people information on why ads have been served to them. It takes the form of an "i" (information) label/button on Search, YouTube and Gmail ads. If a user presses the button, they will see a drop-down notice explaining what criteria the ad they're seeing is based on (eg this ad was based on your current search terms).
- 'Mute this ad' is an option given with many ads on Google partner sites and apps. The tool takes the form of an 'x' in the corner of the ad and allows users to dismiss the ad if they so choose. Muting an ad also stops certain other ads very similar to it that have been purchased by the same advertisers, as well as other ads from the same advertiser that use the same web URL.

5.3 We have developed many tools to help our users clearly understand what data we collect and how we secure it.

- 'My Account' is a single destination, unique to each Google user, which gives people transparency over the data we have and control over how it is used. Users can turn off personalised advertising, change interest preferences and, if they so choose, delete all of the information we have related to their account. In 2016 there were over 1.5 billion unique visitors to 'My Account'.
- 'Privacy check-up' is a procedure we ask all Google account holders to go through at least once per year. It takes people to their privacy settings and asks them to manage the data they share, update the information they choose to make public, and adjust the types of adverts they would like Google to show them.
- 'Ad settings' allows people to amend, delete, or turn off completely personalised interest-based advertising from Google across Google services, as well as on websites and apps that we partner with. Ads Settings preferences are cross-device, which means that users only need

to make their preference choices on one device for them to be adhered to on any other devices they're signed into.

6. Fact-checking and veracity of information

6.1 The Internet has enabled an enormous increase in the quantity and diversity of information available to the average person. This has brought substantial benefits, including improved access to knowledge and education, broader political engagement, and a greater plurality of news and editorial views. Ofcom data shows that most consumers now rely on more than one news provider, with an average of 3.5 sources used in the UK.

6.2 While this diversification of the news industry has had an overall positive impact on the plurality of media consumption, it has created new concerns about the accuracy and partisanship of some emerging media sources. The most high profile of these issues is the phenomenon of 'fake news', where content on the web has contributed to the spread of misleading, low quality, offensive or false information.

6.3 While this is a relatively new problem, our goal remains the same - to provide people with access to relevant information from the most reliable sources available. And while we do not always get it right, we are making good progress in tackling the problem through a series of measures, including removing advertising from sites that misrepresent content, promoting trusted and vetted news sources, and supporting fact-checking organisations that can provide independent verification of news items.

- **6.4 Fact-check:** Along with our partners at Jigsaw, last year we announced that we would enable publishers to show a 'Fact Check' tag in Google News for news stories. This means that when you conduct a search on Google that returns an authoritative result containing fact checks for one or more public claims, you will see that information clearly on the search results page. The snippet will display information on the claim, who made the claim, and the fact check of that particular claim.

This information is not available for every search result, and there may be search result pages where different publishers checked the same claim and reached different conclusions. The fact checks are also not Google's and are presented so people can make more informed judgements - allowing people to understand the degree of consensus around a particular claim and have clear information on which sources agree.

For publishers to be included in this feature, they must be using the [Schema.org ClaimReview](https://schema.org/ClaimReview) markup on the specific pages where they fact check public statements, or they can use the Share the Facts widget developed by the Duke University Reporters Lab and Jigsaw. Only publishers that are algorithmically determined to be an authoritative source of information will qualify for inclusion.

Finally, the content must adhere to the general policies that apply to all structured data markup, the Google News Publisher criteria for fact checks, and the standards for accountability and transparency, readability or proper site representation as articulated in our Google News General Guidelines.

- **6.5 New Search Quality Rater Guidelines:** developing changes to Google Search involves a process of experimentation. As part of that process, we have evaluators - real people who assess the quality of Google's search results - give us feedback on our experiments. These ratings don't determine individual page rankings, but are used to help us gather data on the quality of our results and identify areas where we need to improve.

As part of this, in 2017 we updated our Search Quality Rater Guidelines to provide more detailed examples of low quality webpages for raters to appropriately flag, which can include misleading information, unexpected offensive results, hoaxes and unsupported conspiracy theories. These guidelines will begin to help our algorithms in demoting such low-quality content and help us to make additional improvements.

- **6.6 Ranking changes:** we combine hundreds of signals to determine which results we show for a given query - from the freshness of the content, to the number of times your search queries appear on the page. We have adjusted our signals to help surface more authoritative pages and demote low-quality content.
- **6.7 Direct feedback tools:** The content that appears in features such as Autocomplete and Featured Snippets - which shows a highlight of the information relevant to what you're looking for at the top of your search results is generated algorithmically and is a reflection of what people are searching for and what is available on the web. This can sometimes lead to results that are unexpected, inaccurate or offensive.

We have therefore made it much easier for people to directly flag content that appears in both Autocomplete predictions and Featured Snippets. These new feedback mechanisms include clearly labeled categories so you can inform us directly if you find sensitive or unhelpful content. We plan to use this feedback to help improve our algorithms.

25 January 2018

Professor Jane Green and Professor Chris Hanretty – Oral evidence (QQ 32–37)

Evidence Session No. 4

Heard in Public

Questions 32 - 37

Tuesday 12 September 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Baroness Fall; Baroness Ford; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Janke; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve; Lord Rennard; Lord Smith of Hindhead

Witnesses

I: Professor Jane Green, University of Manchester; Professor Chris Hanretty, Royal Holloway, University of London.

Examination of witnesses

Professor Jane Green and Professor Chris Hanretty.

Q32 **The Chairman:** I welcome our two witnesses, Professor Jane Green and Professor Chris Hanretty. If people walk out, it is not because you are boring them but because, unfortunately, we are clashing with a memorial service for Patrick Jenkin, who died recently and to whom some of us, including me, were much attached. I will stay with you. Please forgive anybody who leaves.

Thank you very much for coming. We try to conduct these sessions reasonably informally, so you need not be in terror. You also have the safeguard that you will see a transcript afterwards and will be able to correct anything that is not quite right. You have a list of our interests in front of you. You are being broadcast via the parliamentary website, but you are protected by parliamentary privilege; that is to say, you can say anything you want and, if somebody sues you, they will not succeed.

Shall we crack on? Could I start with you, Professor Green? What is the evidence on the influence of polling on people's voting behaviour?

Professor Jane Green: In so far as the academic evidence exists, we can say that it points in different directions in different elections. Has everybody said that?

It is a really difficult thing to detect. One way is to look at how people's perceptions of the outcome of an election drive their electoral choices. Before I say what my research shows in that area, it is important to say that people's expectations of election outcomes come from lots of sources aside from opinion polls. I am stating the obvious, but it is a really

important thing to say. One thing we know first and foremost is that there is enormous bias in people's perceptions about an election outcome. It is not that people act in a vacuum and are influenced only by opinion polls. We know that people generally expect the party they like to do well. UKIP voters were very disappointed in 2015 because they had expectations that far exceeded realities. Of course, those came not from opinion polls but from their own beliefs and wishes.

Obviously, people talk to people they know and who are similar to them, so information comes through that. There is information that comes from political parties. It would be foolish to ignore the fact that in campaigns—I cannot think of an election campaign in which this has not been true—parties always tell us, "Actually, the Conservatives are not way ahead. It is a really tight election and it is really important that you go out and vote". Of course, that was slightly ironic, as it turned out. There are elections where parties are not doing well and constantly tell us that they are doing better than the opinion polls expect. People get those expectations from a variety of sources in the media. They also get a bit from people who are commenting—experts and so on. Polls come into that mix. They influence parties and experts, but fundamentally they are just one aspect of the wider environment.

It is a very difficult thing to detect; I am sure that everybody has said that. In our research, my colleague Ed Fieldhouse, Chris Prosser and I looked at the 2015 election. It is a little too soon to look at the 2017 election definitively, although we have some indicative evidence about it. In the 2015 campaign, little changed in aggregate as regards who supported each of the parties, but one thing that did change as the campaign progressed was people's expectation that there would be a hung Parliament. There was a common perception that that was bad for Labour, because if people, maybe especially UKIP voters, were faced with a Labour-Conservative race they might move over to the Tories and that would damage the Labour Party.

In fact, we found no evidence for that whatsoever. We looked and looked, and analysed and analysed, using the British Election Study panel data, which allows us to look at switching, people's preferences, where people came from and where they went, and how their expectations changed in the campaign. We found that when people expect there to be a hung Parliament they are more likely to vote for minor parties, because a minor party might have more influence in a hung Parliament situation and major parties are less likely to be able to secure their policy promises. In 2015, there was a real surge in the number of people voting for minor parties. That was not the whole effect, by any stretch of the imagination, but we think it was a small part of the explanation.

In 2017, although I have not looked at the data to support this yet, I guess that it probably worked a bit in reverse, and that the expectation of one or two of the major parties doing very well depressed the minor party vote share. My colleagues Jon Mellon and Chris Prosser looked at expectations of Labour winning and were very much able to put to bed, at least as far as they were concerned, the idea that people voted for Labour because they thought that Labour was not going to win.

That was all about expectations. I want to come back to the caveat that in 2015, when we saw expectations of a hung Parliament increase, it was very much in the political parties' interests to flag up warnings about the likelihood of a hung Parliament. Certainly in the Conservatives' case, they were flagging up the possibility of Nicola Sturgeon influencing Ed Miliband, and so on. Those expectations did not come from opinion polls alone.

The Chairman: Do you want to add anything, Chris?

Professor Chris Hanretty: Yes. I should begin by registering an interest of my own. I worked with Survation in the run-up to the election and expect to work for it again, so that may colour what I say about its performance.

In my written evidence to the Committee, I noted that, alongside methods of identifying the influence of polls through what we might call observational data, there have been experiments regarding the impact of polls—their direct effect on people. Those involve splitting one group into a control group, which is given information about an election but no information about polling, and an experimental group, which is given information about polling. One recent article that I thought was quite useful found that, if people were presented with a scenario in which the Dutch Labour Party was shown to be up by 4 percentage points in the polls, respondents were 2 percentage points more likely to vote for that party, compared with the control group. There is some experimental evidence, but it concerns only the direct effect on people who have been explicitly exposed to a poll. I venture to suggest that not one person in 100 can recall a single particular poll from the last general election. People who can are probably political obsessives whose minds were already made up.

Baroness Fall: Professor Green, in a recent article that was sent to us, you talk about the “increased volatility” of voting. That might change—it might go back—but it might not. If it is something that remains with us, at least for now, how does it affect polling? In particular, how does it affect the way in which political weighting is done?

Professor Jane Green: I know that Will Jennings has given evidence to the Committee and has shown that there is no time trend in the errors or the accuracy of opinion polls over time, yet there is a time trend in the increasing switching of the British electorate, in particular, between elections. Those two patterns are very interesting together, because they tend to suggest that the increase in volatility in electoral choice is not having a damaging impact on the accuracy of polls.

Where it could play a role is in the degree to which what happened in the last election is an indicator of what will happen in the next election. I am not really the right person to talk about how pollsters choose to weight on the basis of either voting intention or party ID, but I can say that it presents a challenge to the opinion poll industry, in so far as the only benchmark in any given opinion poll is the last election. That is the reality; that is the truth. That is why opinion polling is so important in elections, because there is a benchmark against which pollsters can judge how well they are doing in measuring public opinion.

One of the interesting things that probably happened—it is too soon to say for definite—was that there was a substantial change in the relationship of the proportions of younger and older voters who turned out in the elections. In 2017, that was a challenge for propensity to vote models. The willingness to switch between parties and to change behaviour throws up a challenge for the opinion polling industry, but I do not think that there is evidence yet to suggest that that increase in volatility—

Baroness Fall: The two things are slightly separate, are they not? The greater turnout of young people is a different thing from the volatility that exists. From the conversations we have had so far, it is not that they have been muddled, but that we often talk about the two together. They are quite different. For example, in the last election, was there a sense that there was another issue at play—Brexit—and that divided people and was a bigger thing than their normal party affiliation? I do not know. It would be an interesting question for Professor Hanretty. Is it just that people felt very differently about different issues in the last election in particular?

Professor Chris Hanretty: The results of the referendum were useful to pollsters in some ways, because they alerted them to the important influence of education in structuring people’s vote choice. It meant that any pollsters who were not making sure that the weights they constructed had some role for education were likely to be off. In a previous session, reference was made to the way in which state polls in the United States failed adequately to account for the educational mix of the populations in which they were interested.

When a new issue emerges, to the extent that positions on that new issue are associated with structural features, such as education, for which we have a good baseline from the census—how many people there are with degrees, how many people have left high school with no qualifications, and so on—that can help. If it is not related to one of those structural characteristics, it becomes much more difficult, so one of the challenges for pollsters is to get people with the right levels of political interest. There is no question on the census that asks, “How interested are you in politics?”, so we do not have a good fix on how interested the samples ought to be. Volatility, or changes in issues of some kind, can be helpful, because that alerts us to new structural changes, but there are other types of volatility that are clearly making life more complicated.

Q33 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** Baroness Fall touched on the question I was going to ask. It is about the influence of polls not on people’s decision-making but on turnout. Some of the discussion that we have had about the outcome of the 2017 election and the referendum was about the inaccuracy of prediction on turnout, and, as you said, Professor Green, turnout in certain demographics. I want to underline that and to pick up a point that you make in the article Baroness Fall referred to, in which you say that, although common assumptions about opinion polls suddenly becoming inaccurate are very widespread, in fact there has been the same standard of error since the 1960s. You also say that we need “to understand the electorate”, rather than “make predictions”.

Professor Jane Green: In 2015, there was clearly a polling miss. That was uncontroversially the case. The independent inquiry responded to

that, and so on. A lot of work was done to understand that and to respond. That was partly the difficulty in 2017; people were trying different things, and some succeeded, while some did not.

I have been very involved in analysing elections since 2015, both in the US and in the UK. What struck me in the Brexit vote, in the vote in the US presidential election and in this year's vote was that the opinion polls were pointing in both directions. I am sure that lots of people have said that. In the case of the referendum, as many were showing a vote for leave as were showing a vote for remain. What really struck me was that each of those outcomes ran against the conventional wisdom. The conventional wisdom was that Donald Trump could not be elected by a normal electorate that was not blind to the Access Hollywood tapes and revelations, and that Brexit was too great a risk. In the last general election, many people did not expect Jeremy Corbyn to be considered broadly electable—at least, if we cast our minds back to a year ago.

What was striking was not that the polls were wrong in those three elections. The reporting of the polls was unhelpful, although there were certain very good exceptions. In the presidential election, Nate Silver did an extremely good job of highlighting probabilities and different methodological choices. When I was watching that, I thought that it was a really good example of good practice. What was striking to me was the consensus among people who are considered experts; people who comment and talk about elections and analyse them could not conceive of those outcomes taking place. Those two factors were at play. It was not a polling miss per se.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: But you stand by your point, which seems to me to be interesting. So much attention has been given to polling recently because of its supposed inaccuracy. We have had Professor Sturgis's commission, et cetera. I think you are saying that, frankly, there is not much difference in the errors since the 1960s.

Professor Jane Green: Exactly. The point I make about prediction is that, increasingly, there are lots of people who want to be certain. We are asked over and over again to give a certain answer—to give a certain prediction. I have been teased many a time on national television. People say, "Call yourself an expert? You do not want to give a prediction". I say, "I do not want to give a prediction because there are good reasons for the uncertainty around what might happen in this particular election". That was very much my motivation for writing the article. I was put on the spot, because every single person had given an answer, and I did not want to. I am really pleased that I did not give an answer, because I would have been set up to fall. I have made a bit of a point about this. Being pushed into providing certainty in a social scientific framework in which our role as experts is to highlight what we do not know and to highlight uncertainty is perhaps part of a culture. It is a very difficult thing to pin down. It is something I have some opinions about, but other people may not share them. It contributes, but it is difficult to see just how much. I certainly think that there are bigger questions than putting your finger on a number. I do not take part in that.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Are polls influencing the results? Lynton Crosby's star is not as high as it used to be, I admit, but he very cleverly got the Tories to do posters of Ed Miliband in Salmond's top pocket and Sturgeon pulling the strings for Ed Miliband. I have some friends who are Tory MPs—I know it is difficult to imagine—who say that that helped them. They got a surge of votes because people down in England did not want the thought of this woman from Scotland deciding what should happen for the United Kingdom. Surely using the polls as a predictor influenced the outcome of that election substantially. Is that not right?

Professor Jane Green: My own research looks at precisely that question. We looked at people's expectations, at voters who chose between the Conservatives and the Labour Party and at whether the expectation that there might be a hung Parliament took people away from Labour and swung them to the Tories, which is the logic of that. We found no evidence for that. We tried very hard to seek evidence for it. We looked at different kinds of marginal seats, different kinds of voters, and so on.

That is not to say that these things do not influence elections at the margin. Perhaps some people give that answer as a reason when they have already made up their mind. Just because, when parties are campaigning, they are told that consistently, it does not necessarily mean that it is true; I think it means that the media are cueing that particular story that week and it is at the top of people's minds, so that is the answer they give. It could be that that did happen and we cannot detect it with the very rigorous and extensive analyses that we have run. I have not said that polls do not influence elections at all.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: No, you have not.

Professor Jane Green: To go back to Baroness Jay's point, the closeness of a race certainly influences turnout. We know that in closely fought elections, where there is a small margin between two of the major parties, turnout tends to be higher. It would be foolish to say that is not important.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Let me use another example. Michael Ashcroft chose specific marginals in which to carry out his polls and gave them great publicity. That was deliberately to influence the outcome—to pretend that those snapshots were predictions and to move people in a particular direction. Is that not right?

Professor Jane Green: You can look at all sorts of party leaflets. It is not just Michael Ashcroft; all the parties try to give voters a clear message. They are running their own surveys, giving their own messages and painting a picture. Thankfully, we have very responsible parties in this country, on the whole, but we can look cross-nationally at the way Donald Trump is trying to manipulate beliefs about his popularity and success. That is done all the time. Polls are a rigorous, objective source of data. Without them, there would only be partisan messages, which would still exist.

Lynton Crosby is a fascinating example. Crosby is a man who is a bit vilified at the moment but was elevated in 2015. Both those responses place too much onus on the influence of the campaign. We know that in 2015 the big damage that was done to the Tories was the Lib Dems going

into coalition. The 2017 election was largely about Brexit before the campaign and about leaders afterwards. We can place too much weight on the influence of such things, but I do not disagree in any respect that there are those who want to manipulate what people think about the likelihood of different outcomes in elections.

Professor Chris Hanretty: In defence of Lord Ashcroft, he said on repeated occasions that his polls offered just a snapshot, rather than predictions. By the end of the 2015 campaign, he had commissioned so many polls that he had covered almost all the relevant marginal constituencies, so it was hard for me to see a clear pattern that might indicate an attempt to influence.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: He never told us who conducted the polls for him.

Professor Chris Hanretty: No.

Q34 **Baroness Couttie:** I am interested in looking at the accuracy of polls, particularly different types of poll. We have seen some information that has been provided to us on BrandsEye, which is done on digital media. It looks at positive and negative tweets, which are analysed by individuals, not by computer, so you can understand the sentiment behind what a tweet is saying. The information we have been given indicates that that is a far more accurate way of generating a prediction. I would like to get your ideas about how true that is. Is it a way forward, or are there flaws that mean it is no better than what we are looking at currently?

Professor Chris Hanretty: The use of social media data in predicting elections is very fraught. We know from some of Professor Green's colleagues on the British Election Study team that the Twitter population is not representative of the general UK population. We also know that the degree to which it is not representative is changing over time. As the population ages, there may be more people who have been brought up on Twitter. The age profile changes, so the character of Twitter changes.

Baroness Couttie: Surely we know a reasonable amount about users of Twitter. Given that there is sample bias in any polling, you could make some adjustments for that or, indeed, combine it with a more conventional form of polling to get a better picture.

Professor Chris Hanretty: It is a bit like the *New Yorker* cartoon of long, long ago: "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog". Now no one knows whether you are a bot. No one knows whether you have been working from nine to five in Moscow pumping out disinformation. While it is possible to hazard some guesses about particular user profiles based on the content they produce, it remains a guess, so any attempt to extrapolate from that guess just multiplies the uncertainty.

There is uncertainty that comes from not knowing who those people are to the degree of satisfaction that we would want. There is an additional complication, which is that positive sentiment itself does not tell you anything about votes. You have to calibrate sentiment to what happened in the last election. You might say, "We have historical Twitter data for 2015, which showed that this ratio of sentiment for the parties was associated with this pattern of votes", so you base your forecast on a

particular model from 2015. The risk is always that a model that was perfectly calibrated to 2015 might break when applied to 2017. My suspicion—it is just a suspicion—is that, of the many attempts to use social media to predict electoral outcomes, we hear only about the successful ones.

Q35 **Lord Smith of Hindhead:** In the evidence that has been given so far, we have heard a lot about how gathering information from people has changed for the pollsters, with some saying that they need to move on and others saying that they need to go back to face-to-face door-knocking. Professor Hanretty, in your declaration of interest, you said that you had worked for the polling company that came closest to predicting the outcome of the last election. What did you do differently from the others?

Professor Chris Hanretty: I cannot claim responsibility for the success of Survation’s headline polling. That is all to its credit and nothing to do with me.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: I was not suggesting that you were behind it. I just wanted to know what Survation had done differently from the others in getting that information.

Professor Chris Hanretty: The main thing that distinguishes it is the idea of committing to a particular analysis plan and sticking to it. Survation knew—not substantially in advance of the campaign, because very few of us knew about the campaign substantially in advance—that it was going to use self-reported voting intention, and it stuck to that. It had its system of weights and stuck to that. It resisted successfully the urge to make any last-minute adjustments. What distinguishes Survation is that it was not trying to fight the last war. It stuck to its guns.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Did it gather the information face to face, from phone calls or from the internet?

Professor Chris Hanretty: It uses a mix of online panels and phone polling.

The Chairman: I have a rather naive question. Could you give us a description of the MRP methodology, without using the words multilevel or regression?

Professor Chris Hanretty: I can try.

The Chairman: Just to do it step by step, slowly.

Professor Chris Hanretty: The idea behind multilevel regression and post-stratification is to take a large national sample and produce estimates of opinion at a lower level, typically a lower geographical level—most often, estimates of what is happening at constituency level. To do that, even with a very large national sample, you need additional information, both about respondents and about constituencies. When presented with a national sample, if you have information on people’s education, age, past votes and other individual characteristics, you can start to model what they might do. You can build a model based on those characteristics and then use other sources of information, such as the census and past election results, to look up how many people of each type there are in each constituency. For example, I might be interested in the

number of people aged 18 to 25 in Norwich South who left high school without any qualifications. I use my model to generate a prediction for each of those types, look at the census to find out how many people of each type there are and simply add them up.

It is a way of combining information from polls with other sources of auxiliary information in order to produce a more fine-grained picture. However, it depends for its accuracy on the informativeness of the other sources of information and our ability successfully to model it, so it involves many of the same problems that traditional pollsters face in selecting the variables upon which to weight. If you do not know that education is important in structuring vote choice and do not include it in your model, you will be blindsided. The question of the appropriate model comes to the fore.

The Chairman: If I understand it right, the advantage of that over conventional polling is that you get constituency results and therefore have a plausible substitute for using uniform national swing to get what the shape of the House of Commons is going to be. That is where the advantage lies. Is that right?

Professor Chris Hanretty: It is a way of producing constituency estimates, which would otherwise be impossible. You could not commission enough constituency polls to cover the whole country.

The Chairman: Okay. I am with it. Thank you.

Q36 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** If polls' methodology is all good and reputable and the way in which they are published is right, reasonable and sensible, why are the polling organisations extremely sensitive about the idea of an independent regulator?

Professor Jane Green: I do not know what different pollsters have said about their sensitivities, but I know that the World Association for Public Opinion Research has expressed some concerns about regulation. I imagine that one of the reasons is that when opinion polling organisations self-regulate they are able to change methodologies, to try different things and to learn from their mistakes. I can imagine there being a perception that if they were less free to experiment with methodologies, for example, or different question wordings—I do not know what kind of regulation would be thought about—it would diminish the quality of opinion polling research precisely because they would not be free to experiment with their methodologies, to try different things and to learn, in an iterative scientific process. Of course, that assumes that any regulation that was thought about would have an influence on those kinds of decisions. Also, the self-regulation that exists from the British Polling Council, being predominantly about transparency and publishing methodological choices and all the data that is collected alongside headline polling figures and so on, serves that process very well. It is difficult for me to second-guess their precise motives.

Professor Chris Hanretty: I would also be reluctant to second-guess their motives. I can only assume that, as with all businesses, they are concerned about the burden of regulation on the cost of doing what they do.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Ofcom, for example, regulates STV and the BBC. It is accepted, it does not create huge problems for them and it gives us some reassurance. Why should polling organisations be so reluctant to consider some kind of regulation, in which the polling industry would be involved—something along the lines of a panel representative of the parties, the polling organisations and the media?

Professor Chris Hanretty: It would depend very much on the character of the proposed regulation. In so far as some regulations might constrain methodologies, there might be reasons to oppose such regulation—all the reasons that Professor Green mentioned.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: If a methodology had proven to be consistently inaccurate, self-regulation would want to control that anyway, would it not?

Professor Chris Hanretty: Except that methodologies that work in one election are not always guaranteed to produce accurate results in subsequent elections.

Professor Jane Green: Let us imagine that the impression is that this is a reaction to a problem that is not a problem. Obviously, 2015 was a polling miss. You can look at that in different ways. You can say that it was not so bad and that it was not outside the historical range. Nevertheless, it was a polling miss. Subsequent to that, the industry would turn round and say, “There is not strong enough evidence that there are systematic difficulties in opinion polling”. Of course, lessons are being learned. Lessons were being learned in different directions in 2017, and there will be more lessons to be learned from subsequent elections. In 2015, the BPC commissioned the independent inquiry, which did a good job of diagnosing those difficulties. I was a member of that inquiry, along with Professor Sturgis. Subsequent to that, as I have outlined, there is evidence to suggest that the primary difficulty has been the reporting and interpretation of opinion polls.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Each time they get it wrong, there is an inquiry. Then they get it wrong again, and there is another inquiry. You are too young to remember 1970.

Professor Jane Green: I had to read a lot about it.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: I remember it very well. I was a candidate in West Edinburgh. I was absolutely certain I was going to win, because the polling was telling me that. In fact, we put a big poster across the Ferry Road in Edinburgh, saying “Labour will win”. It was there for about a year afterwards, unfortunately. As you know, we lost. We were ahead in the polls by double figures, but then Mr Heath won. The record is not very good, is it?

Professor Jane Green: I defer to Chris, but the danger is that we ask too much of opinion polls and that they are elevated to a level where any inaccuracy is deemed a failure. Actually, opinion polling is a difficult exercise. There was a polling miss then, there was a polling miss in 1992 and there was a polling miss in 2015. In other elections, they have done quite well. There are polling misses in other countries. There was a more severe polling miss in 2017 in the French run-off elections.

The difficulty is that we demand that opinion pollsters are bang on the money. That is an unrealistic expectation, given the difficulties of sampling, of getting people to talk to you and of declining response rates—all the difficulties that are inherent in the exercise. Possibly, opinion pollsters looked as if they were doing a very good job after 1992, and we got a bit of a shock. Perhaps we judged them to be almost too successful and that served to build unrealistic expectations. That is the error: we ask too much of social scientific surveys, which cannot be that precise all the time.

The Chairman: We will, of course, get a chance to cross-examine the BPC about its reasoning. I had precisely this conversation with a past chairman of the BPC. His answer was, “We are against regulation because it will stop us doing methodological experimentation that might improve polls overall. We will get regimented in a particular scheme”. Obviously, that has some force. Patrick, I will let you ask a question.

Q37 **Professor Patrick Sturgis:** Professor Hanretty, can you comment on the role of poll aggregation techniques and models, which are a fairly new feature of the polling landscape? They do not do polling directly themselves, but they combine polls, which should bring some benefits. One of their key features are the probabilities we now get—that Clinton is 90% likely to win the election or, in the UK context, that there is an 80% probability of a hung Parliament. There are questions about what those numbers mean, what the public make of them and how we communicate them. I know you have been involved in some of those exercises.

Professor Chris Hanretty: I have been involved in two largely unsuccessful attempts to forecast elections. Generally, I would say that aggregating polls is useful, because it means that we no longer focus on polls that, for whatever reason, are exceptional or dramatic. In the previous session, you heard Carl Miller say that the media tend to focus on those dramatic polls. Certainly, if you look at the polls that are retweeted most on Twitter, the more the poll reflects a change relative to the last poll conducted, the more likely it is to be retweeted. If you aggregate, you avoid that undue focus. Some of the polling companies are slightly anxious, because any media organisation can aggregate polls, and if they aggregate polls they might not pay for them to be produced.

Polling aggregation is useful, but there is a difficulty in communicating the results. We as human beings tend to be really bad at working with probabilities. Often, we have to resort to analogies; for example, “It is as if there were a 10% chance of rain tomorrow”, or, “The odds of something happening are the same as for rolling a six on a dice”. There is always the challenge of communicating uncertainty. That is very difficult whenever you communicate a large interval.

I give the example of my own forecast at this election. I incorrectly predicted a Conservative majority. That was the central estimate—the outcome I judged most likely—but I was prepared to say only that it would come in at a 95% forecast interval that was 50 seats wide. Lots of people took the mickey out of me and said, “That is of no use at all”. My reply was, “That is the degree of uncertainty we should have, given the historical record”. Either you are exact, and you risk being lampooned, or

you try to convey uncertainty, and people think, “What is the use of this?” Polling aggregation is helpful, but it is not without its communication challenges.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: If the polls are so inaccurate and there is that much margin of probability in them, what is the point of having them?

Professor Chris Hanretty: I will flip the question around, in a sense. If we are interested in knowing what might happen, polls are the most useful source of information. They are more useful than looking to betting markets and more useful than looking to social media. If we want to forecast, we will probably look to polls.

Of course, there is a question as to whether we ought to forecast at all. I think there is a general interest in knowing what might happen. The BBC and ITV pay lots of money to work out the results of the election just 12 hours before we will know those results definitively, because we want to know what might happen. There is also the question of whether there is an interest in knowing what might happen because, if we foresee that something might happen, we might change our actions accordingly. That was one of the key issues with the reporting of the polls and the probability of a hung Parliament in 2015—the suspicion that people changed their behaviour on that basis. Polls are useful because we want to know what others think and to make decisions on that basis.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Every pollster we have had in here has said, “This is a snapshot. This is 3 furlongs before the end of the race. It should not be used to forecast. Forecasting is not what polling is about”. You have just said, “That is exactly what people want. The media are paying for a poll. They want a forecast. They want to predict, and those forecasts have an effect on the way people might vote”. You can understand why we have a concern. The last thing you said summed up exactly what many of us are concerned about.

Professor Jane Green: One of the difficulties is: what is accuracy? We are not saying that polls are entirely inaccurate. I am not saying that there is an error margin, that they are held up to too high a standard and that we should not expect them to be accurate at all.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: No, but you are saying that there has been consistent error since the 1960s.

Professor Jane Green: There is error.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: That is the point that Lord Smith is making.

Professor Jane Green: Yes, there is error in polling. There is error in all surveys—all data. If you look at economic forecasts, you will find error in those, too, but we still use them to make enormously important decisions. Polls tend to be particularly helpful where they agree on a trend. We might say that there is error around the top-level estimate, but let us think about the 2017 general election, for example. All the polls agreed that Labour was gaining and that the Conservatives were losing support. There was strong consensus around that trend. Regardless of methodology, of the questions you were asking and how you were weighting, there was a change. I would argue that that was a very

important part of the election. It was a very important thing for the public to know about, because the public have a right to know what is going on.

What we are thinking about, of course, is the horse race—which party is going to win an election—but polls are not there only for that. One of the features and functions of opinion polls is to take the temperature of what the public care about. Which issues are of primary concern? What should legislators be focusing on? Is Donald Trump—or any party—doing well? Around an average, with all the caveats about how accurate we can expect that objective evidence to be, there are clear benefits to understanding. Like Chris, I suggest that you flip the question around and imagine a world where we do not have opinion polls because we do not trust them at all. That would be a step too far. The key is to admit that they cannot be perfect.

The Chairman: There is a difference between this and issues polling, for example. In the case of the general election, you get a result and can see whether the polling was accurate. With issues polling, there is no result to compare it with; you can only say, “The methodology looks broadly sound”. Very often, the methodology does not look broadly sound. There is a big difference. If opinion polling for elections is not sound, neither can we trust all the issues polls.

Professor Jane Green: One of the most important changes that happened in the 1990s, the 2000s and subsequently was the rising concern about immigration. We would not have known about that if it had not been in evidence across a range of opinion polls. It has had a phenomenal impact on British politics—on UKIP’s rise, on the EU referendum, on the dimensionality of vote choice, on how important Brexit was, on what moved people’s votes, and so on. That is just one example. We know that after the financial crisis there were concerns—

Lord Smith of Hindhead: But the pollsters got the prediction on the referendum wrong. Although you picked up these trends, you still got the outcome of the elections incorrect.

Professor Jane Green: I—

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Not you personally—I am talking about the polling industry.

Professor Jane Green: Not all pollsters did. The EU referendum is a perfect example of the polls showing a neck-and-neck possibility. As many polls showed a leave lead as showed a remain lead. Some were too close to call. That was an instance where we—me included—could not quite believe that it would happen, because of the enormous risk that was judged to be associated with that vote, yet the British public took that risk. That was a surprise.

Professor Chris Hanretty: It comes back to the point about communication of uncertainty. If a pollster were to tell you, “The result will be exactly this. You should form your behaviour on that basis”, and that information was subsequently revealed to be inaccurate, you would feel that you had been had. If, as pollsters do, someone were to say, “The result is probably going to be this, but it could be 3 or 4 percentage points either way, and you should take that into account when making your

decision”, you might feel less bad at the end of it. The question is: are those who report on polls adequately communicating that uncertainty? My suspicion is that they are not.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: But they are the same people who pay you to produce the polls.

Professor Chris Hanretty: Yes. There is a question about how the media report polls. That takes us into questions about the media ecology, degrees of statistical literacy in the media and the time and space pressures on journalists. As I suspect Jane and I both know, teaching people about statistics is really hard. It is difficult to give a good summary of what a margin of error is, so a sub-editor might say, “That is the first thing to go”.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: They are too busy doing the graphics to show what the House of Commons would look like if the poll was accurate on the date.

Professor Chris Hanretty: There are many difficulties in communicating what polls might look like if they were translated into seats. House of Commons graphics are not always the best way of doing that.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Is it fair to say as a historical reflection that the polls are usually accurate, with all the caveats you have described, when there is a major shift—when there is a trend, whether about an interest or about a voting intention—but that they are not able to reflect the subtleties of marginal calls, which, from the politicians’ point of view, are the ones that are the most interesting and the most important?

Professor Jane Green: I am not sure that I have an answer to that, if I am honest. The polls seem to have more difficulty when they are judging vote shares for large parties. They seem to do better when they are judging vote shares for smaller parties. Hence, polls tend to do better in multiparty systems than in systems such as our own. That is only consistent with work by Professor Jennings.

There are also large shifts that polls get wrong, but perhaps not ones we have focused on. In 2010 and 2015, particularly in 2010, there were issues about the Liberal Democrats’ rise. In the 2017 election, the polls did not do a particularly amazing job of judging just how big the UKIP decline was going to be. That was a substantial shift, from nearly 13% down to 2% or so. Those things are difficult to detect, partly, perhaps, because not all the people who intended not to vote UKIP either said so or knew that they were going to do that. I do not know the answer.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Or whether they were going to vote at all. This goes back to the point that I keep trying to get at: whether the polls have an impact on turnout, and whether that was the defining characteristic of the difference in the referendum and in the 2017 election.

Professor Jane Green: Certainly, it was not a factor in 2015. It is fair to say that we can rule that out.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I am not talking about 2015.

Professor Jane Green: It could easily be a factor. In the EU referendum in 2016, we saw that turnout was higher in areas that voted more strongly to leave and lower in areas that voted more strongly to remain. Of course, in a referendum every vote has equal weight. It also seems to have been very important in 2017.

Professor Chris Hanretty: May I go back to the issue of marginal calls, which you mentioned? There is a difference between accuracy in the sense in which Professor Jennings will record it when he sends his additional evidence and the perceived accuracy of polls. Reference has already been made to the polling error in the second round of the French presidential election. No one really cares about that, because the polls indicated the correct winner. When there is a marginal call, the pollsters get it in the neck because they backed the wrong horse. When it is a runaway election, they can be more wrong, in a sense, without incurring any penalty for that.

The Chairman: Baroness Jay, I cannot resist recalling the wonderful aphorism of your late, great father, for whom I had the privilege of working: never believe the polls unless they are bad.

We have had another useful and informative session, and a very good debate all round. Thank you for your trouble in coming to see us and for the work that you have put into your answers to us. We will take it all into account when we draft our report.

Professor Chris Hanretty and Professor Jane Green – Oral evidence (QQ 32–37)

Professor Chris Hanretty and Professor Jane Green – Oral evidence (QQ 32–37)

[Transcript to be found under Professor Jane Green](#)

Professor Chris Hanretty, Oliver Heath and Michael Spagat – Written evidence (PPD0011)

1. What are the most significant challenges for conducting political opinion polling and achieving accurate results? What measures could be taken which might improve the accuracy of political opinion polling?

1.1 The most significant challenge to political opinion polling is cost. Carrying out high quality random probability surveys is very expensive. Surveys which use other forms of sampling, such as quota sampling or non-probability sampling, are cheaper, but depend for their accuracy on adjustments meant to mimic the results of a random probability sample. If these adjustments are wrong, the results will be inaccurate. In most cases, there is no way of knowing in advance of an election whether polling companies are making the right adjustments or not. Good adjustments embody substantial elements of professional judgment, about which experts disagree.

1.2 Two measures could be taken to improve the accuracy of opinion polling. The first of these is to require polling companies engaged in election polling to deposit their microdata (anonymised individual responses together with information on respondent characteristics used in survey weighting) following an embargo period. The release of this data would permit different research teams to examine the sensitivity of results to different weighting schemes or methods of analysis. An example of the value of this approach comes from the New York Times (Cohn, 2016). The NYT gave the detailed micro data from one of their proprietary Trump-Clinton polls to four analytical teams and asked for projections. The results ranged from Clinton +4 to Trump +1. These are all valid estimates made by serious professionals. Yet they differ quite substantively because the teams differ in some of their key judgments.

1.3 Much political polling data are collected by private companies that must make a profit on their investment. These organizations might feel threatened by this open data proposal. However, these concerns can easily be addressed by allowing an appropriate interval of time for data collectors to monopolize their datasets. This could work much in the way that patents are issued to provide creative incentives for inventors by giving inventors a window of time to reap high rewards before their inventions can be copied by competitors. The only difference here is that these monopolization intervals for pollsters should be much shorter than they are for patent intervals.

1.4 The second measure is for the government to continue to fund random probability surveys for the purposes of social scientific research. The government already funds the British Election Study (BES) through the Economic and Social

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Research Council, and BES data have been used by polling companies to help improve their methods of analysis.

3. What new methods have had the most impact on political opinion polling? Can technological innovation help to improve the accuracy of polling? What is your assessment of polls that produce constituency level estimates of voting intention?

3.1 The most important new method in political opinion polling is the use of multilevel regression and post-stratification (MRP). This is a method which models respondents' choices as a function of different respondent and location characteristics. (In this sense it is a *regression* model). Such models also take account of the way that respondents are grouped into constituencies or regions. (In this sense they are *multilevel* models). These models are then used to make predictions for particular voter types in each area, where the number of voter types in each area is typically based on the census. This last element is the post-stratification element.

3.2 One of us (Hanretty) was one of the first academics to develop MRP models for the United Kingdom. Together with Ben Lauderdale and Nick Vivyan Hanretty analysed how the accuracy of MRP varies with samples of different sizes and different sets of information (Hanretty, Lauderdale and Vivyan, 2016). Hanretty first used these techniques to produce estimates of constituency level opinion in 2014, when they were presented at a House of Commons Library event.

3.3 Polls which are analysed using these techniques can be used to produce constituency level estimates of voting intention just as with any other opinion. Our assessment of these techniques is positive. The way in which estimates are post-stratified to census targets can mean that reasonable results can be produced from non-representative samples. However, most of the gains in accuracy associated with these techniques are not the result of census information but information on constituencies. That is, it is more helpful to know whether the constituency is currently held by party X than it is to know the demographic breakdown of the area.

3.4 For this reason, it is helpful if companies and researchers producing seat-level estimates of opinion using MRP provide information on (1) the variables to which they post-stratify; (2) the variables which they use to model variation across constituencies.

5. Can polls be influenced by those who commission them and, if so, in what ways? What controls are there on the output of results, for example to prevent 'cherry picking' of results?

5.1 Poll results can be influenced by those who commission them in a variety of ways (question wording, question ordering, post-hoc adjustments to weighting schema). One important way is through response rates. This is particularly important in probability surveys which tell potential respondents what the survey is being used for and who it is commissioned by as part of informed consent. Surveys that are commissioned by well-known agencies tend to get higher response rates than those which are commissioned by agencies that are either not well known or not trusted. To give an obvious example: a poll is likely to get a higher response rate if it is commissioned by the BBC than if it is commissioned by the Socialist Workers Party. These differential response rates can have an important impact on the final results.

6. What impact do political opinion polls have on voters, politicians and political parties during election campaigns? To what extent does the publication of voting intention polls affect voters' decisions, for example, in terms of turnout or party choice? What are the implications for election campaigns if polls are inaccurate?

6.1 Many people have researched the effects of opinion polls on voters' behaviour. This research has not always produced consistent results. This is because two contrasting effects are commonly discussed in the literature:

- a "band-wagon effect", whereby a reported increase in support for a party (or opinion) will produce further subsequent increases in support; and
- an "under-dog effect", where a reported decrease in support will produce subsequent increases.

Originally, these effects concerned changes in support; the concepts have now been stretched to include new information which reports "high" or "low" support without reference to how popular the party (or opinion) was before (Rothschild and Malhotra 2014;

Van der Meer, Hakhverdian, and Aldering 2015). Generally, these effects have been studied using survey experiments, and manipulating the poll results shown to respondents.

6.2 A review of the literature on bandwagon effects found that most studies were able to identify a statistically significant bandwagon effect (Hardmeier 2008). However, few studies identify a very large bandwagon effect. A recent Dutch study found that respondents who were shown reports showing the Dutch Labour Party up by four percentage points in the polls (a very large change in the Dutch context) were two percentage points more likely than respondents in a control group (Van der Meer, Hakhverdian, and Aldering 2015).

6.3 Because most research on these effects has used experiments it is difficult to say whether there are appreciable direct effects in the real world. Suppose that the effect of a poll showing an increase in support for a party of 4 percentage points is associated with an persistent increase in support of two percentage points amongst those who see the poll. If everyone sees the poll, then the effect of the poll will be to increase support for that party by two percentage points. If only fifteen percent of the population see the poll, the (direct) effect of the poll will be to increase support for that party by $(2 * 0.15 =) 0.3$ percentage points. If those who see the poll are less likely to change their mind (because they are already political sophisticates) the effect could be even smaller.

6.4 There are, of course, indirect effects of polling. If polls report a consistent lead for one party, that party may receive more media coverage, and that media coverage may (depending on its tone) lead to increases or decreases in support as voters respond to this media coverage. This was particularly evident in 2015 when much of the Tory campaign focused on the possibility of a hung parliament and much of the newspaper coverage focused on the horse race rather than the actual policies.

6.5 These effects are effects at the national level. Because there have been far fewer opinion polls of constituencies, or estimates of how constituency would vote, there has been less research on how polling affects vote intention at the local level.

6.6 The effects of publishing poll information on turnout have been less often studied. One of us (Heath, 2007) has found good evidence that turnout is higher in elections that are anticipated to be close.

8. Is the polling industry's current model of self-regulation fit for purpose? Is there a case for changing the way political opinion polling is regulated? What regulatory changes, if any, would you recommend and what challenges are there to greater regulation?

8.1 The current model of self-regulation enjoins polling companies to disclose a range of information about published polls. However, this information is generally not clear enough about the samples and the populations from which they are drawn. This is partly because making these details public would reflect very badly on the quality of the data and make people question it. For example, it is estimated that it takes 30,000 phone calls to generate a telephone sample of 1,000. For telephone polls, there is a lack of information about how numbers are chosen and how the balance between landlines and mobiles is struck. Alternative forms of disclosure can be found in the Italian (governmental) regulator's website (www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it) and the AAPOR Code (<http://www.aapor.org/Standards-Ethics/AAPOR-Code-of-Ethics.aspx>). Both

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codes require polling companies to disclose response rates and information on the construction of the sample frame.

11. Does the media report on opinion polls appropriately? What steps could be taken to improve how the media reports the results of political opinion polls? For example, should standards be set in relation to the reporting of political opinion polls, or should a code of conduct be introduced?

11.1 Much more needs to be done by the media and the polling companies themselves in how the uncertainty (or error) of polls is reported. The common practice is to report poll estimates with a 'margin of error' typically in the region of around 2 percent. However, this margin of error is essentially meaningless and is not statistically valid as it only has any meaning in relation to samples that are drawn using random probability. Since the surveys do not use these techniques it gives them a false sense of precision.

11.2 A better and more honest way to present the uncertainty around polls is to use the historic track record of the polling companies (either individually or collectively). So, if for example, over the last few elections, polls have tended to over/under report the vote share for the two main parties by around 5 percentage points – then this value gives a much better indication of the level of uncertainty around the estimate than any pseudo margin of error.

Note

This submission has been written jointly by Chris Hanretty, Oliver Heath, and Michael Spagat. Hanretty and Heath are Professors of Politics at the Department of Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway, University of London, and are members of the Democracy and Elections Centre at Royal Holloway. Michael Spagat is a Professor of Economics at the Department of Economics at Royal Holloway.

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Professor Chris Hanretty, Oliver Heath and Michael Spagat – Written evidence (PPD0011)

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31 August 2018

Todd Hartman, Ron Johnston, Kelvyn Jones, David Manley, Charles Pattie and David Rossiter – Written evidence (PPD0017)

Todd Hartman, Ron Johnston, Kelvyn Jones, David Manley, Charles Pattie and David Rossiter – Written evidence (PPD0017)

[Submission to be found under Ron Johnston](#)

Oliver Heath, Professor Chris Hanretty and Michael Spagat – Written evidence (PPD0011)

Oliver Heath, Professor Chris Hanretty and Michael Spagat – Written evidence (PPD0011)

[Submission to be found under Chris Hanretty](#)

Professor Ailsa Henderson – Written evidence (PPD0012)

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Evidence to Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media 31 August 2017

I am a Professor of Political Science who has commissioned several ESRC-funded and university-funded public opinion polls during election and referendum campaigns in the UK since 2010. I was the Principal Investigator (PI) for the Scottish Referendum Study and am the current PI for the Scottish Election Study so I also have some experience of dealing with polling data on sensitive topics in the context of close democratic contests. The evidence that follows is based on my experience of designing questionnaires, commissioning pollsters, reporting on poll findings, issuing press releases about poll findings, working with journalists as well as researching and teaching within the field of survey research methods.

I address primarily four questions: Polling methods and accuracy, influence of polls on voters, media coverage and regulation.

1. Polling methods and accuracy - A large part of the inaccuracy in the 2017 pre-election polls stemmed from pollsters using different methods to weight the data to calculate estimates, some of which were or inaccurate than others. Most pollsters weight respondents by various demographic characteristics such as age, gender, class to ensure that the sample reflects the general characteristics of the electorate as a whole. This is in addition to whatever sampling mechanisms they employ for selecting a sample that broadly reflects the population. When used in the context of elections, however, there are usually additional steps that pollsters employ to ensure that those who say they're going to vote are given more weight than those who are not. After all the election result relies on only those who cast a ballot, so identifying such individuals before hand – and paying attention to their partisan preferences rather those of non-voters – is critical.

In 2017 many pollsters changed their methodology in terms of how to identify likely voters. This, so the thinking went, was an effort to address the inaccuracies in the 2015 election and the 2016 Brexit referendum. There were three main methods: filtering our respondents who said they were unlikely to vote, weighting respondents by their propensity to vote (using self-reported turnout questions in the survey) and weighting respondents by their propensity to vote using 'external' information such as other surveys like the British Election Study. A full description of the methods used by different pollsters (along with their previous practices in 2015) is in Henderson 2017 (reference below).

Those who were most accurate in 2017 ‘massaged’ their numbers least and took respondents at their word when they said that they intended to vote. The reason for this is that using external data (developing models of who is and is not likely to vote based on results in earlier elections) does not allow for changing motivations across elections. The factors that propelled folks to vote in 2015 need not be the same in 2017 nor need be the propensity with which voters head to the polls. Since more of the electorate cast a ballot in 2017 any method based on predictors of turnout in 2015 under-estimated the voting population and either downweighted or in some cases removed possible voters from examination. In addition, late deciders and previous non voters had different partisan preferences from the electorate as a whole, so this obviously affected polling accuracy.

2. Influence on voters – In the 2016 Scottish Election Study we asked voters if they were aware of political opinion polls during the election campaign. Fieldwork for wave 1 of the survey occurred in the three weeks before the election. The results suggest that polls do not exert an undue influence on voters. Indeed one would be hard pressed to say they exerted an influence at all.

There have been a number of opinion polls reported in the run-up to the election. Which of these best describes how much attention you have paid to opinion polls?

I’ve paid a lot of attention to the poll results	9.2
I’ve paid a little attention to the poll results	46.8
I’ve paid no attention to the poll results	44.0

SES 2016 wave 1. Results are unweighted percentages. Sample size 4074.

It is worth noting that of the group that said they paid attention to opinion polls (either a lot of attention or a little attention) twenty percent couldn’t tell us which party was shown to be in the lead in the polls before the election. The table below shows that even when individuals pay attention to polls *and* know who is in the lead, it does not affect their behaviour. Less than one percent of our sample said the polls made them change their voting behaviour.

Which of these best describes the influence if any, that the polls have had on your choice?

Didn’t have any impact my mind was already made up	70.2
Made me think but didn’t change my mind	20.4
Got me seriously thinking about changing my mind	3.1
Changed my mind completely	0.3

SES 2016 wave 1. Results are unweighted percentages. Sample size 2280 (those who said they paid attention to polls).

This is in a context in which relatively few voters watch the leader debates and, when they do, report that they exerted a minimal influence on their voting preferences (the same is true of leader visits). Voters misunderstood the tax positions of political parties in the 2016 Scottish election despite clear media coverage about their differences. The notion that voters pay much attention to polls should come in for careful examination.

One area where polls might influence voters is if they led to tactical voting. For this to be the case, though, individuals need to have constituency-level information about the party that is likely to win and the party that is likely to serve as an effective rival. Publicly-available constituency-level polls are very rare because the sample required to say anything meaningful is usually impossible to assemble. Our data show that around fifteen percent of the Scottish electorate voted tactically in 2017 but the bulk of that was to try to stop SNP candidates from winning. Such a figure would not have been lower in the absence of polls one week or two weeks before the election (and indeed need not be influenced by the reporting of opinion polls at all).

Another role that polls play is to encourage participation. We know from research on voter turnout that individuals are more likely to cast a ballot in a close contest. The way potential voters learn of a close contest is through the media reporting of opinion polls. In 2016 we asked respondents whether they felt the polls made them more likely to vote. The results suggest that while attention should be devoted to exploring the possible negative influence that polls might have, so too should there be attention to the positive role that polls play in informing public debate and facilitating voter engagement.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The polls made me think it was important for me to turnout to vote.

Strongly agree	33.3
Tend to agree	18.5
Neither agree nor disagree	35.1
Tend to disagree	5.6
Strongly disagree	7.4

SES 2016 wave 1. Results are unweighted percentages. Sample size 2280 (those who said they paid attention to polls).

3. Media coverage - To the extent that there are issues of concern they are primarily in the area of media reporting most of which, it should be said, is responsible, seeks to be accurate and provides sufficient details of the poll that interested readers can then locate the data and have a look for themselves. It is rather rare now to see a poll reported without any details of its methodology (although it occurs frequently in outlets such as the Metro). That said there are common errors (see a full description in Jennings and Henderson below). The first is referring to sub-samples in polls as if they can say something meaningful about that particular group. In a GB-wide poll, the Scottish sub-sample is usually

around 200 people. You can't say much with a sample of 200 people but there are often attempts to use this sub-sample to say something about trends in support, even when the figures are at odds with the figures in larger Scotland-only polls. The same is true of particular demographic groups. Young people are commonly discussed, but the sample of young people in any survey is usually too small to say anything definitive. As a snapshot of the GB-wide electorate the polls are often quite accurate (and Scotland-only polls before both 2015 and 2016 were markedly more accurate than the GB-wide polls) but for sub-samples they are less so, and media reporting of such things is unhelpful. Most poll reporting mentions the margin of error in polls but then forgets about this when discussing the horserace element of politics. Greater pains to point this out and to address some of the other common errors would be helpful. Each of these is an issue of education rather than regulation, though.

4. Regulation The current practice among pollsters is generally very good. Information about methodology, question wording and results are typically found easily on the website of polling companies. It is my experience that this has universally been the case for any poll reported in a major newspaper. Polls reported in smaller papers, however, are harder to find on the websites of polling companies. Having worked with several polling companies in the UK and Canada I have found them at all times to strive towards best practice. This includes posing questions that do not bias respondents, adopting sampling methods that don't over-burden the panel, and ensuring the quick reporting of results and methodology online. The current method of self-regulation seems to be working well.

The use of different methods to estimate 'likely voters' in 2017 stems from an effort to be more accurate, not complacency about accuracy. The fact that pollsters employed different methods gives us insights into what works and what doesn't (or rather the conditions under which certain methods will work). This experimentation will enhance accuracy during the next election campaign and so any regulation that would seek to inhibit experimentation and impose a single industry standard on any aspect of polling – question wording, sampling, weighting – would not be in the short- or long-term interests of those seeking to understand whether and why people vote the way they do. Experimentation breeds improvement.

With respect to bans on the reporting of polls, in the age of the internet such a policy would be impossible to fulfil. If effective it would put information about the mood of the electorate into the hands of those who are able to fund private polls but not in the hands of the public, which does not seem to be moving towards democratic transparency.

Making privately funded polls publicly available would likely be a non-starter. It is hard to see why anyone would pay for a poll that would then be released to competitors. Larger firms would have sufficient funds to conduct in house polls without commissioning an external firm, the result of which could well be lower quality in house polls informing decision-making. Asking firms in receipt of public funds to list the polls they have commissioned (pollster, date, sampling, topic) might be a way forward.

Professor Ailsa Henderson – Written evidence (PPD0012)

Henderson, Ailsa (2017) "Polling Who Votes" Centre on Constitutional Change Blog <http://www.centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk/blog/polling-who-votes>

Jennings, Will and Ailsa Henderson (2017) "How to get the most out of opinion polls without being led up the garden path" The Conversation <https://theconversation.com/how-to-get-the-most-out-of-opinion-polls-without-being-led-up-the-garden-path-78846>

31 August 2017

Dr Narisong Huhe and Dr Mark Shepard (PPD0003)

Dr Narisong Huhe and Dr Mark Shepard (PPD0003)

[Submission to be found under Dr Mark Shepard](#)

IMPRESS – Oral evidence (QQ 111–121)

Evidence Session No. 15

Heard in Public

Questions 111 - 121

Tuesday 21 November 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Baroness Fall; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Baroness Janke; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve.

Witness

I: Jonathan Heawood, Chief Executive Officer, Impress.

Examination of witness

Jonathan Heawood.

Q111 **The Chairman:** Welcome to this hearing of the Committee. We are very grateful to you for breaking your sabbatical to be here with us today.

I will say a few technical things to start with. This is being televised, so do not be ruder about anybody than you are quite happy to be. However, you are protected in any answer that you give by parliamentary privilege. If you are excessively rude to someone, at least they cannot sue you. You will get a transcript of the hearing afterwards. If you feel that you have misspoken or have not made yourself quite clear, you will get a chance to correct it.

We are extremely pleased to have you with us. It would have been very curious indeed for us to have taken evidence, as we have, from IPSO, which is a system of press regulation not recognised by Parliament, but not to have taken evidence from the one body that accords with the systems set up by Parliament for these matters. Because we asked you quite late, you did not have a chance to submit evidence. Therefore, would you like to start by making a short opening statement explaining who you are and where you are coming from?

Jonathan Heawood: Thank you very much. It is good to be here. I hope that I can help.

As you said, Impress is a body that was recognised by the Press Recognition Panel on 25 October 2016 as meeting the Leveson criteria for independent and effective regulation, as set out in the royal charter on self-regulation of the press. For Impress itself, that was extremely important. We see the Leveson recommendations as having two fundamental aspects. One is the criteria that Leveson set out for what

constitutes good regulation. The second fundamental is that this is not something that the regulator can self-declare. We could have gone forward and said, “We meet the Leveson requirements”, but it is not down to us to declare that. It is down to an independent, properly constituted body to declare that, following a very thorough public process, which lasted nine months.

That process concluded last October. Impress now has recognised status. Forty-three news publishers—primarily digital, but some with a print outlet as well—have joined us so far. Collectively, they are responsible for 76 publications and reach an audience of about 5 million people every month. A further 40 publishers, taking us to 83 in total, have applied to join Impress and are at various stages of our compliance system. We do not simply receive a phone call from a publisher wanting to sign up and then sign it up. We ask it to confirm to us that it is ready to be regulated, is prepared to abide by the standards and has someone who will take named responsibility for upholding them.

In the year for which we have been up and running as a recognised regulator, we have received just over 100 complaints—what we call complaint contacts. Not all of those manifest ultimately as complaints. Some fall by the wayside, and some do not engage our code. Of those that have engaged the code, six have resulted in investigations, four of which are ongoing. One has led to an adjudication, where the board has met and ruled on a code breach. In fact, on that occasion, it ruled that there was not a breach, but it looked at the code. One resulted in an arbitration. One of the unique features of Impress is that we work with the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators to provide an arbitration service in respect of libel, privacy and harassment claims—legal claims that go above the threshold of the ethical code and engage the civil law. That arbitration resulted in a damages award against the publisher. We have also issued a number of advisory notices to our members where a member of the public has contacted us to say that, for various reasons, they do not welcome press interest or intrusion—the occasions that we had were to do with funerals.

What is interesting about where we are now is that, as Leveson recommended, it is a voluntary framework. Leveson did not recommend mandatory, compulsory, statutory regulation, despite those who suggest that he did—he recommended voluntary but incentivised regulation. We are the voluntary part of that landscape. As I have said, 83 publishers have joined or are in the process of joining us, because they see benefits and are motivated to earn the public’s trust. They also see legal and commercial benefits—not least that their insurance premiums go down as a result of joining Impress, as it mitigates their legal risk.

Leveson recommended that there should be further incentives to encourage publishers that might otherwise be reluctant to submit to independent and effective regulation. Those incentives take the form of Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act, which, as I am sure many of you know, is pending. There has been a government consultation on that. Leveson also made recommendations in relation to data protection. He felt that members of a recognised regulator—publishers that have chosen to hold themselves accountable to certain standards—should enjoy a certain

status in relation to data protection law that might not be afforded to publishers that have not chosen to hold themselves accountable to those standards. Again, we are in a slight limbo position in relation to that recommended change in the law.

The Chairman: The editors' code is the basis of the code that you put into effect. Is that right, or are there very substantial differences?

Jonathan Heawood: We arrived at a similar place, but we arrived at it by looking at 50 or so codes from comparable jurisdictions around the world. We distilled what we saw as the key norms of those codes. They all have something on accuracy and something on privacy. They tend to have something around discrimination and hate speech, and provisions around contempt of court. We distilled those core elements and then consulted experts, members of the public and our publishers. With quite a lot of toing and froing, and tweaking and adjusting, we came out with our new standards code, which is akin to the IPSO editors' code in so far as both reflect the norms of best practice. However, there are some differences as well.

The Chairman: When Matt Tee from IPSO was in front of us, he explained his code and said why he thought that it was adequate for regulating polls. However, under a good deal of pressure from the Committee, which raised ways in which the code might be strengthened to give more details of what reports of polling had to do, he was prepared to concede that there might be a case for some sort of addition to the code to cover the particular issues on polling. Have you given any consideration to that?

Jonathan Heawood: On a personal level, yes; on an institutional level, no. On a personal level, I am here today to give evidence, but also partly to learn from the Committee and from the previous witness about potential issues around reporting of polling. On an institutional level, it is not something that Impress has had occasion to look at. We have received no complaints, and there has been nothing that has prompted us to investigate any of these issues. That is not to say that we will not or could not. We are quite free to investigate an issue, if the board feels that there is an issue to be investigated in relation to the code as it currently stands. If, having looked at the issue, we find that there are gaps in the code or grey areas, and we feel that it is in the public interest for those gaps to be closed, the code committee, which advises the board on the code and has various experts and journalists on it, will want to look at that to see whether this is an issue where the code, or perhaps the code guidance, needs to be revised.

All of that would be done within the frame of a very strong expectation that our members are free to be politically partisan. I am sure that you understand that. There is a distinction—a very strong cultural distinction, at least—between broadcasting codes, which require impartiality and balance, and press codes, which tend not to require that. They do in some countries, but not in this country. However, press codes do tend to require accuracy and the avoidance of distortion.

There will always be a balance to be struck in this area around the reporting of any political information. A publisher may well have a clear

interest in the outcome of that information and may clearly want to influence its audience in one way or another. On the face of it, we believe that it should be free to do so, subject to limitations around accuracy, distortion and transparency.

The Chairman: It is not surprising that you have not had any complaints about polls, because the member organisations listed on page 23 of your annual report are not the kinds of organisations that are rich enough or inclined in any other way to commission polls. Given that you want to recruit more and better publishers, should you not be trying to get ahead of the game by considering whether you need more than just the code as you have it in order to make sure that poll reporting meets the standards and criteria that you have just set out?

Jonathan Heawood: It is a legitimate question. Again, I do not want to anticipate what Impress, its board and its code committee may or may not want to do. I am sure that you can understand that we would not want to be led by Parliament in a particular direction, much as we might share the concerns that have prompted the formation of this Committee. As I have said, it is an issue we are very keen to learn more about. If we feel that the balance between having a partisan press and having a press that is nonetheless accurate is not working properly in respect of the reporting of polls, we will want to look at it.

The Chairman: Parliament would not try to dictate to you what the substance of your code should be. We might have to say, “There appears to be a problem with polling. Do you not think that your code, or subsidiary guidance under your code, should address that?”

Jonathan Heawood: Quite. If there were evidence to suggest that there was a problem, and a problem that might be addressed without challenging the fundamental assumption of a politically partisan press, we would want to look at that.

Q112 **Baroness O’Neill of Bengarve:** Do you think that it would be helpful if there were a requirement to publish who had commissioned a poll and who had paid for it? Many a publication in the media of the results of polls is bereft of information about who commissioned and who paid for the poll. One has to take it or leave it, so to speak. Would you think that a reasonable requirement or do you see it as an unfortunate infringement of freedom of expression?

Jonathan Heawood: Not on the face of it. There are two related issues. One is where the publisher itself commissioned the poll. Impress has commissioned polls on occasion. When we did our code consultation, we wanted to know what the public thought about certain elements of journalism standards, so we commissioned polls. We signed a contract with the polling company—I think that it was YouGov on that occasion—that required us to publish the information that you are describing. There are occasions when the polling company, to the extent that it is self-regulated through the British Polling Council and the Market Research Society, is obliged to require its client to publish that information. If that information is not being published, you would say that, on the face of it, there is a contractual concern.

There is a secondary issue, where the publisher is reporting on a poll that may have been commissioned by a third party. My understanding is that at present that is not governed by any code, whether it be a press code or a market research code. That is perhaps the kind of grey area the Committee wants to get into.

- Q113 **Lord Hayward:** I noticed that you were in the room for the back end of the previous session. I asked the previous witness about betting and the control that exists in France. If I want to find out about the current state of the population's expectations in Germany, I can look at the betting markets and find out what the prediction is for the CDU, the SPD or AfD. I can then report that. I can say, "The betting markets are showing the following percentages". Are attempts to control reporting of opinion polls not completely passé, because there are all sorts of other means of divining and conveying views?

Jonathan Heawood: Yes. Was it not Bill Clinton who said, "I don't run America, the bond markets run America"? Markets—whether they be betting markets or more rarefied financial markets—tend to be very good at finding and using information.

No one ever knows what the public will do next; it is the one thing that we always get wrong. One of the issues here is the potential for a feedback loop, where a poll is commissioned and shows that the public think X in response to a given question, on a given day of the week, but the next day the public do Y—something quite different—perhaps because of the poll. The poll may have nudged them to vote in a different way or not to vote, or perhaps a landslide is predicted and they do not feel that they need to turn out. There is a feedback loop. If we come into this imagining that polls provide neutral, academic, scientific information about either the state of affairs now or what the state of affairs will be next week, we are in for a hiding. It is very hard to imagine a situation where you would ever have that scientifically perfect information, whether or not the reporting of it is more robustly regulated.

- Q114 **The Chairman:** Can I ask about journalists' reporting of polls? My own experience is that mostly, when polls are badly reported, it is due not to malevolence but to incompetence, and perhaps perverse incentives. You get a bigger headline if you report a one-point swing to the Tories with May triumphant, than if you say, "No change". Would Impress welcome greater training for journalists in the use of opinion polls? Have you been able to take any steps that might assist in that regard?

Jonathan Heawood: We have not. It is a very good point. It may sit within a wider issue about the reporting of statistics more generally—not just polls, but all sorts of statistics, which are notoriously difficult for people who are non-specialists to understand and communicate. We have already done a number of training modules for our members on aspects of our code of standards. This is the kind of issue we may well want to think about for the future.

- Q115 **Baroness Couttie:** The effectiveness of Impress is entirely linked to the member organisations that belong to it. I have had a quick look at those. To be blunt, it is not a terribly impressive list, when you think of the influence of some of the larger media outlets—and indeed the volume of

regional press and regional broadcasters. You say that there are incentives, which you have just touched on. However, it strikes me that there needs to be a much more proactive approach from Impress in order to increase the number of publications that you cover. Otherwise, your effectiveness is deeply in question.

Jonathan Heawood: There are a couple of points. First, the news media are clearly in an era of massive transition and huge disruption. We do not know where we will be in five or 10 years' time. Some publications that have appeared in the last five years have already grown exponentially. If the trajectories continue, they will become very significant and substantial players within the next five or 10 years. By the same token, some publications we are all familiar with and grew up with appear to be waning. We are at a crossover point. None of us quite knows where things are going.

Baroness Couttie: Given that you exist and are supposed to be trying to be effective now, the fact that things will change in the future does not mean that your organisation should not be trying to ensure that its membership is representative. It can then evolve as the industry changes.

Jonathan Heawood: A misconception that sometimes goes around is that people wake up in the morning and are particularly enthusiastic about getting themselves regulated.

Baroness Couttie: No, I am sure that they are not. You were talking about what the incentives are to become regulated by Impress. Should there not be a more proactive set of activities from Impress to try to generate membership? I am not aware of very much that you have done at all, particularly to try to get some of the larger publications, such as the nationals, to become covered by you.

Jonathan Heawood: I am sure that you are aware of the politics that surrounds this issue. People do not wake up in the morning wanting to be regulated.

Baroness Couttie: No, of course they do not.

Jonathan Heawood: If they are in the news industry, they generally wake up in the morning, read what other people in the industry have written and tend to agree with it. If the reporting of Impress, IPSO and the wider issues is not always 100% clear or accurate, that decision is not necessarily made on a level playing field.

Baroness Couttie: That is on the basis that you are relying on people from the large publications in particular—of which there is a limited number; there are not that many of them—getting their information only from other printed media or broadcast. I would have assumed that you would have gone out proactively to talk to the editors and publishers, to try to persuade them of the value of becoming regulated by you, and that you would have had a much more proactive set of engagement activities. Unless you broaden your scope, you are pretty ineffective.

Jonathan Heawood: We are effective for those publishers that choose to be regulated by us.

Baroness Couttie: If there is a limited number of those, and they are not the big ones—

Jonathan Heawood: It has grown from 12 this time last year to 43, and soon it will be 83. It is a pretty rapid rate of growth. It is not a mandatory framework. Leveson did not recommend mandatory regulation. Parliament and Government did not recommend that it should be mandatory.

Baroness Couttie: I understand all of that. I am trying to get at what you are doing, as an organisation, to try to make sure that your effectiveness is improved by attracting some of the larger publications and broadcasters.

Jonathan Heawood: I reiterate that I do not quite accept the point about effectiveness. There is effectiveness for those we regulate, and there is the broader situation. As you know, there is another regulator in town, which currently regulates—

Baroness Couttie: What are you doing to try to get a broader membership, particularly of the larger publications?

Jonathan Heawood: We are on an annual budget of £950,000, £220,000 of which goes straight to the Press Recognition Panel, our oversight regulator. With the remaining £730,000, we have to pay a small staff team, a non-executive board and arbitrators and so on.

Baroness Couttie: How much does it cost to go and have a meeting with someone? Probably not very much.

Jonathan Heawood: We are having meetings with people.

Baroness Couttie: That is what I am asking. What are you doing?

Jonathan Heawood: We do not have them in public. I am not quite sure why you would.

Baroness Couttie: I am not saying that you should have them in public. I am asking what you are doing. It can be private.

Jonathan Heawood: We are doing everything in our power—our limited power—to encourage publishers to think seriously—

Baroness Couttie: What is “everything in our power”? I want to understand that. Are you having one-to-one meetings with them? What are you doing? Such meetings do not have to be public.

Jonathan Heawood: To the extent that they are prepared to have one-to-one meetings with us, yes; to the extent that they are not, no. We do not force ourselves into editors’ offices.

Baroness Couttie: No. I was hoping you were going to say that you have a proactive campaign to try to get in, even if they are resistant to start with, to persuade the more important media to become—

Jonathan Heawood: Of course.

Baroness Couttie: It has been a struggle to get out of you what you are actually doing.

Jonathan Heawood: I was not quite sure exactly what you were asking.

Baroness Couttie: For quite some while, I have been saying quite clearly, “What are you doing?”

Jonathan Heawood: On our limited resources, we have a business development function. It is the job of two members of the team to seek meetings with publishers of every shape and size. Obviously, we also use our social media feed and other channels to try to communicate.

Baroness Couttie: Do they prioritise the more important publishers—the very large regionals and the nationals?

Jonathan Heawood: They prioritise publishers who are on the market, as it were. If a publisher has signed a six-year contract with IPSO, which it is almost impossible to break, it is not on the market. We are happy to communicate with those publishers, but they are not necessarily going to join Impress tomorrow, in any world.

Baroness Couttie: In any marketing campaign, there is a lead time. They may have signed a contract with IPSO. However, if that contract has two years to run, you must have a plan. Presumably, you have a strategy and a plan.

Jonathan Heawood: Of course. The other aspect of this is the point that I made before—that Leveson recognised, absolutely sensibly, that in this industry there are very few internal, market-based incentives for regulation. It is not like other industries. Accountants or doctors, for instance, rather want to be regulated, because it weeds out the bad apples. In this industry, the incentives do not quite work.

Baroness Couttie: I am fully aware that this is not an easy market in which to build your customer base. However, it is essential that you build your customer base—and it is not impossible to do so.

Jonathan Heawood: There is a loyalty and there is a duty to the public. I would say that our primary duty is to the public. There is a public interest in having high standards of journalism that enables us to make good decisions as citizens, consumers and so on. In the context of a free and partisan press, you nonetheless want the information to be accurate and to know where it is coming from.

Baroness Couttie: Absolutely.

Jonathan Heawood: To the extent that we have regulation in this country, it is voluntary. It is for those publishers who choose it. There are not many market-based reasons for them to choose it. We have created what we can. We have developed the insurance premium in relationship with an insurance broker, and there are various other benefits that we believe we can offer. Leveson said that government and Parliament should also do their bit to create incentives that make it more convenient than not for a publisher to be regulated by a body, such as Impress, that is recognised. Those incentives are not in force. We do everything that is in our power, on our limited budget, to bring the horse to water, but everybody expected that Parliament and government would also do their part to help it to drink.

The Chairman: I have a little queue of members waiting to ask questions. Catherine will be followed by George and then Margaret.

Q116 **Baroness Fall:** I want to come back to the complaint structure of your organisation. It is the same with IPSO. When we talked to IPSO, we looked at the relevance of the complaint structure, especially in digital. There was a feeling that, even more than with newspapers, people went to sites they felt comfortable with and took their news from isolated places. It is therefore less and less likely that you will have a complaint. Going forward, is there anything that you and other organisations can do either to move away from that or to encourage organisations such as Full Fact to issue complaints? Otherwise, we will never have those revealed in the way in which an organisation such as yours, working for the good of the nation, should.

Jonathan Heawood: It is a very interesting point. There has been some recent research on this. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism does an annual digital news report that looks at global trends in the way in which we consume our news online. The most recent iteration of that report seemed to find slightly surprising evidence that many people are now exposed to more sources of news than in the past, when the *Daily Express* landed on their doormats and they turned on the BBC at six o'clock. The echo chamber idea that took hold over the last few years is now perhaps not quite as accurate a picture as we thought.

Secondly, quite often social media encourages complaints. I am sure that IPSO would say the same. We get complaints from people who are not natural readers of the publication in question, but who have been led by social media sharing of a particular story to take umbrage at it and then to make a complaint to us. There are some ways in which the changing digital media landscape is facilitating people coming to us with complaints.

We are totally open to complaints from third parties, such as Full Fact. We have taken third-party complaints already. Perhaps it goes back to Baroness Couttie's point—could we be doing more to encourage complaints, as well as to encourage membership? We can go away and think about that.

Q117 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** Unlike Baroness Couttie, I have a lot of sympathy with you. I think that you have been given an almost impossible task by government and Parliament. You are doing a brave job.

Jonathan Heawood: Thank you.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Writing for the *Fabian Review* is probably easier.

I have two quick questions. Is there a press regulation body in France?

Jonathan Heawood: No. France is anomalous in that respect. There is a press court. The things we think of as media torts—privacy and defamation—go to something that is more akin to a small claims court in this country. We looked at that system when I was involved in the libel reform campaign five or six years ago. The NUJ was also interested in something more like a media tribunal. It is an idea that has not been pursued in this country.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: I notice that *Private Eye* is not one of your members. Is it a member of IPSO?

Jonathan Heawood: No, it sits outside. It has always made that very clear—a plague on both your houses.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: So we cannot complain to anyone about *Private Eye*.

Jonathan Heawood: You can complain to Ian Hislop and see where you get.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Or sue, grab it and run. It is a mess, is it not?

Q118 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** You may say, quite legitimately, that this is outside your realm, but I follow Lord Foulkes in thinking that the pursuit of the public interest in journalism, which you are trying to do very expertly, is a valiant and valid one, although it may be uphill.

One of the things that I have learned from the progress of this Committee is that we should be all be downplaying absolutely the significance of any opinion poll. Regulation is more or less impossible, for all the reasons that you have rightly described—the enormous extension of the way in which the markets move and the issue of social media, as well as all the conventional media outlets. One of the problems—of course, it is led by the politicians, so I do not absolve anybody of responsibility for it—is the obsession with the polls, and the fixation that they are of enormous significance. What we have learned over many weeks of discussing this with many people is that there does not seem to be any way in which we can guarantee that the polls are either valid or accurate; that they may or may not improve a bit; and that the French may be better at this, but we may be better at that. Would it be in the interests of public information, public interest journalism and better public education and understanding if you were involved in a progressive projection—along the lines of Baroness Couttie’s recommendation that you are more proactive—to try to minimise the significance of all of this?

Jonathan Heawood: It seems to me that there are two reasons why people commission polls. One is to find out what people think. The second is to influence what people think. The influencing role of polls is probably preponderant.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: We have very little evidence that that is significant.

Jonathan Heawood: Is that in terms of the influence?

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Yes.

Jonathan Heawood: I imagine that if you were a company or a campaign—

Baroness Jay of Paddington: We are addressing political polls.

Jonathan Heawood: So you mean questions about voting intentions and taking the quite narrow question, “Which way will you vote in the forthcoming election?” as the definition of a poll.

Baroness Couttie: Or questions about election-driven issues.

Jonathan Heawood: Or about preferences, such as who would make a better Prime Minister.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: That is political polling, is it not?

Jonathan Heawood: You are talking about the political domain. You should pursue with other witnesses the question of the extent to which polls are commissioned—

Baroness Jay of Paddington: We have tried to pursue it, but we have got very little hard evidence. As I said, one of the very interesting things that I have learned from sitting on this Committee is how inadequate polling is as a guide to anything.

Jonathan Heawood: Can I hazard a guess? Again, this is something to pursue with better-qualified witnesses. Maybe there is a public cognitive dissonance between the sense that a poll is in some way an accurate or scientific reflection and the fact that it is not.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Exactly.

Jonathan Heawood: In that gap, there is room for real confusion.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: And, as Baroness Couttie was suggesting, for leadership by an organisation such as yours, which is trying to pursue the public interest.

Jonathan Heawood: Let me think about that one. I am going to take a shopping list of interesting recommendations away with me.

The Chairman: It is a bit tricky when the only way in which these doubts can be reported is through media that have a vested interest in playing up the significance of opinion polls.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: That is the thing that Onora O’Neill has been suggesting throughout the Committee’s inquiry—that it is driven by commercial interests, rather than anything else.

Jonathan Heawood: Far be it from me to create new organisations, but another idea would be to have an organisation whose only duty was to publish polls on certain questions and that was established on a basis—

Baroness Jay of Paddington: The nearest that we get to that is the collaboration that takes place on election day between the media organisations on the exit poll. Interestingly, because of their methods and that collaboration, it is one of the most accurate reflections that we get.

Jonathan Heawood: Yes.

Q119 **Baroness Couttie:** The issue is the sensationalising of movements that are not significant enough to merit a conclusion—or that are certainly within the margin of error. Newspaper-published polls tend to have the headline, “Big swing”.

I want to go back to something that I think you said; correct me if I am wrong. You as an organisation are at liberty, should you choose, to pick up an issue, to look into it and then to change your code according to what you have found. You do not need a complaint to trigger that.

Jonathan Heawood: Precisely.

Baroness Couttie: How many times have you done that? What is the process for doing it?

Jonathan Heawood: Once, so far. An issue came to our attention. We looked at it to the extent of discovering that there was not something to be pursued in full. It is rather like what happens with a complaint, where someone comes to us and says, “Here is my concern. Here is the article of your code that we think it engages”. We then take that on board and pursue it. Once it has got beyond that threshold, an investigation follows the same course as a complaint. The only thing that is different is how it comes into the system.

Baroness Couttie: One of the issues we are looking at is the fact that, because the general public—quite understandably—do not understand enough about polls, statistical significance, margins of error and all the rest of it, very few complaints are made about polls. However, that does not mean that the issue should not be looked at or that codes should not be developed. No member of the Committee wants to change newspapers’ ability to take a political side or not, but we are very interested in making sure that the media portray the findings of polls accurately. We have come across many examples where that is not the case. Despite the fact that you have received no complaints about polls—for good reasons—I would like to think that an organisation such as yours might take the issue away and look at it.

Jonathan Heawood: You are quite right. The absence of complaints is not a barrier to our looking into an issue. If we were to see the evidence that you have seen, we would be very interested.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I will finish with a supplementary to Baroness Couttie’s point. Given that we have discovered that it is almost impossible to make sure that journalists report polls accurately, we should minimise them. We should put them on the same page as the astrology.

Q120 **The Chairman:** That is most unfair to astrologists.

Do you have a power within your remit at Impress to institute a general inquiry? IPSO has that power, but it has not decided to use it yet.

Jonathan Heawood: Yes. The key point is that the Impress board is sovereign. It is master and mistress in its own house. If it has a concern about something, it can pursue it. That is subject to proportionality—we do not ask our publishers to provide us with unnecessary information. However, if we have a reasonable belief that there may be a serious or systemic breach of either our code of standards or our wider governance requirements, we are contractually free to pursue that with our members.

The Chairman: If the Committee were to conclude that there was a systemic problem, both in the accuracy of polls and in the accuracy of their reporting, and to say that organisations such as yours should look to produce more detailed code guidance on how these things should be put right, you would be happy to consider that as a board.

Jonathan Heawood: Yes. I am not saying that we would then make the change, but it is something that we would be very happy and free to consider very seriously.

Q121 **Lord Hayward:** Can I ask a question that relates more to your broad experience than to your specific current role? A concern that I have had, which has been acknowledged by one or two people who have given evidence, is that we are now in a society where, to catch attention, you have to sensationalise everything. The sensationalisation of polls is no different from the sensationalisation of everything else, whether it is a tragedy, employment figures, investment or something that happens in Germany or Zimbabwe. We are now in a society where everything is sensationalised to a degree to which it was not 20 or 40 years ago.

Jonathan Heawood: When we did our consultation on the code and talked to various members of the public, through polls and mass surveys and through focus groups, concern about sensationalisation ranked very high among people’s grievances about the nature of the contemporary media. Obviously, the point that one has to make in follow-up is that many of them still buy or consume that highly sensationalised information.

The challenge for us when we took that back and reflected on it in relation to the code was to determine exactly what the code clause would be—what rule on lack of sensationalisation would be enforceable and fair. Any good journalist wants to attract a reader. You want a hook and a good headline. We require the headline to be accurate: for instance, you cannot have a headline that is completely cut adrift from the substance of the story. We have a requirement about avoiding distortion, and so on. Intrusion into grief is also in the code. There are various concrete ways in which we try to get at the individual harms, but the general sense of sensationalism is very hard to capture.

Baroness Couttie: That is not necessarily the case with polling. For example, if you say that a 1% swing is shown in a poll, which is within the margin of error and therefore not relevant—it is the same as saying that there is no swing—yet the headline reads, “Huge swing to Bloggs”, clearly that is sensationalism and is not factually accurate. However, we are seeing that sort of reporting.

Jonathan Heawood: If we saw that sort of reporting by one of our members, we might well want to consider the distortion clause of the code. We have an accuracy clause, which has a subclause about distortion. Significant distortions should be avoided. If there was a very clear, quantifiable benchmark—here are the facts, and here is the reporting on the facts—

Baroness Couttie: The same is true, of course, where you have a tiny or self-selecting sample from which conclusions are drawn.

Jonathan Heawood: Quite. I am very cognisant of the issues the Committee is looking into. They are important, difficult issues. However, as is always the case with these things, you have to think very carefully about what is a fair and proportionate regulatory response. You know this. You do not throw the baby out with the bathwater. You leave some latitude, while mitigating any potential harm.

The Chairman: We need precise clarification here. Clearly, if you get a complaint, you will rule on it. Clearly, you have the power to call a general investigation and to say, “Is polling all wrong?” Suppose that you, your

board or your staff see one of the stories to which Pippa has referred, where the reporting is clearly misleading, but you do not get a complaint about it. Are you in a position to take action on that, or do you say, "There's been no complaint, so we will let it go"?

Jonathan Heawood: Yes, we are. I am sorry if that was not clear enough before. That is one of the ways we might become aware of an issue—because it comes in front of us individually, because someone makes us aware of it or because there is a general public concern. There are all sorts of ways in which something may come into the mix.

The board then needs to decide whether it is a proportionate response to launch an investigation into that. Is there a realistic prospect that the code as it stands has been breached or is at risk of being breached? Even if that threshold is not met, it is possible for the code committee to look at the code with a view to future development. The code committee comes in if we feel that something is falling between stools, but nonetheless is not helping us to uphold our commitment to the public interest. One way or another, there are various tools at our disposal to take things forward. However, to activate any of those routes, we need to see real evidence to help us to clarify what the issue is, what the harm is and whether there is a regulatory solution.

Lord Hayward: In slight disagreement with a comment that has just been made, I make the observation that, in general, the problem is not inaccuracy, but more subtle variations. For example, instead of having, "Huge swing", you get, "Tory lead rises by 1%", but it is in bold and in a font size that is twice or three times what it might warrant. That is what we are seeing and trying to grapple with. The issue is the manner of the representation, rather than necessarily the accuracy.

The Chairman: We have reached the end of a very profitable session. Thank you for coming before us. It is very nice to have your view to set alongside that of IPSO. We look forward to seeing an even longer list of large publishers that are supporting you next time we see you. Thank you very much. A number of members of the Committee made clear how strongly we support the general thrust of much of the work that you have been doing, if not the detail.

Jonathan Heawood: It is very gratifying to hear that; thank you.

The Chairman: Thank you very much indeed.

Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) – Oral evidence (QQ 77–82)

Evidence Session No. 10

Heard in Public

Questions 77 - 82

Tuesday 31 October 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Couttie; Baroness Fall; Baroness Ford; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve; Lord Rennard; Lord Smith of Hindhead.

Witness

I: Matt Tee, Chief Executive, Independent Press Standards Organisation.

Examination of witness

Matt Tee.

Q77 The Chairman: Good morning, Mr Tee. Welcome to the Committee. Thank you very much for sparing the time to appear before us. You have in front of you a list of our interests, such as they are. You are being broadcast live via the parliamentary website, so you cannot take any of that back. There will be a transcript, which you will be able to correct where you have misspoken or said something you do not quite like. You are protected by parliamentary privilege, so you can be as rude as you like about us or anybody else, without fear of ending up in the law courts.

Thank you for your paper. We have studied the bits of the code that are relevant.

I will start with quite a practical question. If a poll in the *Daily Mail* shows that, in a month, the Conservatives have gone up two points and Labour has gone down two points, and the newspaper headlines that poll as “May recovers into decent lead”, is that a breach of your code?

Matt Tee: It depends on whether it is an accurate portrayal of the poll in question. If it is reported accurately and the report is not misleading, it is not a breach of my code.

The Chairman: The pollsters themselves accept that there is plus or minus 3% on each figure—well within the statistical margin of error, let alone the actual margin of error, given the inaccuracies of the samples on which pollsters draw. A statistician would probably say that the two poll results are the same number. Is the paper not misleading the public by saying that there has been a big increase in the Tory lead?

Matt Tee: The example you give, if it is a real example—I suspect it is—

The Chairman: No, it is a deliberately hypothetical example, but one that reflects the real world.

Matt Tee: Were somebody to complain about it, we would consider whether the headline and the article were a misleading interpretation of the opinion poll. Given the circumstances you cite, I suspect that our view would be coloured by whether the methodology was explained in the article—whether the article said, “This may indicate a swing to Theresa May”. Issues of that sort would come into play.

The Chairman: All these matters are judgment. All they have to go on is the code saying “misleading”. Is it not time that you produced something underneath the code giving journalists specific guidance on how to observe it?

Matt Tee: Our experience is that all areas of our code are open to judgment. The code is deliberately written in that way. We expect editors to exercise professional judgment against a professional code of standards they have signed up to. Given that, yes, there is always a question about judgment. There may be a disagreement about that judgment. In some circumstances, we have issued additional guidance to journalists—or, indeed, to the public—on our consideration of particular areas of the code. Not long ago, we issued some guidance for journalists on the use of images or content from people’s social media feeds.

We do not get a lot of complaints about opinion polls published by our members. We use the number of complaints that we receive as an indicator of the degree to which it is an issue and might benefit from further guidance. We do not receive a lot of complaints about the coverage of political polling.

The Chairman: Is that not the problem with complaints-driven machinery? You as a body should not be worrying about how many complaints you get—you should be asking yourselves whether the press is misleading people. In the last election and the election before that, the press, by its reporting of polls, misled the public about the state of the parties, with profound effects on the democratic conduct of those elections, yet you are sitting there waiting to see whether anybody complains about it. That is not good enough, is it?

Matt Tee: I think it is good enough. Given the accessibility of our complaints system and the fact that in the three years for which IPSO has existed we have had two general elections, a referendum in Scotland and a referendum on Europe, the small number of complaints we receive is not a bad indicator of the degree of public concern about the coverage of opinion polls in newspapers.

The Chairman: There is no public concern because the public do not understand thoroughly things like statistical margin of error, sampling error and turnout differentials. What are you doing to tell them about it? It is as little as your papers can possibly get away with. What are you doing to stop them getting away with it? Absolutely nothing.

Matt Tee: We seem to have a disagreement about whether they are getting away with it. It is open to organisations such as Full Fact to complain to IPSO about the coverage of things like opinion polls, which they have done. We get very few complaints, even from bodies such as Full Fact, about the coverage of opinion polls in newspapers.

The Chairman: How many rulings have you made in the last three years on complaints against opinion polls?

Matt Tee: It depends slightly on how you define an opinion poll. I guess that the figure is not more than 10.

Baroness Couttie: Correct me if I am wrong, but it sounds as though you are saying that, as long as somewhere in the article—even if it is in the bottom paragraph—it says that the margin of error on the poll is, say, 4%, that is okay, even if the headline says, “Swing to Tories of 2%”. We are all steeped in politics and will probably read the whole thing, but most people may not get to the bottom paragraph. Even if they read the whole article, what they remember is the headline, given that they are reading the whole newspaper. When judging whether a complaint should be upheld, do you distinguish between the impact of a misleading headline and the caveats buried somewhere in the article itself?

Matt Tee: It is part of our code that a headline must be supported by the article that comes underneath it, but we can take a complaint about a headline in isolation.

Baroness Couttie: Lord Lipsey gave the example of a caveat stating that there was a margin of error in excess of the swing that was announced as a big swing towards the Tories. Under your procedures, would that mean that the article was deemed to be okay?

Matt Tee: We are dancing on the head of a hypothetical pin.

Baroness Couttie: We are, but it is an example that reflects many similar articles.

Matt Tee: I make the point again that people are not hesitant in complaining to us about things that they think are wrong in the newspapers.

Baroness Couttie: It is about knowledge, is it not? Your readers need to know that there is something wrong. Most people are very unsophisticated—quite understandably—in their understanding of margins of error and where the polls are wrong. They take these things at face value.

Matt Tee: But some people are exceptionally sophisticated. In the heat of a general election, not only are people sophisticated but they take differing positions on which parties they support. It seems to me unlikely that, if a newspaper published a story that a party felt was seriously misleading about the advantage gained by another party, somebody somewhere would not make a complaint about it.

Baroness Couttie: The interesting word you use is “seriously”. One problem is the cumulative impact of things that are slightly misleading. “Tories soar by 2%” is not as big as “Tories soar by 10%”, so it is slightly misleading. However, a lot of those headlines over time build a big impression.

Matt Tee: It is not part of my regime to consider a complaint about a cumulative effect. I consider complaints about individual articles.

Baroness Couttie: In all likelihood, an article like that would get through and be seen as okay. You must have the caveat at the bottom, even though the headline is misleading.

Matt Tee: I am not prepared to speak for my complaints committee on a theoretical article with theoretical content in the last paragraph.

Q78 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** You made one rather positive suggestion, as you saw it, for improving the situation when you talked in your written evidence about “the development of independent guidance for journalists”. Will you expand on that? Who would develop such guidance? How would it be monitored and enforced?

Matt Tee: It might be developed by all sorts of people. We have developed some guidance on our own, and we have developed some guidance in co-operation with other groups. For example, we have guidance on the coverage of transgender issues, which we developed with transgender charities. It might be produced by somebody else—the Royal Statistical Society, for example—and we might adopt it as guidance. Rather like something that already exists called the editors’ code book, which sits next to the editors’ code, it would be—

Baroness Jay of Paddington: We have taken evidence on the BBC regulations on reporting polls, for example, so we are familiar with what other organisations do.

Matt Tee: Any of those might generate guidance. I sense that the Committee may not be entirely with me, but, given the number of complaints that we receive and the ease of complaining, it is not on our radar as one of the most serious issues that journalists get wrong.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: We take that point. What I am trying to get from you is whether you think it would be appropriate to have a much more rigorous, independently developed monitoring system and whether, if you achieved that, it would be up to your complaints system to ensure that it was enforced. I follow the Chairman in saying that that is a rather reactive way of trying to monitor and regulate a code.

Matt Tee: It is certainly the sort of subject that would be amenable to the guidance that we issue. There is no question about that. It is also a question of the number of complaints that we receive. If we had issued guidance and received a complaint about polling in which the complainant said, “IPSO has issued guidance that says that best practice in political poll reporting involves these things, but this article does not do them”, that would be a very properly phrased complaint.

You made the point that it is reactive. We have a standards function that gives us the opportunity to look at standards more broadly across newspapers. Were we to get an instance—this has not happened—of a newspaper being held to be in breach of the code around its coverage of statistics or political polling in a series, we might look at that as a possible broader standards issue and consider whether the editorial standards within the newspaper were sufficient to enable coverage of political polling or statistics at the right level. We might intervene with that newspaper to check whether that was the case.

The Chairman: May I press you a bit more on the issue of complaints as the indicator? I was on the Advertising Standards Authority council for years. When we received hundreds of complaints, it was nearly always because religious pressure groups and so on did not like the nuance of some advert. Those complaints invariably were turned down by the council as not valid.

Statistical errors or nuances in adverts received virtually no coverage. I think I am the only one who complains about bad use of statistics. The number of complaints is a very poor indicator of whether you are doing well or badly. I am disappointed that you are not being more forthcoming in saying, "There is a big issue here. We need to consider at IPSO whether a complaints-driven way of dealing with it is adequate for the size and importance of the subject".

Matt Tee: I may be at odds with the Committee, but I do not think that there is a big issue here.

The Chairman: You think that the inaccuracy of polls—which, arguably, determined the results of the last two elections, and is translated to the public largely through your members—is not a big issue.

Matt Tee: I am not taking just the number of complaints—I am taking the source of complaint. If we got a single complaint about an article from an organisation such as Full Fact, we would take that extremely seriously. Full Fact is a very serious organisation that makes very good complaints that are usually very well founded. But, from the coverage of the newspapers that we regulate, I do not feel that there is a big issue with the coverage of political polling in newspapers.

The Chairman: I am bound to say that this will raise questions about the adequacy of IPSO as a press regulator.

Q79 **Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** Do you consider whether reporting on polling is clear and explicit about the source of funding for a poll?

Matt Tee: That would be an important consideration in the way in which the poll was presented. For example, we had a complaint from a complainant in Northern Ireland about a political opinion poll carried in a newspaper. The poll was carried out by a professional polling company and was described in the newspaper as an independent poll, but it was subsequently discovered that it had been commissioned by the Democratic Unionist Party. We ruled that that was a breach of the editors' code, because the poll, however professionally carried out, could not be described as independent, given its source of commissioning.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: You would object to a poll being described as independent if it was commissioned by a political party without declaration. What about the many other ways in which polling may be funded? Would you regard it as important that the public knew which commercial or sectoral interest had funded a poll?

Matt Tee: Again, it is difficult to talk in theoretical or hypothetical terms. If an article was about a poll and that poll had been funded by an interested party, it is very likely that we would entertain a complaint about its being misleading, because the source of the polling had not been made transparent.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: So if it came to light that it was an interested party, that would constitute a breach of your code, but when it was just silent about the source of funding and who commissioned it, that would be perfectly okay.

Matt Tee: We would expect a newspaper to ask what the source of the funding was. If the source of the funding was relevant to the story, we would expect it to report that.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: Do you systematically ask them to state that, or do you allow silence to indicate that there was nothing interesting about the source of the funding?

Matt Tee: The latter, as you describe it.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: In order to complain, you need to know that there is a body to which you can complain. When I googled "IPSO", I got "professional laundry equipment", which did not seem to be too relevant. Eventually, I got you. Do you have any assessment of how well known you are to readers?

Matt Tee: If you google "complain about a newspaper", you will find that we come at the top of the list of Google searches. In a way, if you know who we are, you do not need to google us to find out who we are—if you see what I mean, Lord Foulkes. I am pretty confident that, if you are cross about what is in a newspaper and want to complain, you can do so. First, our newspapers are required to carry what we call the IPSO panel, which says where you can complain about the newspaper and gives IPSO's contact details. Secondly, the public are able to find us quite easily by googling. We received 15,000 complaints last year. This year we are on course for 28,000. There is a big ramping effect.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Each time, you have said, "newspapers". When I got on to your website, I found that it says that you regulate "over 1,500 print and over 1,100 online titles". What online titles does that include?

Matt Tee: We regulate the main national newspapers and all their online content.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: But none of the social media.

Matt Tee: We regulate some online-only websites, but they tend to be of the smaller, more local variety. We do not regulate somebody like BuzzFeed.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Or Guido Fawkes.

Matt Tee: We do not regulate Guido.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Somebody needs to, do they not?

Matt Tee: It would be open to Guido to be regulated by IPSO, if it so chose.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: How could it be regulated otherwise? What would you suggest? Could you take on an additional responsibility, or would it need another organisation?

Matt Tee: The nature of our regulation is that it is voluntary independent regulation. To be regulated by us, you need to sign up to it.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Some people are not happy about that, of course.

Matt Tee: Within our system, there is no way of compelling Guido Fawkes to sign up to IPSO. You could move to a statutory form of regulation for newspapers and social media sites in which you had a government regulator for that.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Or a non-governmental regulator that was not voluntary—a compulsory non-governmental regulator.

Matt Tee: You would then be getting very close to the licensing of the press, which has not happened in this country for many hundreds of years.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: In other words, online titles could be regulated, but they would have to seek to come under your authority.

Matt Tee: Yes.

Lord Hayward: How do your codes of conduct vary from those of broadcasters, other than in the obvious ways? Are there any marked variations between the two?

Matt Tee: The very obvious difference between our code and the broadcast code is that broadcasters have a requirement to be balanced and impartial. That does not apply to newspapers. Newspapers are allowed to be partial and to editorialise.

Lord Hayward: Would you like to have that power?

Matt Tee: I believe that the ability of newspapers to be partisan and to editorialise is an important part of freedom of speech in this country.

Lord Hayward: To take a slightly different direction, are not regulators and codes of conduct rowing against developments in society? A number of people who have given evidence to us have said that we are moving to a more sensational world where you would need to highlight that an opinion poll was being sensational in one form or another. It is not journalists who need guidance—I refer here to your third recommendation—but the editors, in one form or another.

I will put it on a more dispassionate basis. If 4,000 people lose their jobs, it is front-page news headlines. If 4,000 people gain a job, it might appear on the bottom of page 7. That is the society we are in, is it not?

Matt Tee: For the majority of my members, who come from the local press, 4,000 jobs either way would be very big news. That is the nature of the economy we live in.

Your first question is a very fair one. Is the nature of society bringing us to a point where regulators based on what were historical industries, effectively, are no longer as relevant as they were previously? There is certainly an issue with regard to convergence of content. If the same video appeared on the *Daily Telegraph* website, the BBC website and an ITV broadcaster's website, it would be regulated in three different ways. I

see no way that a member of the public could be expected to know that. Convergence is unquestionably an issue for us.

There are some very interesting things going on. While it is true that the people who are signed up to IPSO are losing readership in hard-copy print, many of them are increasing readership in the digital sphere. The *Independent*, which is not regulated by us, has gone digital only—a move that we will see increasingly in other areas. At the moment, most of the news-type content that is read in this country that is outside the BBC probably still comes from members of IPSO, in one way or another. However, there are websites such as BuzzFeed, in particular, that have employed many mainstream journalists from newspapers and are seeking to do an editorial job that is similar in professionalism to something that you might expect to see on the *Telegraph* or the *Times* website. Developments of that sort are very interesting.

The other tier is the completely unedited social media sphere—the things that people post on Facebook, and so on. I really struggle to see how you can come up with a form of regulation that begins to tackle that.

Lord Hayward: I typed “complain about a newspaper” while you were talking. Three of the top four entries come up as IPSO.

Matt Tee: Thank you.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: The other one was the Press Complaints Commission.

Matt Tee: That is a historical anomaly that is fading over the years, I am pleased to say.

Q80 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** In the section of your written evidence on appropriate reporting, you defend the right of publishers “to be partisan, to campaign and to present opinion” as “crucial to free speech”. You go on to say that, in the context of what you call “healthy political debate”, inaccuracies “can occur due to an error in the way the data is presented, or because of an honest but inaccurate interpretation of the polling results”. I paused when I read the phrase “honest but inaccurate”. I would be grateful if you elaborated a little on what you mean by “honest but inaccurate interpretation of the polling results”.

You go on to say, “IPSO is able to determine whether or not an article contains such inaccuracies and to what extent readers would be misled by them”. It seemed to me that there was a suggestion in the tone of this paragraph that you could regard inaccurate interpretation of polling results as a fairly venial sin.

Matt Tee: Yes; we could, and we would. The point we were trying to get at was that it is in the nature of modern news and modern newsrooms for there to be rather fewer people in them than there used to be. People who might in the past have been very specialist journalists are often rather more general now, or span more areas. Therefore, the sort of knowledge about polling methodology that would almost always have been available in national newsrooms may not be there as much.

A reporter may make an error that is not deliberate misreporting of the poll but a misinterpretation of the poll through lack of knowledge or

understanding. We would still find that to be a breach of the code, but we would take a view on whether there was an intention to mislead. We would look at that. If a newspaper had set out to present a misleading version of an opinion poll, we would think that that was potentially a serious breach of the code.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Where you found that a journalist reporting on polls was not well trained and able to do so correctly, would you upbraid the news desk, the editor, or the proprietor and say, “This is not good enough. We need better standards of political coverage and reporting”?

Matt Tee: We would say—and, indeed, have said in the past—that, generally, we are looking to see an improvement in the standards of statistical reporting. It is notable that at least two of the national news organisations now give their reporters training in the interpretation of statistics, provided by the Royal Statistical Society. That is a very good and important thing. I think that they take it seriously and are trying to get it right.

Very occasionally, I visit newspaper newsrooms. It has been reported to me that, in the *Daily Mail* newsroom, a ticker-tape goes around above the news desk that reads, “Numbers are important, and journalists are not always good at them. Check”. There is a sense that people want to get it right.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Is it part of the role of IPSO to define and establish good practice, to monitor the observation of and conformity with good practice, and to use its influence—and, indeed, its power—to insist that better norms prevail?

Matt Tee: I hesitate slightly to say that it is down to us to define good practice. There are people with expertise in polling—indeed, two of the most eminent figures in the country are sitting behind me—who can provide good advice on what is good reporting of polling. I am in an ongoing dialogue with the Royal Statistical Society about exactly that. We will always seek an improvement in standards of journalism, and the reporting of statistics and polls is part of that.

Baroness Fall: You are a voluntary organisation based on a system of complaints. I want to look at how that works online.

I think I am right in saying that you cover mostly newspapers that appear in hard copy and online. Given that more and more people get their news from a variety of sources online, do we not now have a system that will not see us into the next few decades?

Worse, the complaints system is based on the idea that someone who looks at a news source either does so because it is their job to do it or has the context of another truth, as it were. One of the things the Committee is struggling with is the idea that people tend to reinforce their views by going to the same sites. Therefore, you are less likely to get somebody to complain. You have lots of sources that are not regulated and your job becomes less important, in a way.

Matt Tee: There is a danger that that may happen. At the moment, readers seem to be able to differentiate most of the time between content

that is professionally produced and content that is not—whether that is a process about brands they have heard of or a process about professionally developed content. I agree completely that online, in particular, it is becoming less clear—at times, deliberately less clear, through some channels—what the source of the material that you are reading is.

We are about to introduce an IPSO kitemark, which our publishers will be able to use alongside their copy. It will say that the copy is from an organisation regulated by IPSO. I hope that, if nothing else, that says to a reader, “The journalist who wrote this is signed up to a set of standards that should mean that I can trust this content”. It also flags to the reader that there is somewhere they can go to complain, if they are unhappy. I am not suggesting that that is the panacea that solves this problem, by any means, but even if it is only a finger in the dyke, it is a finger in that dyke.

For the future, it will be very interesting to see where we go as regards the consumption of news-type content. We now have people all over the country—particularly on a local basis—generating news. What I do not see very much at the moment is content generated by individuals that is beginning to enter the national milieu. We are beginning to see a bit of it. Some of the content of publications like *The Canary* and *Squawk Box* is now beginning to cut through in that way. *The Canary* claims to be regulated by Impress. It will be very interesting to see where that takes us.

I hope that, as time goes on and online publishers become bigger and more influential, they will see a benefit from joining up with one of the voluntary regulators. I would exclude Guido Fawkes from that, because I do not think that it will ever seek to be regulated by anybody—rather like *Private Eye*.

Baroness Couttie: I want to build on that answer. The people covered by your organisation are voluntary. Are there any areas where you think there is a gap, either in specific publications—you mentioned the *Independent*, which some people think is a significant national newspaper, even if it is just online now—or in particular sectors, that should be covered by yourself or a similar organisation? We know about all the difficulties with chatrooms, but are there other areas that could be covered that have chosen not to be covered?

Matt Tee: The more written news content that is produced professionally, against a set of standards, that could be covered by a regulator, the better.

Baroness Couttie: I agree. I am asking where the gap is. Who is out there, but is not regulated?

Matt Tee: In my terms, it would be better if the *Guardian*, the *Independent* and the *Financial Times* were covered by a regulator. I would prefer that. Our job is doable without it, but it would be better. I would very much like some of the larger online-only news sources, such as BuzzFeed and *Huffington Post*, to consider being regulated in this country. There is an issue with the online-only case, on which we are currently close to coming to a resolution. If I ask *Huffington Post*, “Why do you not come and be regulated by IPSO?” it says, “Hang on a second. We are a

global news organisation. Are you really telling me that the UK press regulator is going to cover all our American content?" That is a legitimate fear on its part. We will reach some sort of resolution on that soon. If a publisher believes that its content is published to the same standards to which it might be published were you to read it in a newspaper—and many online publishers believe that their content is on that level—my suggestion to it would be that one way of demonstrating that would be to sign up to voluntary regulation.

Baroness Couttie: Are you saying that currently very few do so? Is it trending in the right direction, or is no one interested in it?

Matt Tee: Today, the online-only publications that sign up are either the equivalent of local newspapers—to give a parallel in the old world—or magazines. We have no member that is of national newspaper equivalence, but published online only.

Baroness Couttie: That is a significant gap.

Matt Tee: It is certainly a gap.

Baroness Couttie: So that I am absolutely clear, can you confirm that there is nobody else covering that? There is no other regulator I have not heard of.

Matt Tee: There is not.

Q81 **Lord Rennard:** My question is more about the quantity and nature of the complaints you deal with. You mentioned that there were about 15,000 complaints last year and 27,000 this year. Presumably, that is a lot of complaints about a rather small number of articles. Why do you think the figure is rising? Why are there more complaints?

Matt Tee: You are right. Some of that rise—probably most of it—is characterised by a larger number of people complaining about a single article. When IPSO first started in 2014, we might get what we call a multiple complaint—something more than 50 people have complained about—once every couple of months or every three months. We now get one at least every month—and usually every two weeks. They can run to thousands of people.

One of the effects that is going on is about social media. It is about the ability of people to say, "This piece in X newspaper"—sometimes including a link to the article, but sometimes not—"is a disgrace. You can complain to IPSO here". They then include a link to our complaints website. That can lead to a large number of people complaining, particularly when—as we have had on a number of occasions—somebody publishes a pro forma complaint online. I make no objection to that. There are some campaigning organisations for which being able to say, "3,000 people complained to IPSO", is partly a campaign objective met. I am absolutely happy with that.

There is partly a social media multiplier. A bit of this is about greater public awareness. When the Queen complains to the press regulator, that attracts a bit more awareness than some other complaints. The volatile political times we live in also mean that people are somewhat more disposed to complain about things than they used to be, perhaps.

Lord Rennard: In how many complaints do you find in favour of the newspaper, and in how many do you find in favour of the complainant?

Matt Tee: Our system is predicated on attempting to achieve resolution between the newspaper and the complainant. It is not automatic that every complaint we investigate will lead to a judgment for or against the newspaper. My experience is that, when a newspaper has got it wrong, it will usually seek to reach an agreement with the complainant about the nature of the remedy that would be sufficient. If it does that, we as an organisation do not take a view on whether there was a breach of the code. The fact that it has reached a resolution with the complainant is sufficient in itself.

Lord Rennard: In what proportion of cases do you reach agreement? In what proportion do you still find against the newspaper?

Matt Tee: Of the complaints that we receive that go to investigation, over half are resolved with the complainants—or, sometimes, the complainant decides not to continue with the complaint. I am happy to give the Committee a detailed report on the full numbers, but every year fewer than 200 cases go to the complaints committee for adjudication.

The Chairman: Will you provide those numbers? It would also be helpful for us to know the number of complaints you have had about polling and what the outcome was.

Matt Tee: I am very happy to do that.

Baroness Ford: I want to pick up on your response to Baroness Coultie, building on Baroness Fall's question.

We all understand the difficulty of regulating, with media convergence. We have three tiers of regulation. We then have user-generated content, which we are all trying to grapple with, for the reasons you have given. In your response, you implied you would be pleased if online publishers signed up to the code voluntarily. To me, a lot of online content looks more like broadcast content than print content. Why would we not want Ofcom to regulate that? If it is more like broadcast media than print media, why would it be voluntary?

Matt Tee: As you said at the beginning of your question, to some degree this comes down to a question about convergence. As the law stands, Ofcom regulates people who require a broadcasting licence. Those websites do not require a broadcasting licence.

Baroness Ford: That could be changed.

Matt Tee: It could. You could change the definition of a broadcaster under the Broadcasting Act. I am not sure how much appetite there would be for that at Ofcom. You could ask it to come and give evidence to you.

Baroness Ford: I am not suggesting that. I am suggesting that it could be given a new responsibility to license online content.

Matt Tee: It could.

Baroness Ford: Why would that not be mandatory? I am intrigued about why you naturally thought it should be voluntary.

Matt Tee: I differ from you, perhaps. When I read BuzzFeed, it feels to me more like newspaper-type content than broadcasting content. That was my only reason. The theory of what you suggest is absolutely sound.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: What is the point of political polling?

Matt Tee: I am slightly the wrong person to ask. I am neither a pollster nor somebody who commissions polling. In the days when I commissioned polling—I did not commission straight opinion polls—it was to discover what the public, or a sample of the public, believed about certain issues.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: It gives your members something to write about.

Matt Tee: Certainly, what the public think gives my members something to write about.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Provided the polls are correct.

Matt Tee: Yes—in our terms, provided the poll has been carried out properly and is reported properly.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: May I go back to the question the Chairman asked you about the 2015 general election? The newspapers had continual coverage of a hung Parliament and of Ed Miliband being in Alex Salmond’s top pocket or of Nicola Sturgeon pulling the strings. The editors’ code of conduct says, “The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images” and “must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact”. There were an awful lot of breaches of those two codes by newspapers during the 2015 election, based on the polling. How many complaints did you get about that?

Matt Tee: I will be very happy to provide the exact number, but there were very few.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Why do you think that you got very few?

Matt Tee: It may be that people felt that, even if in retrospect the polling was inaccurate, at the time the newspapers accurately reflected what the polls were finding.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You are saying that the problem lies with the polls, not with the newspapers.

Matt Tee: I am saying that that is a possibility.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Similarly, in the run-up to the 2017 election, did you get any complaints about the polls?

Matt Tee: Very few indeed.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Like the Chairman, I find that surprising. Why do you think that that was?

Matt Tee: It is quite possible that, in the run-up to the 2017 general election, when most of the polls—with a couple of exceptions—were showing a result that was different from the end outcome, the newspapers were reflecting what the polls were saying, rather than what we now know was the underlying situation.

Q82 **The Chairman:** I want to return to where I started—the question of

whether the code is enough. Let us take another hypothetical example from the poll that I had earlier, showing a 4% increase in the Tory lead. If you read down the poll, you find that it also shows that the leader of the Tory party has fallen six points further behind the leader of the Labour Party in the ratings. However, the newspaper chooses to report only the first of those findings, not the second. Is that misleading under the terms of the code?

Matt Tee: It would be a matter for my complaints committee. I could not prejudge the matter for it.

The Chairman: It is a bit hard on the journalist who is writing the story. If he looks at the code to see whether he is being misleading in making this decision, all you can say is, "It is a matter for the committee, if there happens to be a complaint—which there usually is not".

Matt Tee: It is a question for the journalist. The question is, do I feel that what I am writing is misleading in the context in which I am writing it?

The Chairman: As long as the journalist is satisfied, it is okay by you.

Matt Tee: No—certainly not. If the journalist is satisfied, I may take the view that we disagree with their judgment.

The Chairman: Would it not be fair to the journalist—I have been in that position—to have a bit of guidance from you on what is fair, instead of going to face a court afterwards for a charge on an offence that they may not have known existed?

Matt Tee: There is also an advantage to the journalist in being able to exercise some judgment.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: Do you equate judgment with feeling? I have been listening to the way in which you describe this. It seems to me very odd to talk about whether the journalist feels that something is right.

Matt Tee: Let us use the word "judgment". The journalist needs to make a judgment on what they are writing, against the editors' code. If the journalist feels that what they are writing is within the bounds of the editors' code, that is what we require of them. We may make a different judgment on the piece later.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: But your paper concludes, "We would support the development of independent guidance for journalists reporting on polling data". That is in your paper.

Matt Tee: As I have said, I am absolutely amenable to that suggestion.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: You said earlier that certain newspapers or media organisations had introduced statistical training. Do we know which those are?

Matt Tee: The News UK group and Associated.

The Chairman: Having done the training myself, I know that it is quite a challenging task. My main job when I was the economics editor of the *Sunday Times* was calculating percentages for journalists who did not know how to do it.

We have come to the end of a very useful session. I say to the Committee

and to you, Mr Tee, that we are also seeking the views of Impress, the other press regulatory organisation now approved by the PRP—and that approval has been approved by the courts. We will take a balanced view between the two organisations.

Matt Tee: I dispute whether there is a balance to be struck.

The Chairman: I said that we would take “a balanced view”, so that both organisations can express their views, not that there was a balance between the two organisations.

Thank you very much for attending. It has been extremely helpful to us in teasing out the situation.

Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) – Written evidence (PPD0021)

IPSO

The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) is the independent regulator for the newspaper and magazine industry in the UK. We hold newspapers and magazines to account for their actions, protect individual rights, uphold high standards of journalism and help to maintain freedom of expression for the press. We currently regulate over 1500 print titles and 1100 online titles, comprising 95% of the national daily newspapers by circulation and the majority of magazines, local and regional newspapers in the UK.

IPSO provides a free-to-use complaints service regarding possible breaches of the Editors' Code of Practice.²⁷ Where resolution between the parties is not possible, IPSO adjudicates on complaints. Adjudications are made by IPSO's Complaints Committee, a panel of twelve with expertise in journalism and a lay majority. If a complaint is upheld, the Committee can require publications to publish a correction or its adjudication. The Committee also has the power to determine the nature, extent and placement of these corrections and adjudications. In addition to the Committee's work, IPSO monitors complaints for thematic issues (such as the misrepresentation of statistics) and works with publishers to improve their compliance with the Code.

Our work gives us a unique understanding of press standards and public concerns relating to press coverage of polling. Through the Committee's rulings we have developed a body of thinking about how polling can be reported in a way that is both accurate and not misleading, but can also be accessible to a general audience. We have therefore focussed on questions which relate to these issues.

Submission

Question 11: Does the media report on opinion polls appropriately? What steps could be taken to improve how the media reports the results of political opinion polls? For example, should standards be set in relation to the reporting of political opinion polls, or should a code of conduct be introduced?

The Editors' Code of Practice:

Clause 1 of the Editors' Code relates to the accuracy of published material. It imposes the following requirements:

- "i) The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text.
- ii) A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence, and — where appropriate — an

²⁷ We also help members of the public with unwanted press attention or harassment concerns, provide advice on the Code, run a Journalists' Whistleblowing Hotline, monitor on-going compliance with the Code, and produce guidance on the reporting of certain topics (such as transgender issues). We operate a pilot arbitration scheme to provide alternative dispute resolution for legal claims against the press.

Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) – Written evidence (PPD0021)

apology published. In cases involving IPSO, due prominence should be as required by the regulator.

iii) A fair opportunity to reply to significant inaccuracies should be given, when reasonably called for.

iv) The Press, while free to editorialise and campaign, must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact. [...]"

The Code provides a single source of standards which apply to journalism in general, covering reports concerning a wide variety of issues. The clauses of the Code are designed to be accessible, and in this way provide a clear set of standards that can form the basis of press complaints from the public. This provides consistency for journalists in the application of press standards and for members of the public in knowing how and where to complain.

Through the work of the Complaints Committee, IPSO has considered how the Code applies specifically to the accuracy of poll reporting. The Committee's decisions set out requirements for journalists to ensure the accuracy of their reporting and to correct inaccurate information promptly and with appropriate prominence.

Taking steps to ensure accuracy:

- General duty to report findings accurately

While it may be possible to interpret the findings of a poll in different ways, publications must be careful to present an interpretation that can be supported by the data. The press is entitled to condense research findings into succinct descriptions designed for consumption by a general audience (03350-16 In Facts v The Sun). However, in doing so, care must be taken to report the findings accurately. This can include the requirement to "form a judgement on what those polled would have understood from the question, and to present a justifiable interpretation of the poll results" (09324-15 MEND v The Sun). The press must therefore take care to present polling data in its proper context.

- Reporting basic information about methodology

An article in the press intended for a general audience may not include the level of detail that would be appropriate for a specialist publication. For this reason, we do not generally require our members to publish a detailed breakdown of a reported poll's methodology (07016-16 McDonald v Daily Express). Nonetheless, the press must take care not to mislead readers as to the context and source of polling data. For example, IPSO has previously ruled that it was significantly misleading to describe a poll about voting intentions as 'independent' in circumstances where it was carried out by a professional polling body but commissioned by a political party (03644-15 Nesbitt v Portadown Times).

Timely corrections of inaccurate reporting:

In circumstances where a publisher becomes aware that they have published a significant inaccuracy, the terms of the Code require them to issue a prompt and

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appropriately prominent correction and, where appropriate, an apology.

IPSO therefore takes into account offers to correct articles and give apologies, or the lack thereof, in its decision making. For example, the Complaints Committee can uphold complaints without requiring its own correction or adjudication to be published where it feels that the remedial action previously offered or carried out by a publication was sufficient (13903-16 *Versi v Mail Online*; 13904-16 *Versi v Daily Express*). Equally a refusal to correct an article will be taken into account in assessing the seriousness of the breach and when requiring remedial action.

This provision seeks to strengthen and incentivise the effective use of publisher complaint procedures. It recognises that when publishers uphold high standards in complaints handling, they are demonstrating their accountability to their readership and transparency in their journalism.

Appropriate Reporting:

Under the terms of the Code, publishers are entitled to be partisan, to campaign and to present opinion. This is crucial to free speech, but can lead to disputes concerning accuracy. These disputes do not, in and of themselves, suggest that polling data is being reported inappropriately, but may simply be the result of healthy political debate. Inaccuracies can occur due to an error in the way the data is presented, or because of an honest but inaccurate interpretation of the polling results. IPSO is able to determine whether or not an article contains such inaccuracies and to what extent readers would be misled by them.

Improving Reporting:

We believe that the Code is the most appropriate way to regulate reporting in this field and to deal with disputes when they arise. Members of the public and other interested parties are able to suggest changes to the Code during regular public consultations run by the Editors' Code Committee. This is the proper method by which standards of reporting within the press industry can be strengthened with input from the public. The production of a separate set of standards may make reporting and the resolution of disputes in this area overly complex, undermining the benefit of having a clear set of standards that covers the majority of the UK press.

This does not however preclude the production of specialist guidance on the reporting of opinion polls and/or statistics in general. Whilst not binding, such information can support best practice in new or complex areas of journalism. IPSO has, for example, produced guidance to help journalists comply with the Code with respect to the gathering of material published by individuals on social media. We have also supported other organisations in the production of reporting guidance. Whilst we have no immediate plans to produce specific Code-based guidance on the reporting of opinion polls, we will continue to monitor complaints and may develop such information in the future. We are also happy to support the development of broader guidance by other specialist bodies.

Training with respect to polling and use of statistics is also an important factor in improving press standards. We provide editorial training on general Code compliance, a large section of which focusses on Clause 1 (Accuracy). We also

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monitor the training provided by our members to their journalists. The News UK and Associated Media Groups have, for example, informed us via their annual statements²⁸ that they arranged for journalists to attend training sessions with the Royal Statistical Society.

Conclusion:

- **We do not support the creation of a separate Code of Conduct as the Editors' Code of Practice already sets the standard for accurate press reporting, the principles of which apply equally to the coverage of polling results.**
- **We would support the development of independent guidance for journalists reporting on polling data, as long as this did not conflict with, or cause confusion about, the application of the Code.**
- **We would support increasing the availability of training opportunities for journalists and believe this could have a beneficial impact on journalistic standards, particularly regarding the reporting of polling data.**

Question 13: What impact is the increased use of digital media channels having on the way in which the public engages with political opinion polling? How is political opinion polling shared across social media platforms and what impact does social media have on the accuracy and reliability of political opinion polling?

Newspapers and magazines are increasingly engaging with their readers through digital and social media platforms. This activity can involve asking for readers' views on certain issues. These surveys can be very useful in gauging opinion within a publisher's readership. However, there are limitations to this sort of data collection, particularly when extrapolating the results to make UK-wide observations. The sample pool will already be limited to those who read the publication in question. Those who respond will also be self-selecting, and a call for views online may only attract particular sections of a publication's readership (i.e. those who engage with its social media and/or digital platforms).

It is therefore important for publications to properly outline the source of the data being reported. As already discussed, a full methodology is not generally necessary, but publications should be careful to distinguish between the results of professional, independent polls and self-selecting surveys directed at discrete audiences. Enough information should be provided to allow readers to form their own opinion about the validity of the data and interpretation being presented. In this regard, the primary concern is not necessarily the validity of the poll in question but the transparency with which it is reported.

For example, IPSO has required a front page correction in circumstances where the details of a phone survey, commissioned by the publication in question and limited to its readership, were not made sufficiently clear. In these circumstances, the article gave the impression that 'it was reporting the significant results of a representative poll carried out by a third-party for the publication' (07016-16 McDonald v Daily Express).

Conclusion:

²⁸ Our members are required to submit annual statements to us, setting out their compliance with the Editors' Code of Practice and details of any guidance and training they provide to their journalists.

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- **Online surveys can be easy to run, but are susceptible to bias. Flaws in data collection methodology are not however unique to social media or digital surveys. News reporting must avoid misleading the public as to the strength or validity of reported data by distinguishing between professional polls and self-selecting surveys.**

6 September 2017

Sue English and Professor Richard Tait CBE – Oral evidence (QQ 71–76)

Evidence Session No. 9

Heard in Public

Questions 71 - 76

Tuesday 24 October 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Couttie; Baroness Fall; Baroness Ford; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve; Lord Rennard; Lord Smith of Hindhead.

Examination of witnesses

Professor Richard Tait CBE and Sue English.

- Q71 **The Chairman:** Welcome to the Committee. This morning we are mostly going through people who have worked for broadcasting organisations in the past and are now reflecting on it. I would like to thank Richard, in particular, for a very good piece of evidence, which we circulated to the Committee yesterday and which most members have read.

I will deal with a few formalities. The mics are on all the time. If you swear at me under your breath, it will be broadcast to the nation. You will get a transcript, in due course, to change any bits where you may have misspoken and want to reconsider. Whatever you say, you are protected by parliamentary privilege, so no one can sue you, although they may shout at you.

As you are now both in different positions from the ones you were in previously, when you worked for broadcasting organisations, it might be just as well if you fill the Committee in on your broadcasting pasts.

Professor Richard Tait: I am currently a professor of journalism at the journalism school at Cardiff University. Before that, I was the editor-in-chief of ITN, in charge of ITN's television, radio and online programmes across ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5. I started my journalistic career as a magazine journalist in business journalism. I worked for the BBC for 12 years, edited the 1987 general election programme and was editor of "Newsnight".

Sue English: I am the former head of political programmes at the BBC. I left the BBC at the end of 2015, having done that job for 10 years. I went to BBC Westminster at Millbank just before the 2005 election.

Prior to that, I was a journalist at ITN. I worked on a number of different programmes for Channel 4 News. I also did various editorships for ITN New Media and LBC Radio. Having left the BBC, I now sit on a number of charitable boards.

The Chairman: Thank you very much. What changes have you seen in broadcast coverage of opinion polling, in particular, during the years in which you have been involved and observing?

Sue English: The changes in coverage of opinion polling mirror the changes in coverage of political journalism and politics in general. You have already talked at some length about the BBC guidelines on opinion poll reporting. It is worth stressing that the BBC never commissions voting intention polls during an election campaign. All the reporting of opinion polls during an election is, by definition, reporting of other people's polling.

My experience of the polling guidelines is that they have not changed a great deal since I first went to BBC Westminster in 2005. I think that they are a very sensible and useful way of ensuring that the reporting of opinion polling is responsible, accurate, puts the poll into context and uses language that is both explanatory and not inflammatory in any way. I never found the guidelines a problem or a restriction as regards what we were allowed to broadcast. I would recommend them to a number of people in different parts of media organisations as a very useful template for how they might want to approach opinion polling.

There are some key differences that appear to me to be at play. Politics is incredibly unpredictable. It is very hard for anybody involved in political reporting—and for politicians—to see how the currents are flowing. The changes in the media landscape, about which we have just heard some fascinating thoughts from BuzzFeed, make a big difference to the context in which people are reporting, particularly when they are reporting politics at a time of flux. In my opinion, an election campaign is probably the hardest test of any media organisation, because you are attempting to report developments in the campaign and the issues underlying them in a very fast-paced environment, when the stakes are incredibly high. For most journalists, those are the most difficult things to do.

Professor Richard Tait: I see two big changes over the last period. In a sense, they are going in different directions. At one level, the broadcasters are much more aware of the issues around polling. They are more careful in how they report polls and have guidelines on how they should present polls. There is greater numeracy and literacy among political correspondents and editors regarding what a poll means and the limits of what you can say about a poll.

On the other side, there are a lot more polls. There seems to be almost an arms race among newspapers and polling organisations to have lots of polls. To me, that encourages a less desirable development—a focus on the horse race in the election, or the referendum, rather than a focus on issues and analysis of policy. This is an argument that broadcast editors always have: how much do you spend on who is winning and who is losing, and how much do you spend on analysing attitudes to education, defence or the economy? I think that the sheer weight of polls is a factor in determining where newspapers and broadcasters focus their attention. If you look at the content analysis done by Loughborough University or my university, you find that there is a large chunk of coverage on the conduct of the campaign.

I am concerned about that, because it helps to push the coverage in a direction where you miss the fact that there are issues people are concerned about that may well determine how they vote. One of the reasons why we, the broadcasters and the newspapers, rather missed what was going on in the last three electoral contests was that there was probably too much coverage of the horse race—on the basis of polls that turned out to be predicting the wrong horse race—rather than the issues people were concerned about.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: There are a lot of interesting things to follow up there. Sue English said that the BBC never commissions polls during a general election. Will you explain the reasons behind that decision?

Sue English: It is not the role of the BBC to commission voting intention polls during an election. Apart from anything else, there are masses of other people commissioning voting intention polls. The BBC commissions voting intention polls very rarely at any time; I just wanted to be clear that, specifically during an election campaign, the BBC never commissions voting intention polls. The reason that is important is that, when we talk about the way in which polls are reported during an election campaign, we are talking about the BBC reporting other people's polls—usually commissioned by newspapers, for example.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: But you do that—and do it quite regularly during an election campaign. For example, in 2015 you in the BBC helped to generate what we have just heard about from Professor Tait—the concept that there was a horse race in the election, that there was going to be a hung Parliament and that, ultimately, Salmond or Sturgeon would hold the balance of power. Is that right?

Sue English: It is correct to say that, in the context of the 2015 general election campaign, that was a narrative that clearly took off. One thing that I would say in parentheses is that it is always important to remember when you are doing an election campaign that you are not fighting the previous campaign. The 2010 election campaign, of course, started off with a narrative that was quite different from what actually happened in 2010.

When you start planning your election coverage, which all organisations do at least a year before they expect an election to happen, one of the key things is to say that you have to keep a really open mind about what the campaign will be about and what issues you will focus on. If you work for an organisation like the BBC, one of the things that you are very keen to work out is what your audience expects the BBC to provide during an election campaign and what you, as responsible political journalists in the BBC, feel you should cover. That is the beginning of the discussion about whether it is a horse race or coverage of policies. Of course, it is always a mixture of the two.

The complication comes when you start an election campaign and have a series of polls that give you a certain narrative. It is clear that that was the case in 2015. That affects not just how journalists cover the campaign, but how political parties organise it. What politicians do—obviously—is the meat and drink of what most journalists will report daily. What politicians talk about on news programmes and “Question Time”

depends on their reading of the opinion polls. Most political parties also have their own private polling, which may or may not say the same thing.

We all know that in 2015 the Conservatives' private polling was telling them something very different from what the published opinion polling was saying. You have to take the coverage of an election campaign in the round. There are a lot of things that affect the way in which it is covered, but the same things that affect the way in which it is covered affect the way in which party politics plays out during a campaign.

Professor Richard Tait: I very much agree. One of the problems with the balance between the horse race and the issues is that, as Sue says, once a certain conventional wisdom has arrived it has an influence on how the public behave and react to journalists.

One interesting piece of research that I saw recently was on vox pops in the 2017 election. The broadcasters made a real effort to go out and talk to voters about their concerns, and most of the pieces that were broadcast repeated the conventional wisdom at that moment—that there was going to be a Conservative victory and that the Labour Party was divided. Therefore, in the end, what the vox pops did not find was young people who were worried about tuition fees and were saying that they were going to vote for the first time. The vox pops did not find people who were angry about austerity and were going to vote in a certain way.

There is one issue that future historians will be really surprised about. The 2015 election was a historic election, because it resulted in a Government who delivered the European Union referendum. I do not recall those issues being debated at any length—or, frankly, at all—in many of the programmes and newspapers that I consumed during that election. The danger is that the conventional wisdom crowds out other important issues.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: I hope you are now getting very sceptical about vox pops. People just repeat what they read in the paper that morning. They are a random choice, anyway.

Professor Richard Tait: This plays a little to what their purpose is. Matt Singh has the lovely example of the *Guardian* journalist who went to Stoke-on-Trent and decided that nine out of every 10 voters would vote leave. In fact, the vote was 69.4%, so that is a pretty inaccurate poll.

The difficulty is that the sort of location reporting that is done in the world we are now in is not sufficiently granular to begin to get below the surface of fairly predictable immediate reactions and to say to people, "What are your real concerns? Is your concern about your local car plant? Is it about university fees? Is it about fishing?" Let us get into the granularity of those issues. For me, that is the only value of a vox pop—to get members of the public to say what is on their mind.

- Q72 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** I am following George Foulkes on the cynicism line. We need to know more about how this narrative is created. I am dubious that it is a completely natural or instantaneous reaction to various stories that occur—whether it is about why the potential European Union referendum was not discussed, or anything else.

We have been trying to pursue the question of who commissions polls and how the fact of who commissions them influences the way in which they are reported and are then influential. I take Sue English's point that the BBC does not commission polls during the campaign. However, I was interested to see that in the evidence that we had from you yesterday, Richard, you say, "Organisations which commission polls can influence the selection of questions and are free to stress the results which most support their views". That seems to me to be crucial when we talk about the press media, in particular, and the way in which their polls are created.

You also say that you do not have any evidence that "reputable polling organisations" tilt their figures in response to a particular agenda. However, it must be clear to us all that a press organisation that has a particular political agenda will report its polling findings in a particular way. In a sense, we need to understand how that works. Onora O'Neill has been very determined that we pursue the question of the financial interest, but there is also the political interest.

Professor Richard Tait: One of the major problems with the polls currently is that there are so many of them. They are commissioned by newspapers to give themselves a competitive advantage—to give themselves a front-page story. I am not as convinced as you are that there is quite such a political agenda behind them.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I am not convinced—I am just trying to pursue it.

Professor Richard Tait: What they want is, "Labour up two points", or, "Conservatives up one point". I know that you have had evidence from better polling experts than me. We know that most of these stories are within the margin of error, so to say that Labour is up one point on yesterday is pretty meaningless journalistically.

The difficulty with the current state of the polls is that in the analytical polls—the British Election Study and the other pieces of research that have been done since 2015, since the referendum and since 2017—we have seen the richness that you can find about the correlation between people's cultural attitudes or educational level and the way in which they vote. There is a whole range of different ways in which you can analyse public opinion that go far beyond someone on the phone, online or even, occasionally, with a clipboard asking, "Are you Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat or SNP?"

My worry about the polls is that, because of the nature of what they do—because they have to do the fieldwork very quickly and are doing several polls, as part of their newspaper's campaign—they are all asking the same question and coming up with answers that are not particularly useful, until the shift goes beyond the margin of error. Together with the ability and desire of the politicians and parties to control elections, as we all know, through campaigning, photo opportunities and the way in which they manage their publicity and promotions—as they are perfectly entitled to do—that encourages an attitude to elections meaning that you end up with a campaign where important voices and issues are crowded out. That is not a healthy thing for a democracy.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I am asking you to produce the evidence that, as you say in your written evidence, those who commission polls “stress the results which most support their views”.

Professor Richard Tait: If you look beyond the voting intention, there is a choice in supplementary questions. You will find that not every poll has the same supplementary questions. The supplementary questions will tend to focus on what someone thinks about this or that policy, if you think that that is to the advantage of your side. In that sense, it is possible for organisations not to skew the result but to ask the questions that they think will get an answer that fits.

We have talked a bit about the Labour-SNP coalition that never happened. There was a lot of polling on that. A lot of people were asked about it. That may have created a sort of howlround effect, so that people started worrying about it. Undoubtedly, the Conservative Party campaigned on it. It was a perfectly legitimate area to campaign on. However, if you start polling on that issue and then say, “A lot of people do not want Nicola Sturgeon to be part of a coalition with Ed Miliband”, you are creating a narrative. With the benefit of hindsight, it was a completely mad discussion, because we now know that it was never going to happen.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I am still intrigued by this point. If the interest of the news media—let us focus exclusively on the press—is in producing an accurate reflection, and their agenda is not reflected in the polls, why do they not follow the polling decisions that are taken on polling day and coalesce around one polling exercise? We know that that is more expensive, but they would be together. We know that it would also be more accurate.

Professor Richard Tait: That is an interesting area to explore. As you know, it is what the broadcasters have done with their exit poll. The background was that, in the days when I produced election programmes, we all had competing exit polls. Some were better than others. There was a lot of reputational damage when they got it wrong on the night. David Dimbleby still has the scars on his back from one or two occasions when he had to put the record straight half way through the night and say, “I think that our exit poll is wrong”.

Sue will know more about this than I do, but in 2010 they all came together. They have a new methodology for predicting seats and pool their resources. Therefore, they have a non-competitive poll where they concede some competitive advantage, journalistically, for journalistic accuracy. It is an interesting model. Whether it would work for the newspapers is a matter you will have to ask them about. However, given that they are suffering reputational damage from spending a lot of money on polls that turn out to be rather less accurate than they hoped, it is at least worth discussing whether you could commission fewer, better polls.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: If that was their intention and wish.

Professor Richard Tait: It is possible. They might get more value out of those polls than they are getting at present. It is clearly a matter for them, but it is worth discussing.

Sue English: The exit poll was one of the things I was responsible for at the BBC. We first did a joint poll in 2005, with ITV. Part of the reason for that was the view that if we were all wrong it was better for us all to be wrong together, and that if we were all right the credit would go to us equally.

There was another, slightly more fundamental question: could we afford to go on paying for two separate exit polls, because they are expensive? I am pleased to say that in 2010 Sky joined us. In the past, it had usually reported our exit poll, but had not credited it. In some ways, it was very good that it came in with us, because then all of us were crediting the same set of data.

I have serious doubts about whether you can make many read-across conclusions from the exit poll to opinion polls. Without being incredibly simplistic, I note that in an opinion poll you are asking what you hope is a representative sample of 1,000 voters how they think they will vote in a week, two weeks, or whatever it is. In an exit poll, you are going to a series of polling stations at which you have polled in previous general elections and asking a sample of people coming out of the polling stations to say how they have just voted by filling in a mock ballot paper and putting it in a mock ballot box. What you are trying to measure is the change in the share of the vote at that polling station from five years ago. John Curtice and his team do a fantastically thorough and efficient job of working out from that the probabilities of how each constituency in GB has voted. They then produce their exit poll.

It is all done under huge time pressure, as you know. Essentially, the last drop of data comes in at about 8 pm, and they have to have their exit poll figures done by 9.30 pm. They have done an incredibly good job for the last four general elections, but I am not convinced that if you simply increased the number of people you were polling you would not just get an opinion poll during a campaign that was more expensive and had more people but replicated the problems that the sample of 1,000 has. You would have to ask a pollster whether they thought that there would be any difference.

There is a second, rather key, point. On occasion, the broadcasters—which, as you know, are fiercely competitive in every single sphere where they can be—come together and say, “You know what? Let us park the competition here, because the interest of the viewers and the audience is that we should collaborate, either on an exit poll or on the leaders’ debates”. I do not see the same kind of thing happening in the print industry.

- Q73 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** Richard Tait has explained why news organisations are commissioning more polls—to create stories for competitive advantage. In other words, they are making news, rather than reporting news. They are creating artificial stories. However, I am not sure that it works even for competitive advantage. Almost instantly, they become their rivals’ stories, because all the news organisations cannibalise one another, or devour one another’s output. Is there not something quite incestuous about this process? The motivation is a commercial motivation, not a public interest motivation. Sue English has just suggested that,

occasionally, the broadcasters are prepared to drop competition for what they perceive to be public interest reasons. However, she drew the rather melancholy conclusion that it was unlikely that the print media would do the same. Is that where we are at?

Professor Richard Tait: I would not be quite so critical of the newspaper industry. It will have to speak for itself, but my impression is that there are significant benefits to newspapers from having a relationship with a polling organisation. It means that they can flex their polling through the campaign and ask questions that they think are relevant.

Just as the broadcasters that do not poll have either units to analyse polls on behalf of the journalists or relationships with universities to get expert advice on what the polls mean, newspapers that poll consistently through a campaign with one polling organisation can have some confidence about the process. It gives you access to pollsters and allows you to ask the right questions.

In 2015, for example, I remember that Andrew Rawnsley, who is a very good political editor, spotted quite early on that there was something wrong with the polls, because they were pointing to a hung Parliament, but David Cameron was polling as the best Prime Minister and the Conservatives were polling as having the best economic policies. Historically, the party that has the best Prime Minister and the best economic policies almost always wins a general election.

He spotted that because he is a sharp journalist. However, if you are working with a polling organisation through the campaign, you talk to your pollsters about what is going on and see trends. They are not doing it just because they want a front page that says, "The gap is narrowing". You are quite right to say that one of their motivations is that they want a front page on Sunday morning that says, "The gap is narrowing", "We are heading for a landslide", or whatever headline they can get out of it. It is a combination of the two.

Sue English: I agree with that. Let me correct myself. I was not saying that the newspapers would never work together for something like that. I am just saying that the reality is that you would probably find it quite difficult to achieve that degree of willingness to park the competition.

One also has to say that the newspapers spend quite a lot of money on polling. It is important for everybody that we focus on how we can make the polls more accurate. We can talk until we are blue in the face about all the wonderful regulations that you could put in place to get people to report the polls better, but if what you are reporting is fundamentally inaccurate it will not make much difference.

Let us go back to that key point. The pollsters themselves would agree with that. I remember Martin Boon of ICM saying after 2015, "The pollsters got it wrong". From that point onwards, all the dominoes fell, because journalists reported what they were seeing in the polls and there was a domino effect.

The accuracy of the polls—and commissioning polls that are as accurate as they can be—is something that we should encourage. The polls are a fundamental part of an election campaign. Therefore, broadcasters have

to cover them in a responsible fashion—along with all the other things that they cover in a campaign.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Did the pollsters get it wrong because the people who were commissioning them were spending quite a lot of money, as you say, but not enough, so that they were not sufficiently resourced to get a better finding—or were there other methodological problems at the time?

Sue English: I do not have that specialist knowledge. I would not want to forward an opinion on that.

Baroness Fall: I want to follow on from Margaret’s questioning. Professor Tait, I go back to the point in your written evidence about stressing the results differently. It is quite fundamental to this inquiry, because often the broadcasters pick up what has been in the papers. In one of the earlier discussions today, we talked about not leading with a poll. One of my colleagues talked about whether there was a different effect in a broadcast if a poll was further down the news. With the newspapers, do you sometimes see the sensational polling put on the front page and the supplementary questions—which might caution against the lead, or the item that most fits with the newspaper’s editorial—put on the 12th page or further back? Should we look at that?

Professor Richard Tait: As Sue said, the newspapers spend a lot of money on polling. Therefore, it is understandable that they will give their poll—their exclusive poll, as they see it—a lot of coverage and prominence. In the main—although not always—they will make it a front-page story.

The broadcasters have a completely different approach. As Sue said, the BBC has long had a guideline not to lead on polls. It was the same at ITN when I was there; I believe that it still is. The evidence that you have been given by Sky is that it has brought its guidelines into sync with the rest of us and that it tends not to lead on polls.

As broadcasters, we have less invested in polls. Because we have not commissioned them, we do not feel any ownership of them. We therefore regard ourselves as able to feel more sceptical about polls. It is perhaps more difficult for a newspaper to say, “I have got this poll, but I am not sure that I believe it”. That is just human nature. You have spent money on the research. You do not know at the time whether or not your data are accurate. You have to trust your data, at some point, and say, “This is what we found”. They are in a slightly different position from us. They certainly use polls more competitively than broadcasters do. That does not mean that their political editors are not as able as a broadcast political editor to imply some rational scepticism and to say, “I am not sure that I believe this”, or, “There are some areas in this poll I am not confident about”. I gave the example of Andrew Rawnsley.

We are talking mainly about the headline number, which says, “It is 43 to 26”, or, “It is neck and neck”. There is quite a lot of other stuff in the polls—on attitudes, particular policies or the popularity of individuals. Again, that runs through the campaign and has an influence. The popularity of Jeremy Corbyn against Theresa May in the last election was

one example. “Who is the best Prime Minister?” was an example in 2015. That can give you all sorts of indications of what is going on.

In the main, the newspapers use polls as well as they can. I do not think that they have a malign plan to use polls in some way to influence opinion. Polls are part of their political coverage, but they have more invested in them than the broadcasters have. The broadcasters are under an obligation of impartiality. There is no reason why a newspaper supporting one party or another cannot say, “This poll is great news, because it shows that we are closing the gap”. They can give their editorial view on what the poll means in a way that a broadcaster cannot and should not.

Q74 **Lord Hayward:** Can I ask two questions, and I want to take it away from political opinion polls in a general election? A lot of organisations use polls—or surveys dressed up as polls—that say, “80% say this and 20% say something else”. Previously I cited polls that say that nurses take a particular view, as well as polls on fox-hunting matters, or anything you choose. Does the coverage of those polls provide any greater problems than coverage of the straight-down-the-line political polls? Professor Tait, do you have any views on the way in which the media cover those polls/surveys, in comparison with political polls?

Professor Richard Tait: I feel that I should stick up for the polling industry for a moment. Overall, the pollsters are trying to do a good job.

Lord Hayward: I am not criticising them. I am asking a question about the journalistic representation of polls.

Professor Richard Tait: As you have heard, they have guidelines, policies, standards and a self-regulatory structure to try to ensure that they all operate in the same way. They commission expert analysis when things go wrong. Overall, they are a very good factor in our democratic system. The reason why we are all so worried about them is that the inaccuracy has resulted in some problems, and I am sure that they are as worried about those as we are.

I am very much more sceptical of the value of most other ways of judging opinion, whether it be commercial surveys, newspapers asking their online readers to press a button, or people trying to read the runes of social media to predict what public opinion is doing. Broadcasters—indeed, all reputable journalists—should be extremely sceptical about other forms of survey. They are useful as an indication that things may be going on that the polls have not spotted. For example, in the 2017 election, Jeremy Corbyn’s impact on Facebook was enormously greater than Theresa May’s, but you could not deduce from that any form of sensible forecast of what was going to happen in the election. However, the fact that one politician had eight times as many Facebook encounters as the other should have told people who were looking at polls that had started with a 20% or 21% gap—

Lord Hayward: I was talking more about other polls—other surveys—than general election polls.

Professor Richard Tait: Do you mean market research polls?

Lord Hayward: I mean surveys on things such as fox hunting and euthanasia.

Professor Richard Tait: It all depends on who does them. If they are done by reputable polling organisations such as the ones that we have been discussing, to me they are of the same journalistic value. If they are done by lobby groups, NGOs or people who are doing them simply to try to influence politicians or the public discourse, we have to be very sceptical about them.

Sue English: We used to call them spurious surveys. They usually pop up in press release form. When you look at who commissioned the survey, you are not entirely surprised by the headline that they have put on it. Realistically, that tends not to get a huge amount of mainstream news coverage. In the BBC, certainly, spurious surveys were very frowned upon. Where they do have an effect is when you have a phone-in programme and are desperately looking for something interesting to talk about. If a spurious survey lands on your desk, sometimes—just sometimes—a producer may think, “Why don’t we have this conversation?”

In a sense, if it is a matter of public interest, there is no reason why you should not use such a survey as a way of getting into a subject. However, as with most journalism, the first question that you probably ask is, “Why is this person telling me this? Why is this organisation commissioning a survey that fundamentally supports its particular commercial or sectarian interest?” In my view, that is totally different from the issue of polling and reputable polling companies undertaking polls on issues of public interest.

The Chairman: That seems to me to be a bit of an oversimplification. I will cite one particular case—ComRes’s poll on mitochondrial cloning, which has just been criticised by the Market Research Society. This was a case where a Christian organisation commissioned a pollster to ask questions, hoping that they would support its views. According to the Market Research Society’s findings, the organisation commissioned did not devote sufficient attention to making sure that questions were neutral. As a result—there was a considerable parliamentary upheaval about this—it came up with results that came out a certain way. The fact that polls are done by a reputable organisation, as ComRes was, does not defend you against the biases that can creep into them, does it?

Sue English: I do not know that specific poll, but, yes, I agree with you; in general, it does not.

Lord Hayward: In conclusion, I ask broadcasters in general to look at the number of news programmes where they say, “A survey says”. The number of stories in any news bulletin that start off with, “A survey says”, is quite staggering. I regard that as polling and influencing, in exactly the same way as political polling.

Q75 **Baroness O’Neill of Bengarve:** This continues the same line of thought. It is one thing, if you are thinking only about the polling, to say, “Accuracy is what we aim at. Reputable polling organisations do accuracy”. Let me assume that they do. However, they sit between the commissioners and the editors and publishers. It seems to me a bit innocent to say, “We do accuracy at that point”. What also matters is, who commissioned the poll,

with what in mind, who published it, with what in mind, or who did not publish it, with what in mind? In particular, could you tell us a bit about decisions not to publish results of polls?

Sue English: Could you clarify that? Do you mean decisions not to run a story about somebody else's poll?

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: That would be the BBC's version. In other cases, it might be that the commissioner, having got a result that was not as pretty as he or she had hoped, decided not to publish the poll. That is beyond your—

Sue English: I would not have any knowledge of that. As a broadcaster, you take a decision about whether to cover a particular story on the basis of a number of editorial criteria that you would use across any story. The BBC, ITN and Sky will not automatically report a poll if they do not think that it is of interest and newsworthy. Again, the context in which you place your reporting of the poll—the language that you use, the information that you give about the margin of error, the size of the poll, when the fieldwork was done, and so on—is a key part of it. However, I would not want to comment on that.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: I understand. You are insulated both from commissioning and from any but the broader editorial decisions that come into anything. What about decisions not to publish the results of polls? What about decisions to commission polls on a speculative basis?

Professor Richard Tait: I have not encountered much of that over the years. I am aware that organisations—particularly campaigning organisations—will commission research. It is their data. If they do not want to publish it, it does not come across a broadcast news editor's desk. We would regard the partial disclosure of a poll or any form of slanting of a poll as a red light for a broadcaster. We would not be party to something that we thought was partial, partisan or dishonest. Broadcast journalism still has a very high reputation with its audience, despite all the issues with fake news and a decline in trust in some forms of journalism. It would be quite wrong of any broadcast organisation to be party to that sort of attempt to manipulate the public.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: I apologise. I was probably asking you something that I should ask others.

Lord Howarth of Newport: I want to pick up something that you have just said, Sue—that editors, using their normal criteria, will tend to report what is interesting and newsworthy. Does that tend to a systemic bias in favour of the extreme, the outlier and the sensational story? Does that itself have an impact on the public's perception of reality and the truth?

Sue English: In a political context, any broadcast organisation is trying to report accurately and fairly what the element of political discussion of a particular subject is. Of course you are interested in knowing what people feel strongly about, but quite often that is what your viewers and listeners want to know about as well.

For example, if you look at some of the issues that are reported in election campaigns, you find that the things people are usually interested in and feel strongly about are things that affect them personally—things

that affect their lives and their families, whether they be public services such as education, the economy or immigration. As we saw in the 2017 campaign, the dementia tax was a hugely important issue for a large number of people who were voting. Of course, if you are reporting on politics, you are trying to report on things that affect the way in which people live, that they care about and that, therefore, will be quite important to them in the way in which they choose to cast their vote. I do not think that that means that you are only going for the sensational. If you looked at most news bulletins on the BBC, I honestly do not think that you would see that very often.

Lord Hayward: I have a quick follow-up in relation to the comments that you have just made. To some extent, we have a position at the moment where standard political opinions have broken down. That particularly applies on the question of Brexit. It is therefore very difficult for you to present political balance. We have a clear position whereby 50%, broadly, of the population think one thing and 50% of the population think another. However, my mind goes to a programme you have just referred to—“Question Time”—which regularly features three or four remainers and one Brexiteer. That is not a reflection of the changing social and political attitudes that we have in society.

Sue English: I have not worked for the BBC since 2015, so I am not responsible for the selection of any “Question Time” audiences since then. However, I worked on “Question Time” for a large part of my career at the BBC. What I can say to you is that the audience for “Question Time” is selected across a number of different criteria.

Lord Howarth of Newport: I am not fussed about the audience—it is the panel.

Sue English: It is quite interesting that you are interested in the panel and not the audience, because the audience is rather a key part of the “Question Time” programme.

Lord Howarth of Newport: It is. Can I put it in a different way—recognising, as you say, that you are no longer involved with it? Do you see the presentation of the panel, as it is regularly constituted, as conflicting with the guidelines to which you operated?

Sue English: I would not want to comment on that at this stage. Once you stop being involved on a day-to-day basis with programme production and the selection of panels, it is not sensible to get involved in that discussion. I am sure that you will be able to talk to somebody who is currently working for the BBC and can deal with that.

The Chairman: I love that answer, which we will have framed. It is an exemplar to all witnesses who do not want to answer a question. That was very good.

Professor Richard Tait: In defence of the guest-bookers, I think that Brexit has added a huge level of complexity to British politics, because it cuts across party-political guidelines. You end up with parties that are for or against their leader. It is a game of three-dimensional chess, which is extremely difficult.

The point about complexity and simplicity of polling is an interesting one in relation to Brexit. One of the interesting issues about the current polling of what people think about Brexit is that, if you ask people in a linear way what they think about Brexit and what their expectations of the negotiations are, they have quite a significant shopping list of things—not all of which are achievable, perhaps. To go beyond that, you have to go into quite a complex form of polling that asks people what their priorities are. Do they prioritise the single market over freedom of movement? Are they particularly concerned about this aspect or that aspect of the issues that are being debated?

I go back to whether the polls are a slightly crude way of trying to test opinion. If you look at what Brexit has done to British politics and political discourse, I think that currently the polls are having quite a lot of difficulty working out what people really think, what they really want, what they would accept and what they would not accept. I mention in my submission, a—sadly—not very successful attempt by the LSE and Oxford University to try to give people different scenarios and to say, “What sort of mix-and-match combination of factors do you think would be a reasonable answer?”, that it all went wrong, because it was not particularly well reported. It ended up with the terrible headline that 29% of people who voted remain were in favour of the deportation of all EU citizens, which was the exact opposite of what the survey found. Because Brexit cuts across everything—political, class and educational divides—it is extremely hard for conventional polling to give us a clear idea of what public opinion is at this stage.

Q76 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** I thought that “Question Time” was now a light entertainment programme, anyway, not a political programme.

I turn to something completely different. We have heard some very fascinating evidence about the way in which bots and algorithms are used to manipulate public opinion through social media. Is that something either or both of you have been made aware of in any way?

Sue English: This is not my specialist area. What is most interesting to me now, as somebody looking from the outside, is how you can ever really understand the effect of social media like Facebook on the democratic process. First, you have a number of algorithms that will deliver to people what they like to see. It may be what they like to see, but, by and large, it means that they do not hear anything that does not confirm their current beliefs.

Secondly, how do you control political advertising on Facebook? It seems to me—again, looking from the outside—that in the 2017 election political parties targeted very small groups of voters in key marginal constituencies, through Facebook, with political advertising that none of us saw, unless we happened to be part of that target group.

Then there is the third element, which is slightly more worrying still: are there actors in the democratic process, either internally or externally, who wish to use these social media vehicles for subversion of the democratic process? I have no idea what the answer to any of those three questions is. However, the effect of that on the democratic process seems to me, in

some ways, to be much more concerning than whether our reputable opinion polling industry gets it slightly right or slightly wrong.

Professor Richard Tait: I agree with that. It is a really big issue. The research so far suggests that social media users tend to operate in echo chambers and to associate with like-minded people. That is slightly less the case on Twitter, but there is clear evidence that bots, some of which have come from outside this country, are being used to enhance one argument or another. That is potentially a very dangerous development. You have to distinguish between legitimate, targeted advertising, which people are entitled to do, and the use of bots to create an impression that your side is the winning side or to troll or attack people who disagree with you—which, in many ways, is diminishing the quality of British public and political discourse, frankly. Some of the attacks on journalists, for example, that one now sees on social media are very serious and need to be addressed.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: This is becoming a bigger issue for the Committee, because of the evidence, than the one we started off on.

The Chairman: Onora, can you do it in half a minute?

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: Yes. I can. Is Mark Zuckerberg's suggestion of transparency about who is placing which targeted ads an adequate solution to this problem?

Sue English: Over to you, Professor Tait.

Professor Richard Tait: I think that it is the beginning of a very interesting dialogue with the social media companies about what they will have to do in the end to ensure that they can still run a business but that they take full responsibility for what they are doing.

The Chairman: We have reached the end of the session. We have probably all changed our minds from considering a ban on political opinion polls during election campaigns to considering a ban on social media. The Chinese manage it, so why should not we? Thank you very much for your judicious and coherent answers. We see now why you both held the elevated positions that you did when you were with the broadcasting organisations. It has been most helpful to us. Thank you both very much.

Sue English: Thank you.

Professor Richard Tait: Thank you. It was a pleasure to meet you.

Ipsos MORI, ORB International and Survation – Oral evidence (QQ 148–154)

Evidence Session No. 20

Heard in Public

Questions 148 - 154

Tuesday 5 December 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Baroness Fall; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Janke; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve.

Witnesses

I: Johnny Heald, Managing Director, ORB; Ben Page, Chief Executive, Ipsos MORI; Damian Lyons Lowe, Chief Executive, Survation.

Examination of witnesses

Johnny Heald, Ben Page and Damian Lyons Lowe.

Q148 **The Chairman:** Gentlemen, could we make a start? As you know, we have just had a session with the BPC. That was in dual mode, in a way, because John Curtice is both a leading expert on polls, as you know, and the chair of the BPC. We thought it right to have a session with selected pollsters, so that they could take our questions specifically from their point of view. Unfortunately, we could not have every pollster present, but we have chosen what I hope the profession will regard as a reasonable sample in the three of you. Your biographies are in front of us.

You are being televised, so watch what you say to that extent, but, whatever you say, you cannot be sued, because you are protected by parliamentary privilege; you can be as rude as you like. Afterwards, you will get a transcript, which you will be able to correct where you feel that you misspoke or were not quite clear. You should have in front of you a list of the interests of members of the Committee. It is a rather short list, in the case of this particular Committee. Is that okay with you?

Johnny Heald: Fine.

The Chairman: I will ask Robert Hayward to start the questioning.

Q149 **Lord Hayward:** Can I pick up a thread that two of you, at least, heard me ask about in the previous session? I refer to the question of polling on social issues and the difficulties that that throws up. Can you give us your personal experience of that? It is the same question that I put previously. Does polling on social issues raise particular problems? If so, how do you cope with them? There is a sense that somehow messages are misconstrued, or deliberately conveyed in one way or another, in order to get the group's issue across. In asking that question, can I pick up something that Baroness O'Neill asked? Can you indicate, very roughly, where the balance of each of your businesses lies between market research

and political polling?

Ben Page: I will kick off. Ipsos MORI employs about 1,200 people in the United Kingdom. About two of those people work part-time on political polling. That is just to give you an idea of the scale. It is not big business. About a quarter of our work is for the Government, charities and public bodies. That is substantial; we have 200 people doing it. The other 800 or more are involved in work for companies such as Google or Procter & Gamble on commercial market research.

I would not say that asking about social issues is, by definition, more difficult. The whole point, of course, is to try to avoid bias or leading people. One of the key challenges is how salient an issue is to people—how much they know about it and have thought about it. Particularly for issues where people do not have a lot of knowledge, how you frame the question or the information that you give to people has the potential to bias the results, if it is inaccurate. Of course, there are areas where nobody agrees on what the correct information is. When that happens, we often try to split-sample the question. We ask it in two different ways, to try to understand the impact of the question wording on the responses.

Johnny Heald: We are a far smaller company. We do not employ 1,200 people. We are about 20 people, split between here and Washington. About 85% to 90% of the work that we do is social and political research. About 15% or 20% of that is in the UK. We do a lot of the same issues, but abroad.

As you heard in the previous session, the answers turn very quickly to the questionnaire and the way in which questions are designed. That is absolutely crucial. If you are working for a certain campaign group that wants to promote a particular issue, it will want to ask the question in a particular way. At that point, any upstanding pollster will say, “You cannot ask that in that way”.

I can give you a very simple example. For a number of years, we have polled for the Countryside Alliance. I have never got on a horse, gone fox hunting or done anything like that. I do not own a red coat. However, one of its issues is that it wants to overturn the ban on fox hunting. On the other side, you have people who work for the League Against Cruel Sports. The way in which those questions are worded matters. You can’t say, “Do you agree or disagree that setting dogs on cuddly foxes is a nice thing to do?”

Ben Page: That sounds like a leading question.

Johnny Heald: Yes, but that is what they will come to you with. This is the good thing about the British Polling Council. Whenever anything is published, you look at the data and the regional and demographic analysis, but what you should look at is the question wording. That is where there is room to manipulate data. There are lies, there are damned lies, and then there are statistics.

The Chairman: Can I come in there? You say that one thing is to look at the question wording. I do not disagree with that. However, I have a very fat file of these social issue polls. To get the result that they want, they rely mostly on differential response rates. The Royal College of Nursing

showed that 40% of nurses were thinking of leaving nursing. That was because it sent a questionnaire to all its members, 7% of whom responded. Who responds? It is the ones who are thinking of leaving nursing.

Ben Page: Response rates for random probability samples of that type are obviously a measure of quality. They should publish the response rate with their survey. When you see that it is only 7%, you wonder, “Are the other 93% like the 7%, or have the results been adjusted for the differential response?”

The Chairman: Looking at the press reports, you would have had a job seeing that the response rate was only 7%. That is what we discovered when we examined that.

Johnny Heald: If you read any textbook on research, one of the lessons that is drummed into you very early on is that your data is as good as the sample from which it is drawn. Earlier we had a discussion about the press. There probably are not sufficient people who pay close enough attention to all the sampling detail. In that case, you would question exactly who responded to the survey.

The Chairman: Do you want to add to this, Mr Lyons Lowe?

Damian Lyons Lowe: Yes. Survation is a relatively new company, compared with Ipsos MORI. It started after the general election in 2010. Political and social research was probably up to 75% of our business in the year of Brexit. Outside the political cycle, it is down to about 25%. We work with lots of different people across the political spectrum.

I will set out my position on this question. I am very careful to protect a new company’s reputation. Typically, people pre-filter. They do not come to us with the idea that they are able to ask a biased or leading question, before we even get to see their idea of a script. When we have to push back on the wording of a question, it is unusual for that not to be taken on board. I can think of a couple of examples. One related to Trident. We argued back and forth over the phrasing of the question. Eventually, we asked the question in the way in which we wanted to ask it. Even though the poll was very favourable to the client, it was not considered to be favourable enough.

Because of the BPC rules on transparency, Ben and my very good friends at YouGov and ComRes can go very quickly to the way in which the question was asked and shoot it down. It is a matter of professional reputation. Professional reputation is all that a company such as mine has. Where we make mistakes, or where a question has been misframed, it is easy for that to be subject to scrutiny. It is not good for business to be seen as a company that gets the campaign and exactly the result that it wants.

The Chairman: I am sorry for interrupting you, Robert.

Lord Hayward: That is fine. That is all I wanted to ask at this stage.

The Chairman: I am in danger of talking too much, as usual.

Q150 **Baroness Coultie:** I want to ask you a question that I just put to the BPC. Johnny, you will have heard it. It is about the extent of human judgment.

As I understand it from other people we have talked to, if the polling companies take a look at their results, when they get them, and feel, “This looks way out of kilter with what we think is reasonable in this context”, human judgment can be used to adjust them. I would like to understand how you do that, particularly given the fact that the people making those decisions are probably influenced by the broadcast media, the newspapers, the friends they have dinner with or the taxi driver they have been sitting with. We all do that; you make your judgments based on what you are exposed to. You probably do not make decisions based on the social media chatrooms that the younger generation are looking at. Therefore, when you make these adjustments, inevitably you make them with a certain form of bias.

Ben Page: I remember the first poll that we did of voting intention in Scotland after the Scottish referendum, which showed the SNP doing amazingly well—as it went on to do. I had the poll redone, at my own expense, because I thought that something must have gone disastrously wrong. Of course, that confirmed the same numbers, and we immediately published the poll.

You are talking about smaller adjustments. What happens is that people have to make judgments. For example, unusually for pollsters, our 2017 polling understated the Labour Party. That was because of a decision that we had made after what had happened in 2015, when we had overstated Labour because we had too many young people telling us that they were certain to vote. Therefore, we used the British election study, which shows empirically that young people are more likely than older people to overclaim their likelihood of voting, to adjust the data. That gave us a number that seemed more credible, but, actually of course, effectively, people’s behaviour had changed.

When we make these judgments, it is not really about social media. I have 37,000 followers on Twitter. I love social media. Of course, I may be talking only to people like me, who like opinion polls, or to George Foulkes, who is not here today. I do not think that it is that. One key thing that we are probably all agreed on is that we are driving with a backseat mirror. The methods that we are using and the adjustments that we are making are ones that, empirically, have worked in the past, or would have adjusted for problems in the past, but, when the dynamic changes, with young people’s turnout now returning to the levels at which it used to be in the early 1990s, we are in a different situation. We will not know that that has changed until it has changed. Effectively, polling is about what works. All over the world—we are in 88 countries—different pollsters have different local solutions that, empirically, work best in their country, and can be shown to have worked. However, when things change, it is wrong. That is where judgment comes in.

The EU referendum is another example. The Committee will probably regard that as a polling miss. We looked at the Scottish referendum and the trajectory of what happened to voting intention in the polling that we did for the Cabinet Office on a daily basis in the course of that campaign. We could see it swing from 55% leave to 45%. We looked at the 150 referendums around the world in which the Government of the day had endorsed the status quo, and their outcome. From all those things, we

made a judgment about the direction of travel. We had 53% for leave the week before. When I woke up on the day, it was 51% for leave on the Tuesday and Wednesday before the referendum. We made a judgment, and it was the wrong judgment.

Baroness Couttie: To what extent are these judgments made at the beginning, before you start the polling process, and then adjusted?

Ben Page: It is always done afterwards.

Baroness Couttie: It is always adjusted through the polling process.

Ben Page: Yes. I will shut up in a second, but one of the challenges is this. If we are honest—again, looking at this empirically around the world—half of the time the pollster improves the poll, but the other half of the time the pollster probably makes it worse. The difficulty is that we never quite know which one it is at the time. It is human nature to be able to feel justified about it. I can always empirically justify the decisions that I have made in the past, even if they have been wrong.

Damian Lyons Lowe: I have a slightly different perspective on the problem. Patrick Sturgis talks a lot about the fact that tinkering does not work, because often it comes back to a confirmation bias that somebody may have, which may send them the wrong way. What Survation did in 2017 was pick a method and not change it. There were no last-minute changes. You will see that in our final poll there was not a differential way of weighting “don’t knows”; there was not a tweak here or a tweak there. I did that on purpose, because I decided that tweaking can only lead you astray. Given that we were the only poll that had a hung Parliament as our central forecast, for both online and telephone polls, when all other polling and most of the commentary was showing a different picture, any tinkering would probably have tinkered me away from the correct result. Before the result, I decided not to do that, because I felt that I could only mess it up by my own actions. We went into the final result without changing things.

Johnny Heald: You also look back at history. My father did this for 30 years for Gallup, it was him and this chap who is sitting behind me. There was one at the *Telegraph* and one at the *Times*. There were probably 50 polls a year; they were done on a monthly basis. The curve for the frequency of polls was unchanged for 50 years, but since 2014 or 2015 it has gone through the roof. Significantly less tinkering was done in the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s and the 1990s than is done now. As polling people, if we get data back on an issue and think that it is wrong, we do not like that. The first thing we look at is the sample. We repeat the survey at our own cost, because there is a reputation issue here as well. In 2017, we tinkered slightly. Older people are more likely to turn out, so you look at that. We also took the education weight that academics had come up with. That was based on a lot of evidence, some of it from here and some of it from the US election cycle. However, it did not make the polls any more accurate.

Ben Page: I think that education did make a difference. We will argue about that.

Baroness Couttie: Ben, you mentioned that you could empirically justify the tinkering, to use the technical term. What was the methodology for understanding that? What was the empirical evidence?

Ben Page: Take the decision that we made in 2017 about the potential for young people to overclaim their likelihood of voting and, therefore, to be overrepresented in the final sample. That was based on what we could see empirically had happened in 2015.

Baroness Couttie: That was a judgment that was made before you started the polling process. I am slightly more interested in what happens during the polling process.

Ben Page: During the 2017 election, we did not change anything. We do not start with an assumption that we want to get to. The issue arises when you look at the final number and say, "Does this look plausible? How does it compare with what has happened empirically in the past?" Then you have to make a judgment.

Baroness Couttie: I am trying to understand how that judgment is made. You mentioned that you redid a survey, which is one way of dealing with it. What else do you do?

Ben Page: It is a subjective decision. You look at where you have been wrong in the past. Our 2015 result had 8% for the Liberal Democrats; they got 8%. We said 36% for the Conservatives; they got 37 point something. However, we overstated Labour by about four or five percentage points. Because of that, we said, "Why was that the case this time, and not in 2010?" We were more accurate in 2010. We looked back and could see that there had been a change in the proportion of people telling us that they were certain to vote, and that the people who were more likely to do so were younger and working class.

We saw the same pattern in other surveys. One of the benefits of the British election survey is that it goes back to the local authority to check that a particular voter on the panel turned up at the polling station. You can see empirically that that is what happened in that sample, and there is no reason to believe that it did not happen in ours. We could see that in the 2015 result. As a result, we tightened the filter on young people. As it happened, they surged, so empirically that was the wrong thing to do. We have now removed it, as a result of 2017.

You are making these judgments, and Damian is right, in a sense, to say that it might be better not to make them. However, I can point to other elections, such as the Scottish referendum, in which we would have been worse if we had not made an adjustment, based on trajectory and other assumptions about the past. You can react with horror to the idea of our trying to be right or making adjustments. These are judgments of about 1% or 2%, so they make a huge difference only when things are very finely balanced. Of course, we have had a series of electoral events where that has been the case. Ultimately, it is about trying to be right. It is for no other purpose.

Baroness Couttie: I understand that.

Ben Page: That is what we are doing. We do not do it because we feel like having a particular number, but because we can see something that

empirically, in other polling or in a recent election, has been a problem. We are like people designing aeroplanes, in a slightly less sophisticated way. When something has gone wrong, you try to fix the problem for the next flight.

The Chairman: However, if that crashes, too, it becomes an issue.

Ben Page: Yes, but airlines have become progressively safer because of that.

The Chairman: That is true.

Q151 **Baroness Fall:** I will continue this line of questioning. To a certain extent, of course, you are correcting the last problem, because that is what you have to base your decisions on. Do you think that it is true that politics has become more volatile? It is certainly less easy to make a judgment on a vote based on what sort of job someone has. In our last session, Professor John Curtice mentioned that he thought that there might have been a late swing—a campaign swing, which is quite unusual—for the EU referendum and, indeed, for the 2017 election. Based on those possible changes, do you think that your job is more difficult and, therefore, that you are likely to get less accurate going forward?

Ben Page: It depends on what judgment you are using around accuracy. If it is about predicting winners, having a series of very close electoral events makes that much problematic, of course, given the inevitable tolerances in any poll, however perfect. Back in the 1990s, nobody was fussing too much about polling accuracy, because it was pretty obvious what was going to happen—and then, lo, it happened.

However, society is more heterogeneous. There are changes. Our long-standing analysis of generational shift shows that there is a generational element to party loyalty, for example. Basically, party loyalists are dying out. The surge of the young to Corbyn at the last election is not baked in, if you look at the British Social Attitudes survey. On that basis, you could argue that it may be a bit more difficult. However, no matter how volatile British politics is, if we are polling two days away from a general election, it should not make that much difference, unless there are amazing events taking place overnight.

One of the biggest challenges for all pollsters is predicting turnout—asking people on a Tuesday or a Wednesday what they are going to do on Thursday. One reason why the exit poll has been so accurate, apart from the excellent analysis and weighting of the data by John Curtice and his team, is that we are interviewing people after they have voted. We know that they have voted, which gives us a huge advantage over asking people, even on Tuesday, what they may do on Thursday. You could argue that it is all a bit more volatile, but we should really be able on Tuesday and Wednesday to have a reasonable read on it.

Damian Lyons Lowe: There is a simpler way of answering the question. The main reason for the 2015 polling mess, of which Survation's online polling was part, was said in the investigation to be unrepresentative samples. Turnout was an aspect of that, but the primary reason was that samples needed to be more representative. The whole industry improved the representativeness of its samples. If your model was based more on

probabilistic turnout, based on 2015 behaviour, than on improving your sample, you would have the least accurate results, particularly in the context of a Labour surge—and there was a Labour surge. In the context of 2017, with a concomitant Labour surge in support from the 20s to 41% by the time of the election, any method that looked to curb the enthusiasm that we were seeing in the public—for example, by basing younger persons' behaviour on how they behaved in 2015—would make you significantly less accurate.

Ben Page: All the polls picked up the surge to Corbyn. On some measures, it was the campaign with the biggest swing against an incumbent Government since 1945. The election did not go as most people, including Jeremy Corbyn's inner circle, were expecting.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Pippa has asked much of what I was going to ask, very shrewdly and appropriately. However, let me try again. You have to make judgments. You make judgments about your weightings. For example, you decide, based on what happened last time around, to take fuller account of what less-educated people may do, or whatever. You tinker. This is the moment when you take real risks, is it not? You take real risks for your reputation and for your profitability.

Ben Page: Actually, there is an inverse correlation between our profitability and the accuracy of opinion polls.

Lord Howarth of Newport: That is a very interesting business model.

Ben Page: The main point that you have to remember—it is a serious point—is that one of the reasons why the exit poll is very accurate is that it costs £300,000. One of the reasons why other polling is less accurate is that the sums and samples involved are much smaller. The people who are spending hundreds of millions of pounds on research of all kinds are much more sophisticated consumers of that than the average journalist.

Lord Howarth of Newport: As you mentioned, you are looking through the rear window. You are all reaching slightly different conclusions.

Ben Page: Yes. Inevitably, you will because—

Lord Howarth of Newport: It is about the tinkering that you do.

Ben Page: Even if we all executed the polls in an identical fashion, with an absolutely identical methodology—perhaps Pat or John Curtice could prescribe a single methodology—the laws of statistics mean that there would be a margin of error. With these sample sizes, there would be noise of three, four, five or more points in the data. One of the central challenges is for everybody to be more cognisant of that fact. In fact, overall, and all over the world, the industry beats those margins of error repeatedly, but those are the margins of error. However good you are, five times out of 100 your poll will be outside those margins of error.

Lord Howarth of Newport: But you are in an area of some subjectivity.

Ben Page: Absolutely.

Lord Howarth of Newport: I am interested in what your internal processes are, to the extent that you feel free to tell us. Do you, as chief executives, simply take these decisions?

Ben Page: No.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Do you have panels of advisers? You must presumably be engaged in this process now. We had an election just the other day, in 2017, but it is entirely possible that we will have another in 2018. You must be getting ready for that. Can you realistically extrapolate from what happened in 2017 to what might happen in 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 or 2022? How are you setting about refining your methodology, to get this better for next time? What do you do?

Ben Page: We have a group of wise and experienced people. You can debate whether they are wise, but they are certainly experienced in looking at these things. They have reasonable track records, and they have done it for election after election. There is a whole group of people who make judgments. Ultimately, as CEO, I have to agree or disagree with whatever is published.

We continually look at things like sample profile. Do we have the right newspaper readership? Do we have the right proportion of people with or without degrees? Do we have the right number of young people? Are the young people whom we are reaching in some way different from young people as a whole? That is a perennial question for all surveys. All those things go on.

The key point is that this is a cottage industry, effectively. It may seem like a vast edifice, but actually this is something that we do, believe it or not, because we believe that it is important for this information to be public. We have always done it. We think that without it, frankly, you would end up with journalists, politicians and pundits trying to tell everybody what everybody thinks. For all their problems, polls are at least an effort to talk about public opinion as accurately as it can be measured.

We have a whole set of checks and balances. We review things all the time. We look at all the expert outside advice and guidance, from the BPC and others. Ultimately, we will have to make a judgment by which we will stand or fall. Being honest about that judgment and about margins of error is something that we need to do. The challenge is that, if you go to the media and say, "This one is just too close to call, so we're not going to publish", people will ask, "What are you hiding?"

Johnny Heald: The margin of error is absolutely crucial. In your questions, you ask about the way in which the media report polls. Nineteen times out of 20, the margin of error is correct to within 3.5%. It is like the tiniest legal note that you see at the bottom of an insurance paper; you do not even bother to read it. Basically, 49:51 and 48:52 mean the same thing, because that is the margin of error. However, if it jumps from 48 for leave to 51 for leave, the headline is not, "It's the same". The whole agenda of the paper changes. The markets react, and 1.2% is lopped off the pound overnight. That happens on the basis of a question that costs £250 to put to 2,000 people. The notion that we are getting fat on political opinion polling is not true at all. The newspapers do not pay for opinion polling now. They want it done within 24 or 48 hours. As Ben said, the margin of error is a point that is ignored.

The Chairman: Can I ask what may seem like a techy question about margin of error? You talk as if there is a scientific margin of error. There

is, of course, for a proper random sample. I know of no statistical measure for the margin of error in a quota poll.

Ben Page: You are absolutely correct. When we talk about all these margins of error, we are also assuming that the design effect is one and that there are no other effects going on, making it a perfect sample. Even with random probability samples, we assume that the sample is perfect. Quota samples can be very good. You get the right number of men and women, on certain measures. These are mere rules of thumb that, empirically, have turned out to be accurate, but you cannot say that they are based on statistical science. They are based on empirical method.

The Chairman: I absolutely take that point. However, it is a worry, when we talk about the difficulty that the media have in communicating these points, that it has taken a bit of drawing out to get you to say before this Committee what you are actually saying when you talk about margin of error—and you are two of the most expert people in this entire industry.

Damian Lyons Lowe: In the previous session, you asked John Curtice about standard deviation. He said that that was work in progress. This is something the industry struggles with. These are not random probability samples. It is not honest to talk about a margin of error as a fact. It can be guidance, but it is not a fact. We are all considering how we report that, given that none of our work involves random probability samples.

The Chairman: That is very helpful.

Q152 **Baroness Janke:** Earlier I asked about the idea of regional variation, as well as disaffected voters and those who you think are least likely to vote. Some of that big, populist, angry vote has come out as UKIP in some places and it could happen in other ways. How do you deal with that? Is it something that you feel you can take account of on previous performance, or do you feel that it is a new phenomenon? I am thinking not just of this country; we have seen this rise of populism elsewhere. How do you feel about that?

Damian Lyons Lowe: It is difficult. I think we all carry out telephone polling. Is that correct, Johnny? You do that. One way in which Survation tries to get the disaffected, perhaps lower-income and low education groups, perhaps the older old, is via a telephone method that actively seeks out those groups in proportion. It is a pre-stratified sample of persons whom we try to contact through mobile and landline methods whom we consider to be representative of all people in the UK. The concept is that because, on online panels, people of lower education are not present. People over the age of 75 are almost completely absent from online samples because they are so difficult to reach online, and that is something that the telephone can bring to them.

Notwithstanding that, I have been looking at our online polling that had a hung Parliament as a projection. It was a lot lower for the Conservatives than I would have liked. It is that that has come into play. What we are trying to work on for the future is not only treating each election as a unique event but trying to improve the representativeness of samples, whether that is online or by telephone, because I can see flaws in all our work and my work as regards that, and it is work in progress. It is also particularly difficult because there will be a change of regulation next year

with GDPR in the way you are able to contact people and data permissions, and it is going to be increasingly difficult to do.

Johnny Heald: It is a tricky situation. About five years ago, we switched to a dual frame approach. The previous year we just called people on a landline, but there are about 16% or 17% of UK households that do not have a landline now, and that number is only set to increase. If you are doing 1,000 interviews, 500 will be to a mobile and 500 will be to a landline. Very often, you must do it in 48 hours, whereas we do a survey twice a year for a US client here and they make us do it over three weeks. Then they make us call back people five times before we eliminate them from the sample, but that costs \$50,000 or \$60,000 for 1,000 interviews. So, you can do it, but there is a time pressure and there is a cost to it.

Ben Page: It can be done but election polling becomes much more difficult, and I think it is a real challenge. Even when you have set quotas for having no qualifications, having no job, and so on, you may still be getting the people with the correct demographic profile who are more engaged than average. You will never quite know, but you can at least account for key demographics. Introducing newspaper weights and education has made polls more accurate, and you can see that shift during the European referendum, for example. But it is a constant challenge and it has always been there for the industry. There are always people who do not want to do surveys, and the question is, are they different from people who do?

Baroness Janke: The point I am making is that in the past, and having campaigned myself, a lot of those people would not have bothered voting, whereas it seems to me now that you see this huge anger vote. It is how you get to those people, and there is the regional variation as well.

Ben Page: One interesting challenge in British politics, particularly, is this relationship between vote share and seat share, because there is no simple relationship. You could be doing brilliantly in the marginals in particular regions but it looks very different at the national level. Then, of course, there will be a surprise when you look at seat share in the House of Commons. That is possible.

Johnny Heald: The problem we have with regions is that 95% of our polls are either a 1,000 or 2,000 sample size. It is only the Lord Ashcrofts who can fund the 50,000s. If you have 12 or 14 government or ITV regions within the country, statistically you are on very thin ice. Maybe outside London, where you may have 300 or 400, you cannot start drawing statistically reliable conclusions about the north-east versus the north-west versus the south-west, let alone a particular constituency.

Ben Page: But you can try to make sure you have a decent spread by region by covering them all.

Q153 **Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** This may be a very idiosyncratic question and I appreciate what you have told us about the importance of judgment, but it occurred to me that a poll published yesterday illustrated something rather interesting about judgment. It was an NHS poll and they had established that the sorts of patients who are least likely to keep their appointments are young men of lesser education, who make their appointments and then, if it is more than two days away, fail to turn up

and fail to call in to cancel. Is that sort of approach going to give you any greater degree of accuracy on voting intention?

Ben Page: Probably not, but it might just remind you that young men are a bit unreliable sometimes.

Johnny Heald: And very difficult to get in polls.

Ben Page: The NHS has done all sorts of things on appointment keeping, and it is a useful reminder that different groups of people are “more likely” to be unreliable, but, because it is slightly separate from voting behaviour and what you are trying to measure there, I am not sure it is a direct read-across; it is perhaps another confirmation—

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: But you do ask questions such as, “How likely are you to vote?”

Ben Page: We do indeed. I have not looked at the detail of it, but it may have been an empirical analysis from an appointments system. Because they know the profile of the patient who was supposed to have turned up, they may just have noticed who has not turned up and inferred something from that, rather than just saying to young men, “Did you miss an appointment?” I am not utterly sure exactly about the read-across on that.

Damian Lyons Lowe: I think you are on to something here in that we are torn. Do we believe people when they tell us how likely they are to turn out or do we not believe them? In Survation’s polling, for this general election, we went entirely for believing them, even though we knew that some of the groups, such as the 18 to 24s, were massively exaggerating. For 75% to turn out among 18 to 24s was very unlikely. We found, though, that no turnout filter based on age and historical data would have improved the accuracy of our polling. We were seeing exaggerations of all age groups. Under heavy criticism I looked at some different ways to look at turnout. None of the methods would have made our Labour figure more accurate. Our Labour figure was very accurate.

Ben Page: A key point here is that there are differences in house effects between different pollsters for all sorts of reasons, and this is why some of the problems or challenges are different. There are some overall generalisations that you can make, but there are also some specific issues. For us, youth turnout with our methodology of sample selection is a bigger challenge than perhaps other issues might be. Everybody is not exactly the same.

Damian Lyons Lowe: The difficulty is what you do. If the only data you have is historical data, some of the high-quality data that Ben has talked about that he bases some of his methods on is the only data that is high quality enough to be used. Before the election, we tried to work with the Electoral Commission on some of the indicators of turnout such as the different rates of registration among different age groups. There was evidence that 18 to 24s were up 33% versus 2015; 25 to 34s were up 13% for net new registrations over the same period in the previous general election. But the data was hard to come by. It was sketchy as to how to work out what it meant in the grand scheme of things. We are still

talking about lower numbers of people. So, it was very difficult to decide what to do about turnout. It was probably the most difficult thing of all.

The Chairman: Taking that particular point, you have explained some of the extremely complex decisions that have to be made but also the very small teams that you have working on political polling. This Committee might want to consider whether we do something that enables the polling industry to operate more at scale to provide the kind of advice, research and help to companies that might enable them to improve their performance. In some ways, the Commission des sondages in France might be the sort of model on which we would work, not telling you what you must do but giving you guidance and expert advice. Are you in favour of that sort of idea?

Ben Page: I am not anti it, but I am not sure how effectively it works. My colleagues may know.

Johnny Heald: I spoke to my colleague in France about the Commission des sondages. I think they have a ban for 24 hours beforehand and there is supposed to be regulation. One of the frustrations or challenges the practitioners have is that those who sit within the Commission des sondages are not necessarily polling experts themselves and are slightly removed from the industry. That is not my view; that is one of the leading French pollsters' views. There is a lot of regulation here. I would argue that we are probably more regulated than colleagues in the US, France, Italy and a lot of other democracies around the world. I am not sure what the Commission des sondages would give us that the BPC does not give us.

The Chairman: The BPC starts from transparency, although it has increasingly occupied, as the president has just explained to us, a role as a kind of industry body in giving voice to and answering some of the concerns that have been expressed. But I am very surprised by the view you have just expressed that we have more regulation here than they do in France. Can you substantiate that?

Johnny Heald: I am a vice-president of Gallup International; we are in 75 countries. I can talk for colleagues in the US, France, Italy and Germany. Within 24 hours you do not need to publish your data. I put out a poll last night on a Brexit tracker. Within 24 hours it has to be up on my website. When I say "it", it means the full data disclosure and the question wording. If it is not up within 24 hours, John Curtice is on my case within minutes.

Everyone has the right to see what I asked and what the data says. That was not around 10 years ago, and I know from personal circumstances how useful that is now. Ten years ago, Lord Saatchi leaked something that I had done, where he kind of suggested that the Tories would win 130 seats in 2005, and it was wrong. He would not be allowed to do that now. I would have to publish within 24 hours. As far as I am aware, and having spoken to colleagues around the world, that does not exist anywhere else.

The Chairman: If you are comparing the need to publish within 24 hours with an actual ban on polling, and you are saying that the need to publish

within 24 hours is stricter regulation than a 24-hour ban, I would have to wonder whether you are really confident of that judgment.

Johnny Heald: No, but, with respect, you said to me, “Do you really think there is a lot of regulation here?” That was your original question.

The Chairman: That is right.

Johnny Heald: Okay, and my answer, as a practitioner, is yes, and I compare that with colleagues in the industry across the other largest countries that carry out polling. Do you agree?

Ben Page: I would tend to agree. The Cabinet Office at one point was supposed to review all surveys of business. This was during the 1990s under John Major. It was either ignored or one poor individual was meant to be reviewing all the surveys. Business is busy surveying business all the time, but it was not involved; it was every time government of any kind wished to do so. It did not work.

In our own organisation, we are in 88 countries and political polling is much more important in some places such as Italy, where they have a lot more elections, or America, where there is a lot more money involved in politics. We now have a formal group of people globally who review things. Before I in Britain can publish something, if my colleagues are worried about what I might do, we now have external validation of that.

One of the difficulties in all this is that, if there was a simple and easy solution to any of the things that we are discussing today, it is very likely that we would have found it a long time ago. We are finding globally that I can show you examples of face-to-face surveys that have done a perfect job in an election. It has largely been abandoned for political polling here for cost and other reasons. I can show you online polls that have been very accurate; in other places they have not.

There are some basic tenets, but it is still very evident that different things seem to work empirically in different places, and consistently so. My colleagues in Ireland working for the *Times* of Ireland have consistently been very accurate with very traditional face-to-face surveys, which some of us might argue would be problematic these days. You cannot speak to anybody in a very short time face to face, but they seem to disprove us. It really does depend on many things, but we have not found that more and more experts looking at the same thing necessarily improves the judgment that you ultimately have to make.

Q154 **The Chairman:** To close this session, could I briefly talk about the relationship with the media, because in the course of the evidence that has been given to this Committee we have heard at least as much criticism of my former profession as a journalist as of your profession as pollsters? It would be nice to have some insight into how those relationships work in practice and whether they are generally satisfactory. There is a strange silence.

Johnny Heald: Practically, particularly with social media and the need to push something out overnight, online and so on, there is probably not as much rigour as there should be when journalists review newspapers. If you talk to people at the *Washington Post*, they have a set of 10 rules that

are drummed into people before they are allowed to publish an opinion poll.

AAPOR—the American Association for Public Opinion Research—has, I think, 12 or 15 guidelines for journalists, such as, “Do you understand enough about the sample?”, “Have you looked at the question wording?”, and so on. There is a checklist of things that the industry has, but I would argue in my experience that journalists want the story to justify the agenda or to push something out, and they are not necessarily spending enough time looking at the detail.

Ben Page: Sir Robert Worcester, over the years, has published guides to publishing polls. We now do podcasts. I think the subs have a lot to answer for. There was one newspaper headline in 2015 where it said, “Up 1%”, which is clearly absolute rubbish, but it was seized on in a poll that moved in the direction that that newspaper liked. Being able to control the subs has probably become a little harder. We are making sure that all the details of the surveys are usually in the text and are not too misleading, but there are issues about how much prominence a newspaper will give to a poll that it likes as opposed to one that does not confirm its prejudices.

There is very little I can do about that because I do not regulate the media. We will correct them publicly if they are wrong, as we will any client who is misleading about something, but choosing what to publish and ignoring things such as margin of error, or focusing on tiny changes that are not, under any circumstances, likely to be statistically valid, are things that go on. You can ask them not to do it again. You can complain. I suppose you could stop giving them data. But there is a tension there.

Johnny Heald: The days have gone when you would be sent a press release and you had 24 hours to check everything. That does not happen now or happens so rarely. Who writes a press release now?

Ben Page: We can insist on sample size fieldwork dates and we can put the questionnaires online, but there is a selection process that newspapers go through about what is news, what to focus on and what the headline should be. How much we regulate that in relation to coverage of opinion polling is a moot point.

The Chairman: Did you want to add something?

Damian Lyons Lowe: Yes; there are a couple of things worth mentioning. To stand up for some of the better practice, Survation does a lot of work with newspaper groups—*Mail on Sunday*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Record*. Those three clients would be more frequent users of Survation polling. We typically work very hard to try to ask balanced questions despite those newspapers having different political persuasions. The editorial teams are very co-operative with that.

Ben Page: I do not think the problem is newspapers trying to lead the questioning, to be quite honest. It is more about prominence, and the headlines in particular.

Damian Lyons Lowe: We often check copy and graphics to make sure there are no inaccuracies.

Ben Page: Sure; we all do that.

Damian Lyons Lowe: On Saturday night there was going to be a splash in the *Mail on Sunday* about a large Labour lead with a Survation poll, and the data tables were available. We had sent out the data tables on Saturday night for the Sunday morning publication so that people could see for themselves what people were saying about Brexit and voting intentions. I think a lot of our clients are responsible in the way that they use data, with some exceptions.

Ben Page: But it is not necessarily the newspaper that you are working for directly. It is then the secondary coverage and selective coverage by other outlets, I would suggest.

The Chairman: This does not cover at all the questions they do not ask. I would not have proposed to the *Sunday Times* when I was doing polls for them that they did a poll on rail privatisation, because I knew it would show that the public were hostile to it and I knew the editor was fanatical about it.

Ben Page: That is an essential challenge. You hope that somewhere it will happen, but ultimately these are commercial organisations.

Johnny Heald: One thing that has changed with the media, or happens more now than five or 10 years ago, is that you are asked to get into the sort of prediction game. What is the percentage chance of them winning and how many seats? Let us look forward and so on. As Andy Kohut, a famous American pollster said, "I'm not a handicapper. I'm a measurer". It is a snapshot in time. It is what happened before. When you have hedge funds calling you up on Brexit on a weekly basis saying, "Give me data; give me data", they are trying to tempt us into the prediction game, which is a big mistake to get involved in, I would say, for this industry.

The Chairman: On that warning note, I think we should draw the session to a close. You have given a very good insight into what you do and the honesty with which you do it. It has been very helpful to the Committee. Thank you all—I know you are busy people—for giving up the time to come and see us today.

Ipsos MORI – Written evidence (PPD0020)

Ipsos MORI has been involved in the preparation of two submissions to the Committee which have been submitted under separate cover.

The first of these is the document produced by the British Polling Council; the second sets out the collective perspective from a group of eight polling organisations including Ipsos MORI.

With this in mind, we are not submitting a detailed piece of analysis here. We endorse the points made in these submissions, including:

- The commitment to transparency of methods and findings shown by the industry – from the publication of individual polls to its participation in enquiries such as the Sturgis report when setbacks do occur
- The contribution the industry makes in communicating and sharing findings – whether this relates to the methodologies used or “telling the story” of how the electorate think and feel
- The track record of polling, both in the UK and internationally, which (as witnessed by research by Jennings and Wlezien) is performing in line with the historical trend
- Our concerns about any potential scenario which would involve restricting the publication of polls. There are a series of issues here, and these have been further accentuated by the role of global social media. Our experience in other countries where this is the case suggests banning the publication of polls in individual countries simply prevents ordinary people seeing polling results – big business and the elite either commission their own privately or have access to data on foreign websites beyond the jurisdiction of the country.

To support the above, Ipsos MORI is pleased to present a series of documents to inform the work of the Select Committee.

In the sections below, we submit some of the recent analysis and thinking prepared by Ipsos teams in the UK and around the world.

We would be delighted to discuss any of the themes presented here with members of the Committee if it would be helpful.

REFERENCES

All our polls are published in full on our website:

<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk>

This includes a consolidated page covering the 2017 General Election:

<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/general-election-2017>

Ben Page: What Happened with the Polling (*a look at the EU Referendum*)

<http://ipsos-mori-almanac.co.uk/783/>

Ipsos MORI – Written evidence (PPD0020)

Henri Wallard: Opinion Polls – why they remain the reference (*includes an examination of the claims made by "social media" pollsters*)

<https://www.ipsos.com/en/opinion-polls-why-they-remain-reference>

Simon Atkinson: The Pollsters' Challenges (the July 2017 International Journal of Market Research Lecture – we would be happy to provide the full presentation deck)

<https://www.research-live.com/article/news/the-pollsters-challenges/id/5025022>

Cliff Young & Julia Clark: Two Reasons a Republican is Likely to Win in 2016 (*for an overview of how polling data can improve and inform those involved in making predictions*)

<http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2015/10/14/forget-what-you-saw-last-night-two-simple-reasons-a-republican-is-likely-to-win-in-2016/>

The Year of Disruptive Elections (*an example of how polls explain the dynamic of what's happening on the ground – looking at the UK and France*)

<https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/2016-10/The Year of Disruptive Elections-Oct 2016.pdf>

Dutch pollsters deliver, unsurprisingly

<https://rwconnect.esomar.org/dutch-pollsters-deliver-unsurprisingly/>

APPENDICES

Supporting the analysis of Jennings & Wlezien, the following provide further background to the recent performance of the polls in different European countries.

Please let us know if you would like to see a full analysis of Ipsos polls around the world, or would like further information on the approaches adopted to political polling in any of these countries.

Accuracy of French Presidential Election Polls – First Round



French Presidential Election 2017 - First Round

	Emmanuel Macron	Marine Le Pen	François Fillon	Jean-Luc Mélenchon	Average error
Ipsos Final Poll	24.0%	22.0%	19.0%	19.0%	0.6%
Ipsos Exit Poll	23.9%	21.7%	20.0%	19.2%	0.2%
Actual	24.0%	21.3%	20.0%	19.6%	

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GAME CHANGERS



Accuracy of Serbian Presidential Election Polls



Serbian Presidential Election 2017

	Aleksandar Vučić	Sasa Jankovic	Luka Maksimovic	Vuk Jeremic	Vojislav Seselj	Boško Obradović	Saša Radulović
Ipsos Final Poll	54.3%	12.8%	9.5%	7.3%	6.8%	3.2%	1.8%
Ipsos Quick Count	55.2%	16.2%	9.4%	5.7%	4%	2%	1%
Actual	55.2%	16.3%	9.3%	5.7%	4.4%	2.3%	1.4%

	Milan Stamatović	Nenad Čanak	Aleksandar Popović	Miroslav Parović	Invalid	Average error
Ipsos Final Poll						
Ipsos Quick Count	0.4%	1.1%	0.7%	0.3%	1.7%	0.90%
Actual	1%	1%	1%	0%	2%	0.2%

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Accuracy of Dutch General Election polls



Netherlands 2017								
	Lib	FP	CD	Soc-dem	Soc	Green	Labour	CU
Ipsos Final	19.2%	12.9%	15.3%	12.2%	10.2%	9.7%	5.8%	3.3%
Ipsos Exit Poll	20.3%	12.2%	12.4%	12.6%	9.4%	10.2%	6.0%	3.7%
Actual	21.3%	13.1%	12.5%	12.0%	9.1%	8.9%	5.7%	3.4%

	50+	AP	SGP	DENK	FvD	Other	Av error
Ipsos Final	3.3%	2.9%	3.0%	1.2%	1.0%	-	0.78%
Ipsos Exit Poll	3.0%	3.3%	2.0%	2.1%	1.4%	1.4%	0.46%
Actual	3.1%	3.0%	2.1%	2.0%	1.8%	2.0%	

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Accuracy of the Irish General Election polls



Ireland 2016						
	FF	FG	Lab	SF	Other	Average error
Ipsos Final	23%	28%	6%	15%	28%	1.4
Actual	25%	26%	7%	14%	29%	

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Ipsos MORI, BMG Research, ComRes, LucidTalk, Opinium, ORB International, Panelbase and Survation – Written evidence (PPD0014)

Ipsos MORI, BMG Research, ComRes, LucidTalk, Opinium, ORB International, Panelbase and Survation – Written evidence (PPD0014)

[Submission to be found under ComRes](#)

Professor Will Jennings and Nick Moon – Oral evidence (QQ 1–13)

Evidence Session No. 1

Heard in Public

Questions 1 - 13

Tuesday 5 September 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Baroness Fall; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve; Lord Smith of Hindhead.

Examination of witnesses

Professor Will Jennings and Nick Moon.

Q1 **The Chairman:** Welcome to the Committee, Professor Will Jennings from Southampton University and not Professor but Dr Nick Moon.

Nick Moon: I am neither, I am afraid, but I will take it if you are offering.

The Chairman: At the end of your evidence, we will decide whether you have earned a professorial seat.

Nick Moon: That is pressure.

The Chairman: I will just say, formally, you are very welcome here. You have in front of you a list of interests that have been declared by Members of the Committee. This meeting is being broadcast by the parliamentary website and it may go out later on BBC Parliament, so do not say anything that you do not want anybody ever to hear you say again. A transcript will be taken and published on the parliamentary website and you can alter errors there.

We will mostly use surnames in our discussion, partly because it is being broadcast. This will no doubt slip on occasion, but it is not us trying to be formal. Indeed, we hope that the conversation will slip along in a fairly free and easy way, so that we can get the maximum information you want to put to us. Having said that, you have only an hour, and I am taking up one minute of it, so it is necessary, please, to be strict in how long your answers are. You can always follow up anything you feel you have not said enough of on a written piece of paper afterwards and it will be carefully read. We do not have a huge weight of evidence, so we will be in a position to do that.

Can I start with you, Will? For two elections in a row, the polls have got it wrong. Why?

Professor Jennings: You start with the big question. It is important to put the two elections in quite different contexts. The accuracies of the polls in 2015 and 2017 are quite different. The polling inquiry, of which I was a member in 2015, deduced that the critical issue was the representativeness of the samples that pollsters were getting.

In 2017, we still have not had all the micro data to look at, but it appears to be more likely that the method used to predict turnout of respondents was a big predictor of error. The pollsters that used what we call probability turnout models weighted to turnout behaviour at previous elections had the highest error, whereas when pollsters used self-reported likelihood to vote—so in the polls when respondents were asked, “How likely are you to vote?”—the error on those polls was slightly smaller. I would say that is the key methodological factor behind the poll errors in 2017.

The other thing to note about the difference between the two elections is that, in 2015, the vote intentions were relatively stable during the campaign. There was a systematic miss, but there did not seem to be a lot of movement during the campaign, whereas in 2017 we saw a surge in support for one party, Labour, that was historically exceptional since 1945. There has never been an election and a campaign in which there was such a large shift in vote intention. That is the crucial distinction about 2017 that made it a really difficult election to survey.

I close with a final point, to keep my answer relatively brief, as in academically, professionally brief. It is really important to note that 2017 was unusual in terms of polling accuracy, because the average error for the Conservatives was quite low by historical standards, but the error for Labour was more substantial than usual and, unusually, was an understatement of Labour support, whereas historically, certainly in the last 30-odd years, polls have tended to overestimate Labour support. It was a very distinct polling miss in 2017.

The Chairman: If the polls had not made any of the changes recommended in Patrick’s and your excellent inquiry, would they have been more accurate or less accurate in 2017?

Professor Jennings: What I would say about the polling inquiry report is that, although we noted there were potential weaknesses with how turnout was modelled, we did not make specific recommendations on that front and our key arguments were around representativeness of the sample. Lessons were hopefully learned from 2015 about caution and the quality of samples. I do not think one could read the inquiry report and say that we were necessarily recommending turnout probability-based models of vote intention. Indeed, before the 2017 election, Patrick Sturgis and I highlighted that there was a risk of pulling the methodological adjustments too far in the other direction.

The Chairman: Before I open it up, gentlemen, you have been polling for nearly the term of your life, like me. Why has it got more difficult?

Nick Moon: It is partly because of the way party allegiances have collapsed over time. There is a decline of class-based voting. If someone had said before the election you were going to see the biggest working-class swing to the Tories in any election in living memory, you probably would have laughed at them, yet that is what we saw. It has become harder to work out what kinds of people might be likely to vote for one party rather than another.

In the days when I was first polling, and even until when I stopped polling seriously two elections ago, we probably had it a bit easier, because it was

a bit easier to identify weaknesses in your sample and think of ways to weight it to make up for that. It used to be very simple. If you had too many C2/Ds, you weighted them down a bit and that would drag Labour down a bit, which probably made you better than you were before.

As generals are always fighting the last battle, there is always a risk of refighting the last election. I accept Will's point that the inquiry did not go out and say, "You must change your turnout weighting", but the pollsters pretty much decided that it was one thing they really ought to do, having read all the details of the report. That is what they did and I am sure they now wish they had not.

Baroness Couttie: Can I pick up on the point you have just made? Pollsters adjust for sample bias. In doing that, how much of it is formulaic and agreed before the poll is conducted, and how much has a human factor to it, which says, "Gosh, this result cannot possibly be right, given what everybody else is saying; therefore, we will twiddle it a bit"?

Nick Moon: Historically, there has always been twiddling, undoubtedly. Bob Worcester used to regale us with stories of how Robert Carvel and he would sit down in the *Standard* office and say, "It could be this or it could be that. What are we going to go for?"

I want to make it clear that it was not just a matter of saying, "Let us pick an answer out of the sky". The way it worked in those days typically was that you had two ways of basing the question. You would ask people how likely they were to vote, you would give them a scale from absolutely certain to vote to absolutely certain not to, and you said, "Okay, we will use only the ones who are really likely to vote. Let us take the ones who are absolutely certain to vote". Then you said, "Some people do not like saying with absolute certainty, so let us widen it a bit. Let us take the people who say they are absolutely certain to vote and the people who say they are very likely to vote, and put those two groups together".

You look at those side by side, and one of them gives a Labour lead or a Tory lead 1% more than the other. Both of them are perfectly justifiable. There is absolute justification for basing it on only absolutely certain to vote, because we know people overclaim, and there is perfect justification for saying we should widen it a little, because we know some people do not like the extreme ends of scales. You are making a judgment between two things, each of which is perfectly justifiable in methodological terms, and you are going to be influenced by thinking, "Frankly, that one looks a bit more plausible, so we will go with that".

One thing that was definitely good came out of the inquiry. The BPC is all about transparency—that is what it is for; it is all about transparency—and to increase that transparency, it can say, "Okay, you can do that kind of stuff if you want. If you want to change your method along the way, you can, but you have to make it absolutely clear that that is what you are doing. You have to be absolutely transparent that that is what you have done. You cannot just shift your method a bit to give you an answer you prefer and keep quiet about it".

It is fine to make different judgments. For example, historically, when Gallup were polling, they never used to use the certainty to vote until the very last poll, and then suddenly slung it in, which meant their poll shifted

a bit during the election. Again, it was perfectly justifiable. Their grounds were that people did not really know how likely they were to vote until it came to the end. It is fine to make changes such as that, but it is important you are transparent, so that poll users can see what you have done.

Q2 Lord Howarth of Newport: Can we return to the question of volatility of politics, which many people think has grown? Politics has become less predictable. The behaviour of the electorate has become less predictable. The parties, perhaps, have become more erratic. We also had a referendum last year, which may have conditioned people's willingness to participate in the subsequent general election and how they voted. Young people, for example, who did not much vote in the referendum realised that they had landed themselves with Brexit, and they have perhaps been more inclined to vote in the subsequent election. Is it entirely subjective as to how you work in these factors as a pollster—to determine your weightings, to fine-tune your approaches—or are there more objective and, indeed, more consensual factors that condition the way in which the polls are finally structured?

Nick Moon: Speaking from the practitioner side, there are two elements to it. Part of it is purely objective. You know what the age distribution of the population is. You know what the gender distribution of the population is. If you have too many men or too many young people, you can correct that and it is entirely objective. It is when you come to turnout that you start getting into difficult ground, because we know that we cannot trust all people when they say they are going to vote. People overclaim. We know that. We can now, thanks to the BES and things such as that, prove it.

You have to find some way of trying to work out which people who tell you they are going to vote are not going to vote. You make it as objective as you can, because you use whatever data you have to hand. There has to be some element of subjectivity in it, because you are saying, "I think this factor is important. I think there is a reason why people who say this should be less likely to vote in practice".

Professor Jennings: In terms of how subjective these adjustments are, I will give you two versions of the issues. In 2015, the inquiry found that methodological adjustments during the campaign reduced pollsters' errors. Although there was some evidence of convergence and herding in statistical terms, they reduced the error, whereas, if you look at the methodological changes in the EU referendum campaign, I think around five out of eight pollsters changed their method in the final poll, which increased their error.

From my perspective as someone on the outside of the industry, I get rather worried by the fact that those final methodological adjustments cannot be detached from the result, because they are being made while at the same time knowing the result. When I talk to pollsters, I often think that there are many reasons why it is preferable to fix your method earlier in the campaign, when you cannot be influenced by all the other information that we have about campaigns.

One of the issues with the polls in 2017 was simply that there was a general surprise about the surge in support for Labour under Corbyn, which people were trying to reconcile. Pollsters are human beings like the rest of us and have to try to reconcile their scientific methodological adjustments with their expectations about what is happening in politics. I get rather anxious with those final adjustments, accepting of course that we see in poll data that people's vote intentions crystallise and converge on the result as we get closer to election day. The risks of those last-minute adjustments probably offset a lot of the benefits.

Q3 Lord Smith of Hindhead: Mr Moon, putting aside your claim that the BPC is all about transparency, which is something that I would probably have a different view about, it says here in a brief that your claim to fame is that you were one of the only people to get the 2005 election results spot on, and that you were involved in the methodology that has been used at every election since 1992. Bearing in mind that the last election was hopelessly wrong by most of the pollsters, and YouGov was almost right but did not quite get the cigar, what do you think that YouGov did differently that got it so close compared with the others?

Nick Moon: There is a fundamental difference between online polling and telephone polling. As Peter, who is sitting behind me, I believe, has said in the past, online polling inevitably involves a degree of modelling. With telephone polling, you have the sample and then you might weight it by demographic factors. With an online sample, you have to accept the fact that there are people who will never take part in an online poll. Everyone can, theoretically at least, take part in a telephone survey. Not everyone can theoretically take part in an online survey. There are structural differences in how you deal with that. That is where the clever stuff comes in—the black box kind of stuff—which YouGov has historically been very good at, although it did not do very well at it in the last election.

That is the difficulty with online polling. There is such a structural difference between the kind of people who are in online polls and the population at large that simple weighting is never going to clear that up. You have to do something slightly more complicated to make up for it, and then you lose transparency a bit. YouGov made a very good business out of its cleverness in doing this kind of modelling, and understandably it does not want to just declare it to one and all so everyone can go and do it.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: If there is one major difference in the methodology now compared to 1992, what would that be?

Nick Moon: Since 1992, online polling has appeared on the scene. When I very first started, people were doing random samples. People were doing random door-to-door, face-to-face surveys. Then we moved on to face-to-face quota samples, usually an on-street kind of thing, which would make Pat tear his hair out, but did rather well. Then we moved on to telephone interviewing, which ran alongside face-to-face. Then face-to-face disappeared and online came along and now runs alongside telephone.

Telephone interviewing is getting so difficult to do that I wonder whether we might even see face-to-face coming back again. It is a constant change. It will always be hard to persuade enough people to take part in

your surveys to make them reliable. That is another thing that has got more difficult for pollsters. It is undoubtedly harder to get people to take part in surveys. You can see it in the response rates of the big government surveys. With a couple of exceptions, such as crime surveys, government survey response rates have done that over the last 10 or 20 years, and that is a problem that pollsters continually have to come up against.

Q4 Lord Hayward: I have one broad question. You said that you are waiting for the detailed analysis of 2017 to come in, but as a gut instinct at this stage, looking forward to future polls, what changes do you think they are most likely to make, on the information that you have at the moment? Have you any idea yet?

Professor Jennings: That is the difficult question. There are certain lessons that we can learn from 2015 and 2017. The first one is not to assume that the next election is going to have identical features of voting behaviour to the previous election. That is what we should learn from the difference between 2015 and 2017. In this case, there is a lot of caution to be taken about turnout-based modelling, based on previous elections. We certainly should not assume that the sort of volatility we saw in the election campaign in 2017 will be a feature of the next election.

If we look at where pollsters did better relatively in 2017, it looks like, without having seen the individual-level data, there had been some investment in the quality of the samples. While there needs to be caution about how we model likelihood to vote, there should probably be continued focus on the quality of samples, representativeness and this whole issue of whether the people responding to polls are overly politically engaged. That is the number one lesson that I would draw from this election, as well as just stopping fighting the last war.

Nick Moon: It is significant that the pollster that got it most accurately this time, Survation, was the one that said, “No, we are going to do what we always did. We trust our samples. We are going to do what we always did, which was ask people how likely they are to vote, and then we are going to believe them”. It is tricky, because had the pollsters done what they did in 2017 in 2015, they would have got the election exactly right. They were making adjustments at the wrong time.

Next time, in 2020, 2022 or whenever it is, do the pollsters say, “It is going to be like 2017 again”, “It is going to be like 2015 again” or, “It is going to be like neither of those; it is going to be like 2010”? That is the difficulty they face. The underlying point is that, as Will alluded to, the more ways they can find to get rid of those structural imbalances in the first place, the less time they have to spend worrying about how to even them out once they have them.

Q5 Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Can I jump back? Can I ask each of you what you think is the purpose of political opinion polling?

Nick Moon: To my mind, it is primarily to inform the public. People like to know whether they think the same as other people. Generally speaking, we like to know if our view is in the majority or the minority. That is a function for polling at any time, whether it about hunting, abortion or any issue you might like to think of. We like to know whether our view is a

minority view or a majority view, and what kinds of people think the same as or differently from us.

It is undoubtedly true that, when it comes to election time, people want some kind of idea of who they think might win. That is when polls get into a dangerous position, because they do not want to be influencing the election. The evidence is that, by and large, they do not. A raft of academic studies have been done, and there is no clear evidence at all that polls influence elections. Some suggest they do; others suggest they do not. Clearly, that is part of their function: people want to know what is going on.

Professor Jennings: There are multiple purposes of political polls. As an academic, you use polls and surveys more broadly to understand public opinion, political behaviour and the sources of that behaviour. The purpose of the political polling that tends to be publicised through the media is to track changes in public opinion and voting intention very broadly.

The Chairman: Just before you go on, Lord Hayward, I think you may have omitted to give your declaration of interest. Could you just put that in now so we can add it to the record?

Lord Hayward: Yes, sorry. I declared on the records that each year ComRes sponsors a presentation that I do for lobby journalists in relation to election polling and election results.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: That is very helpful. I was interested in the pause—quite a long pause—before you answered the question. The survey tells you what people think at a particular time, so 4 September 2017, but you said, Mr Moon, that the polls got it wrong absolutely. The polls did not forecast it correctly. Both of you have said this. What do you think about using a poll on a particular day, which is done all the time now, to forecast the outcome of an election, particularly given late swings? I remember 1970 very well. I was a candidate then, and we were expecting to win and we did not. Given differential turnout and all the other factors, is it not the case that polls have been to some extent prostituted, by taking them on a particular day to use them as forecasts and predictions?

Nick Moon: Pollsters themselves are always very careful not to suggest that their poll is a forecast. Bob Worcester is always good for a quote. He used to talk all the time about it being a photograph of a horserace three furlongs from the finish. You would not win money if you always backed the horse that was winning at the point. The polling industry has certainly changed. I cannot remember the exact details, but in 1970 the polls by and large stopped polling a week before the election, and the only poll that came close to getting it right was the one that carried on polling until nearest election day. Since then, the pollsters have learned from that mistake.

You cannot say that a poll done the day before the election, as most of the polls were, is not a forecast. You cannot say it is not. A poll two weeks before the election is not a forecast. The pollsters would not say it is a forecast. Journalists will try to make it into a forecast, but you cannot treat a poll two weeks before an election as a forecast. You cannot treat a poll the day before the election as a forecast.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Yes, you can, if you allow for late swings, differential turnout and all sorts of other factors. All the polls that were taken in 1970, just before the election, were completely wrong, because they did not account for the late swing in that election.

Nick Moon: Realistically, there is not very much late swing. We have never seen an election like this last one. The history of all the other elections I have polled in is that the campaign makes no difference at all. Whatever happens in the campaign makes absolutely no difference. The polls are there at the beginning and they are there at the end. What was extraordinary about this election was that we saw a change during the election that we have never seen before.

You find it hard to really justify the idea that there was a late swing on that last day. The evidence from BES about when people make up their mind and so on shows us that, even at an election like this last one, a lot of people go into the election absolutely knowing how they are going to vote. Speaking as a former pollster, I do not think pollsters can use that as a defence.

Professor Jennings: In terms of election forecasting, there is quite a reasonable argument to be made—I say that as someone who has engaged in election forecasting using poll data and other data in elections—that election forecasting and the prominence and publicity given to it have exacerbated some of the issues around polling.

This is especially true in the US, but it has also happened in the UK that the levels of uncertainty or certainty ascribed to polls by election forecasting have fed our desire to know what is happening. For example, in the US elections, the various forecasters were giving Hillary Clinton a 90% chance of winning the election. Those forecasts were based on models and people interpreted 90% as saying it was a guaranteed event, whereas if you said to people, every time they crossed the road, there was a 1-in-10 chance they would get hit by a bus, they would not cross the road very much.

Although there are many issues that we could discuss with polling today and the difficulties of it, election forecasting and the prominence it is given are quite problematic. In 2010, our election forecasts were very good because the poll error was relatively low and we were able to predict the parliamentary seats pretty well. In 2015, those same models, based on polls again, which I personally had great confidence in, were wrong. That election forecasting on top of polls has inflated some of our overconfidence in the methods we use.

Q6 **Baroness Couttie:** Going back to the methodology as such, there has been a lot of coverage recently about analysis of tweets and how that might be a better way of forecasting elections than the traditional polling technique. Given a very large percentage of the population now get most of their information via social media, I would be very interested in both of your opinions on the accuracy of this and whether it might be a better way forward for accuracy.

Professor Jennings: At present, I would be very sceptical about the possibility of using social media as an alternative to polls, simply because social media, just like polls but probably more so, have these fundamental

issues around representativeness. Is the population that uses Facebook or Twitter representative of the general population? One would argue that they suffer even more from the sorts of biases that we see in polls. You might capture interesting trends or phenomena that could give you information.

Baroness Couttie: Like all polls, you adjust for sample bias. People well into their 40s, and even 50s now, are using social media as the main source of their information.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: So are people in their 70s.

Baroness Couttie: Absolutely, there we go. As time goes by, that will get bigger and bigger. There is a sample bias because not everybody has access to a computer, but presumably you can make some adjustments or combine them with a different form of poll.

Professor Jennings: That is absolutely true, but I think the biases would be larger. I will give you an example about this. In the run-up to the Stoke Central by-election, I think Leave.EU published a poll where the UKIP candidate was far ahead, which Arron Banks said was—I have it somewhere in my notes—based on sophisticated AI technology from the United States. The error on that was much larger than we would see even in a constituency poll.

As Nick was saying, the methodological change in the polling industry over the last 40 years has been vast and we should not be completely dismissive of these new technologies and new universes to sample. By the same token, we should be moderately sceptical about whether these really are superior things or just nice, new shiny objects that we are all fascinated by.

Nick Moon: I am extremely sceptical. I have no doubt at all that, in the last two elections, various people were doing exactly what you said, because it is virtually free. If you have the necessary computer skills, you can access it very easily. People were doing it. If it had been any good, they would have told us afterwards how good they were at it.

It is not as easy as it appears. In the midterms in the US, people claimed to have predicted—I think it was gubernatorial; I cannot remember—a set of results with incredible accuracy. Then it basically turned out that they had only predicted the ones that were not in doubt. In fact, I can go like that and predict 45 of the American states, because they happen the same way every single year. Their hit rate was not any good at all.

It offers potential, but it is about how you sort the wheat from the chaff. It is not just a question of who is on it. The last time I looked—it may have been overtaken slightly by events—the 80/20 rule still applied: 80% of all tweets come from 20% of people tweeting, and the vast majority of tweets are just retweets from somebody else. Nowadays, we know there are people in China paid by the hour to supply tweets about what anybody wants them to tweet. Those of us who watch “Homeland” will have seen it going on in there. That is the reason why we should be very dubious about it, but we should not stop trying. I have no objection to people trying. If they find they can make it work for two elections in a row, I will say, “You are on to something. This is real good stuff”.

Q7 **Baroness Fall:** Can I first declare that I am a partner at Brunswick LLP? To this last point on social media, I wonder whether we should draw a distinction between the use of social media as a guide to where you think your voters might be in the course of an election and social media as a polling guide. Being at the heart of a few elections, it was quite a helpful guide to find people, especially young people, for whom it was not always obvious where they go, what they like to do. I wonder whether that is a distinction we should make.

I really wanted to come back to the more difficult and slightly enigmatic issue of weighting and political assumptions. Forgive me, because I do not know nearly as much about this as you, but it seems to me that, when you are taking samples, part of the methodology includes assumptions about whether you have a balance of political party. You surely make some assumptions, given that you have a certain number of people who work in the public sector or private business, about whether that is balanced. Given the changeable political affiliation that we have seen recently, is that slightly outdated? Is it the core or part of the problems we have seen in polling recently and, indeed, going forward?

I have a final, linked question. In France, the forecasts did a pretty good job with a new political party, with Macron. I wonder whether we do as well here with the same sort of methodology.

Professor Jennings: In terms of political weighting, as Nick said early on, questions around volatility, in terms of the dealignment of voters from parties, raise challenges. The bigger issue around political weighting, which, until I sat on the polling inquiry, I had not been as attuned to as I might have been, was that of having a representative political sample to the previous election. The first issue is around people's recall. People start misremembering who they voted for, but also the electorate is constantly changing. Although we know the result of the election in June, there will be some people who were not previously in the electorate who now are and some people who were in the electorate who are now not. Pollsters have to make additional adjustments to that.

On France, again, this speaks to the caution about overly drawing inferences from single elections. It is certainly true that the pollsters did very well in France on the first round, where the error was much lower. Part of that is to do with the fact that the four leading candidates were all averaging around 20% or slightly above in the polls. By sampling theory alone, the margin of error on smaller proportions of the vote should be lower. When comparing across elections, we have to be really careful about adjusting for that relative proportion of the vote.

I cannot remember precisely what Macron and Le Pen received, but I think it was between 22% and 25%. The error should by definition be smaller. If you look at the second round of the French elections, the polling error was very high. Part of that has been attributed to late swing. I am not sure there is anything particularly special that French pollsters were doing and UK pollsters do not do that we can learn from, on that front.

Nick Moon: When I first started, we used nothing but age, sex and class to weight to, and that was it. Then people started to say, “There must be more to it than this”, so ICM started looking at what it was that correlated with voting behaviour. They started putting questions in all their surveys such as, “Have you been on a foreign holiday in the last year?”, and this kind of thing, because they found it helped. Pollsters are in a constant process of looking at what is measurable and correlates strongly with voting intention, so they can use that in their weighting.

Q8 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** I wondered if I could pick you up on the points you have been making about volatility, and how the 2017 election was extraordinarily volatile and showed a huge shift in opinion. Is that in fact accurate, or was it simply that there was an inaccuracy in the differential turnout, in that the turnout was underestimated for particular groups, particularly, as you have said, young people and people who had not voted for a long time? It was not a shift in opinion, but a problem about the use of the demographic on the differential turnout.

Professor Jennings: There is certainly an issue, which I do not think there is an answer to, about whether biases in the polls are constant over the election cycle - so we cannot assume the biases that are apparent on election day would be apparent if the election was three months previously. We cannot be sure, essentially, whether there was something about the methodological adjustments that meant there was not this large shift in opinion. I think we can take the polls at face value to the extent that there was a large shift in opinion. Whether it was precisely correct about the extent of that swing, we cannot be sure. Simply because there is only one test of polls, which is election day, we cannot really know whether the bias was true two months before.

Nick Moon: I accept that, but just take the campaign itself. All the time when you are trying to say, “Could something have happened or could it have not happened?”, you want a counterfactual. I would need to see a theory to explain why the pollster should have one kind of bias at the beginning of an election and, using exactly the same methodology, have a different kind of bias a month later, because that is where the change happened. It was going on in that month. That might have happened; as Will said, we will never know, but I would want to have a good explanation of why that should have happened: why the polling bias should have been different from the beginning of the campaign to the end.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: It was not about underestimating a particular opinion. It was about underestimating a particular intention of a particularly large group of potential voters, but, as you say, you do not yet know.

Could I go on to one further point, about the fact that most of the answers you have given to the questions have been about political psychology, rather than about statistical and other methodological issues? I was fascinated, Mr Moon, that you said you might well want to go back to the face-to-face interview process, in order to get an accurate poll. Does that suggest that, with all the conversations we have had about social media, big data and new forms of methodology, given that I know it would be

enormously expensive and probably not attractive to many sponsors, it would be much better to invest in going back to a different type of poll?

Nick Moon: The irony is that it would not necessarily be more expensive. Telephone polling is getting so difficult to do that it is becoming less and less attractive. As a means of reaching the general population through the kind of random sampling that you and I would both approve of, it is becoming impossible, because nobody answers their phone.

Survation, for example, buy in samples of people. They are named samples. They knew that they are people who are more likely to co-operate. It raises the question of representativeness, but that is the only realistic way to get people by the telephone. If I went to my operations people a year ago and said, "How much would it cost me to get 1,000 five-minute interviews done with the general population?", it would almost certainly be cheaper to do it face to face than by telephone, and it would widen the group of people you could talk to.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I am picking up, for example, on one thing in our briefing, which was a quotation about social media saying, "Algorithms find it hard to see how people feel". That is in fact exactly what you have been saying.

Nick Moon: Yes. I keep saying "we", sorry. At GfK, they spent a lot of time trying to do machine-learning on looking at tweets. The commercial world is probably far more interested in this than the political world. If I am Apple, I want to know exactly what people out there are saying about me.

When you start looking at this stuff, you Hoover in all this data—because, again, it is virtually free—you suck it in and you find things like, "I just bought my new iPhone. The screen has cracked already. This has gone wrong. That has gone wrong. It does not work properly. This is bloody great, Apple". What does the machine-learning see? "This is bloody great, Apple". It does not spot the irony involved, and it goes down as a positive comment.

Q9 **Lord Smith of Hindhead:** Both of you said in early evidence, particularly to Lord Foulkes, that polling is just for that one day and you cannot forecast at all—once you have done that, that is the health check; this is the poll—and it is the media that forecast, not the pollsters. We all know that the media do that; they forecast. They will have a poll that says, "This is the intention and, if this were represented at an election, the House of Commons would look like this". They have the Parliament seats and everything else. While you mentioned, Mr Moon, that you did not think the polls ever influenced political voting, we probably all agree that they can very much influence the turnout to vote.

Do you think it is right that the pollsters have these polls and, with their simple health check, say, "This is over to the media", and the media use it to forecast? Do you think it is right that the media are paying the pollsters for this information? The pollsters can simply give the figures away and then say, "It has nothing to do with us. You can do whatever you like with it". Do you both feel comfortable with that?

Nick Moon: It is not true that pollsters just say, “Here is the data. You can do what you like with it”, because there are various codes of conduct. For example, the MRS and the ESOMAR codes of conduct place responsibilities—

Lord Smith of Hindhead: You said earlier that it was like taking a snapshot three furlongs before the end, so you could not forecast.

Nick Moon: You can stop people misinterpreting your poll directly. For example, a classic thing when I was polling all the time was that the *Sun* would try to write a headline that said, “Labour surge ahead”, and it was a half-point difference. You have to say, “No, you cannot say that. The data do not support that”. If someone, in writing up a poll, says, “This proves they are going to win”, you can say, “No, it does not prove that at all”. There is stuff that you cannot control, secondary reporting particularly. It is the secondary reporting where a lot of it happens.

There is this, “What is going to happen?” In the days when by-elections used to be a much bigger thing, Peter Snow used to do an election night programme. It was just a bit of fun, and he would tell us what the House of Commons would look like if that by-election result were repeated in every single election.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: That is forecasting.

Nick Moon: That is forecasting, but no one really takes it seriously. He was always careful to say, “It is just a bit of fun”. Yes, the media, because they are paying for it, want something back for their money. The pollsters are always in a position of trying to make sure they do not say anything that is not supported by the data.

Professor Jennings: I am not privy to the conversations between pollsters and media, but an important issue about the translation of the poll results to news stories should be taken in the context of differences between different branches of media. Broadcasters tend to be far more careful than newspapers, and within the newspaper industry, in my experience, there is a great diversity of quality, in terms of how polls are reported. Some newspapers spend quite a lot of time trying to report polls accurately and giving qualifications; and some newspapers—I am not sure I should name them—are of particularly poor quality, in terms of how they present polls. Some newspapers will even present straw polls essentially as polls of public opinion.

While there is a responsibility on pollsters to make sure they communicate the information to journalists, a lot of the poor-quality reporting we see cannot be solved by that, because certain news organisations have particular interests, either in terms of constructing stories or other sorts of agendas, that will drive the way polls are reported. That would, for me, explain why there is that great diversity in the quality of reporting of polls across the media.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: If the polls are wrong, which they have consistently been for quite some time, and that is being given out—including to the BBC, who then use the graphics to show what the House of Commons would look like—we have a problem, have we not?

Professor Jennings: That is where the communication of uncertainty and the potential for error are really important. There is a lot of information out there about polling accuracy and polling errors, which is freely available and journalists can draw on, but is not necessarily used because there is the pressure for the story. What can pollsters do in terms of conveying their results to a journalist? They perhaps could add further cover sheets with some contextual data on uncertainty, but we know that polls have error and potential for bias, yet we report them all the same.

From 2015, we should have known that polls should be treated with caution. A lot of journalists said after 2015, “I will never trust another poll again”, and within a year in the EU referendum we were obsessed with polls again. Within another year, again, the polls were wrong and we were obsessing about polls again. There is something quite human about our desire to use polls, and information about what people are thinking and how they are going to behave, to project the future. Simply coming up with technical solutions about what pollsters do will not necessarily solve those sorts of problems.

Q10 **The Chairman:** Can I just say one word on international polling? We have just had a few flashes of the thigh on that. As I understand it, Professor Jennings, you have the biggest database of all on this, and some fascinating facts come out of the material. For example, 16 of the 28 members of the European Union ban polling in the run-up to elections. I am not sure if I need to ask you a question now, but I wonder if I could ask whether you would be prepared to do a short memorandum for the Committee about lessons from your international work, which would be absolutely valuable to us.

Professor Jennings: I am very happy to. In my written evidence submitted—

The Chairman: I am sorry; we have not seen that yet.

Professor Jennings: —I gave an overview of the comparative performance of the UK polls compared to other countries, but also the performance of the polls over time, addressing this question of whether polling is in crisis globally or whether errors have been relatively stable across time.

The Chairman: We will read that carefully and see if there is anything else we need.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Does your evidence—I am sorry; I have not seen it either—also include any analysis of the difference in the type of voting system?

Professor Jennings: Yes. Essentially, we find that polls have lower errors in proportional representation systems, in multiparty systems, in legislative elections and in systems with a large number of parties. The common theme of all those electoral contexts is that parties are smaller, which relates to this point about sampling error being smaller on a smaller proportion of the vote. We would expect polling errors to be higher in the UK relative to an election, for example, in the Netherlands, where there are more small parties.

Lord Howarth of Newport: On that same point, we have a miscellany of electoral systems for different elections within the UK. Do you also reflect on the methodological differences and the differences in the capacity of polls to get it right under different electoral systems domestically?

Professor Jennings: I have not looked at the domestic data. I would be very happy to, if that was something you were interested in. It is true that, if you look at devolved elections and mayoral elections, you see varying errors. Again, it comes to this issue about whether we can infer from a single election or a couple of elections about the systemic features associated with polling errors. There is certainly good evidence that the electoral system and how it conditions the attachment of voters to parties or candidates is a significant factor in the accuracy of polls, both before the election and as they converge on election day.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: I have a point I want to raise on that. As the Chairman said, 16 European countries ban polls, three of them for more than a week, and yet you have now said that polls are more accurate in those countries and polling errors are higher in the United Kingdom. Why have they decided to ban them?

Professor Jennings: Not all the countries that ban polls will be covered in my study, in the data that we have. I would separate out the question of polling accuracy from banning polls. The arguments around banning polls are related to their influence on behaviour. I do not think there is a relationship between polls being banned and polls being more accurate.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Why have they decided to do it? Why have they decided to ban polls in 16 countries, three of them for more than a week?

Professor Jennings: Part of it will be historical regulations that have been introduced, in a belief that the polls might influence voters' behaviour. As Nick said, there is an ongoing debate around that, where there are studies showing both positives and negatives in that regard. In some countries, those arguments have held sway. I would not consider myself an expert on poll regulation in other countries. I would separate it out from questions around accuracy, which relate to features of the electoral system, as opposed to regulatory questions, which might stem from features of the electoral system, but would also stem from other issues around legal systems or political systems.

The Chairman: We now have three questions to conclude.

Q11 **Lord Hayward:** I was going to ask a question earlier on about accuracy, but you have covered it, so thank you very much. Your study, which you shared with a colleague from the University of Texas, made excellent recess reading for those who are sad enough to have done so.

Can I take the other part of the question that I wanted to ask? In the United States, they report polls two or three months back, not as 47/53 but as 36/43, indicating that there is a margin for alternative decision. As you get closer to the polling date, they will move closer to a total of 100%.

Is there an advantage in doing that, in terms of avoiding the confusion

that we get in this country because people think there is a forecast result? I just looked up the pending Senate elections on the web, and they are not reporting them as a total of 100%. They are reporting them as a total of 95% and 93%.

Nick Moon: They do that right up until the election day itself. The norm is to leave “don’t knows” in there explicitly as “don’t knows”. There is a lot to be said for it, because it draws your attention to the fact that there is uncertainty. Certainly, if you have 50% saying “don’t know” you should be very dubious about the validity of what else is going on.

Within the BPC rules, you have to make clear what the “don’t know” figure was. We cannot force newspapers to put it in the figure there, but you have to make it available. The argument against it is that it is very difficult, in those circumstances, to work out what is happening, because you start saying, “Let us project”, and everybody then just says, “Let us take ‘don’t knows’ out, re-present it and see what we get to”, which is what happens anyway.

It makes it very hard to calculate errors in the polls, because you say, “Hang on, they said Obama was only going to get 40%, but that is because they allowed 10% ‘don’t knows’, so how do I decide if that 40% is any good when he got 49%?” It is very difficult to judge the accuracy. That is probably why British pollsters have not gone down that route. It has attractions. Anything that makes it obvious whether there is a high “don’t know” level should be drawn attention to.

Q12 **Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** I would like to go back to the question of accuracy and purpose. Mr Moon, you answered that in terms of the public liking to know that their views were widely shared. That is a very understandable thing, but of course the public do not commission polls and do not pay for the polls. What is in it for the people who pay for them? Do they want accuracy or do they want to have a basis for intervention, in order to adjust the way that things will come out?

Nick Moon: From my experience, there are two different ways you need to look at this. There is the reason why the media commission polls, which in my experience has always been to get the accurate result. I have polled for both Labour-supporting newspapers and very Conservative newspapers, and in each case they never sought to change anything from the findings when they showed the party they supported in a bad light. I have never had to go to them and say, “You are overegging the pudding, because you are putting it too much towards your point of view”.

The media may well be doing it because it gets them publicity, and certainly when I polled for one newspaper in the past I was paid out of their marketing budget. That is why they did it. It got them on BBC News. At 10 o'clock on a Saturday night, they would be on the news.

Then you have the other issue: why pressure groups commission polls. That starts to get into a slightly different area, because they are trying to get the answer that they want. That then raises two questions, one of which you address in one of your many questions in the call for evidence: the question of whether they influence and the issue of cherry picking.

Cherry picking is undoubtedly a real risk. Anyone who remembers seeing “Yes Minister” will have seen it very neatly exemplified. The BPC rules have always been very strict on cherry picking: you cannot do it. We have had members publish results of questions clients did not want published because they said, “I am sorry; these are what the rules are. We have to publish them all”. Cherry picking is taken care of.

The really difficult area is when it comes to people getting the answer they want by asking the questions they want. Historically, I can remember many instances of pollsters who went from agency to agency trying to find someone who would ask the question they wanted. They had a question in their head that they wanted to ask, which was a biased question. There was no doubt about it. They would come to a pollster and we would say, “You can ask something a bit like that, but you cannot ask that”. They would say, “We will go away and find someone else”, and you would find out through talking in the industry that they had been to everybody. No one would take the question that they wanted and they gave up, abandoned it or reworded it.

More subtle than that is the question of what is a bad question. It is incredibly difficult to assess whether a question is good or bad. Any idea that regulation might extend from regulation of publication of polls and suchlike into regulation of how polls are done is stepping into very dangerous ground indeed. We might talk about regulation of methodology. We talked about telephone polls earlier. Were it the case that telephone polls universally gave a worse result for the Government of the day than online polls, and regulation came in saying, “No, telephone polls are not fit for purpose; they should be regulated against”, that would be a fairly chilling prospect.

On question wording, you could ask a question in different ways and get a different result, without it being a bad question. Small changes in the question can lead to vast changes in the result. So long as you are clear about what the question is, that is fair enough. A question can get a different result without being biased. Pressure group A asks a question that shows people favour it. Pressure group B says, “This is a biased question”, and rounds up three experts who will tell you it is biased. Then the polling company will almost certainly, if they are any good, be able to find three experts who will say it was not biased, because they genuinely thought it was not biased. You can have an influence in a question without it being biased. There is no doubt that, as you allude to, pressure groups want to do that kind of thing, but it is fair to say that the industry as a whole is fighting all the time to make sure that they do not exert undue influence.

The Chairman: Onora, could you just remind us of your interests?

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: Yes. I have published widely on the ethics of communication, accountability and trustworthiness.

Professor Jennings: I would agree with Nick that there are issues around how you would regulate question wording. There is a broader issue around society: how we try to infer people’s preferences and support for policies from survey questions. That is something about which I have become increasingly anxious over time. Assuming that X% of people

agree with proposition X in a survey, it should not be taken as a fixed, definitive account of public opinion, because the percentage may vary with subtle changes in the question. It might not bias it completely. Sometimes you cannot turn 70% support for a certain policy into 30% support.

When we are dealing with subtle issues around majority, 51/49 sorts of questions, question wording can matter, but those are broader issues around how we interpret polls as measures of public opinion, rather than issues that we can methodologically regulate. Even for people in the survey industry, determining the best question to ask about people's attitudes on particular social or political issues is incredibly difficult.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: My question was not whether accuracy was the aim in, for example, consumer polling or, indeed, the objective of those running political polling. I was asking about the objectives of those who pay for the polls. Are they really interested just in accuracy?

Nick Moon: The media are interested in them for two reasons. To be fairer to them it is part of the service they offer to their readers, and to be less fair to them it is good publicity for them.

As for the pressure group kind of people, partly it is because they hope they will get a result that means they can show 80% agree with them or whatever, but an awful lot of it is done because they want to know whether their message is getting through. "We have been banging away about this issue, whether it is donkeys in Greece or whatever. We want to know: has that message got through? Are people believing us? Are we couching our message in the right way?"

In the same way, the political parties commission polls. Political parties do not commission polls to find out whether they are ahead. They commission polls to find out which of their attack statements on the opposition side are working, which of their positive statements about their own side are working and which ones are not. It is all about enhancing your communications. To that extent, polling is used a very large amount to help you develop your communications strategy, in just the same way that commercial firms do it.

Q13 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** This follows from Baroness O'Neill's question and the answer you have just given, Mr Moon. I wanted to ask you to reflect a little more on the relationships between polling organisations and political parties, sometimes quite long-term relationships. Commonly, the poll findings provided to political parties are not published, but it is not unknown for certain amounts of cherry picking to go on, for selective leaks to take place, with a view to manipulating public opinion.

Does that raise ethical or professional issues for the polling organisations? What leverage do you think they have? Are there norms of methodology and behaviour that can bind the relationship between the polling organisation and the political party commissioning polls from it?

Nick Moon: The first thing to say is that pollsters in this country are very different from those in many other countries. In America, for example, you are known as a Democratic pollster or a Republican pollster. I have

polled for the Labour Party and briefly for the Conservative Party in one form. You can go and poll for newspapers and still be independent.

The issue of leaking—not just by political parties, but they are the main source of it—is possibly the most difficult thing the BPC has to deal with. The best we can do about it is to say that, if you leak a poll and try to give it credibility by saying, “This poll was done by ComRes”—or by Ipsos MORI or whoever—if you seek the authority that comes from using a recognised pollster and say, “This means it must be a real poll and you can trust it”, you cannot get away from the BPC rules. We have had cases where other questions have been released on that basis.

If pollster A conducts a poll for the Labour Party, and the Labour Party chooses to leak one question in it and says, “We have done a poll that says this”, you cannot realistically force the pollster to go, “That was us, and it said more than that”. Where the BPC has drawn the line is to say you cannot claim the authority of using a BPC member without following BPC rules. You cannot stop leaking altogether, but at least you can stop people leaking and trying to claim authority for it. You are right; it is a very difficult area.

The Chairman: Thank you. I am afraid we have run out of time, but we have had an extremely rich hour, from my point of view at any rate. Thank you both for the thought you have put into it and the concise, clear and informative answers you have given us.

Professor Will Jennings – Written evidence (PPD0009)

Evidence submitted to House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media

31st August 2017

Will Jennings

I am Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Southampton and a Trustee of the Political Studies Association. I served as a member of the British Polling Council/Market Research Council inquiry into the pre-election polls for the 2015 general election, and contributed to its final report (Sturgis et al. 2016). I have conducted a wide range of research on public opinion, voting, and polling, and have a specific interest in polling accuracy (and errors). Through this work, I have assembled what I believe is the largest cross-national dataset of vote intention polls for national elections from 45 countries dating as far back as the 1940s in some cases. This has enabled analysis of the evolution of voter preferences over the election cycle and, most pertinent to the remit of this committee, the degree to which polls at the end of the cycle correspond to election outcomes. This statement is made in a personal capacity, drawing upon both published and unpublished work (listed as an addendum to this submission), and in particular my longstanding collaboration with Professor Christopher Wlezien of the University of Texas at Austin, USA.

1. Summary

In this evidence I consider (i) how the accuracy of polls in Britain compare to other countries, (ii) the factors associated with poll accuracy in comparative context (specifically relating to the features of electoral and party systems), (iii) how polls for the recent 2015 and 2017 general elections compare to the historical track record of polls in Britain and to elections in other countries around the same time (such as the U.S. and France), and (iv) whether polling errors have increased over time in general. I then proceed to discuss (v) how pollsters' methodological choices impact on their estimates of vote intentions, and the impact on polling accuracy, in the 2017 general election (specifically relating to turnout adjustments). I conclude with a brief discussion of some of the problems with the ways polls are reported in traditional and social media.

The spoiler: the historical accuracy of polling in Britain is typical of similar advanced democracies.

In comparative perspective, polling errors tend to be higher in legislative elections characterised by single-member districts (contrasted with PR), candidate-centric electoral rules, and a smaller number of 'effective number of parties'. Most of these differences appear to be attributable to those electoral systems associated with 'larger' parties (i.e. parties a higher share of the vote). While the 2015 and 2017 elections were not the British polling industry's finest hour there is no

evidence of a global trend of rising polling errors. Nor does the average poll error in either 2015 or 2017 stand out as being particularly exceptional compared to other national elections in the same period (though individually the errors on the Conservative vote in 2015 and Labour vote in 2017 were well above the average). It is important to note, however, that these were two quite distinct polling misses: with the former being due to unrepresentative samples (Sturgis et al. 2016) and the latter, seemingly, associated with turnout adjustments (Sturgis and Jennings 2017). However, many of the problems with the communication of the uncertainty attached to polls are not primarily the fault of pollsters, but stem from how opinion polls are understood and discussed in wider society, media and politics.

2. Measuring polling errors

There is no single, universal benchmark against which the accuracy of polls can be gauged. We often want to know both how close the poll estimate for a given party or candidate is to the actual election result (i.e. the size of the error), but also whether it has over- or under-stated the level of support (i.e. the direction of the error). It might also be important to know whether the polls accurately capture the relative lead of one party or candidate over another (i.e. the size and/or direction of the error on the 'the margin'). This matters because polling errors can be relatively modest in magnitude but in combination tell a misleading story about the likely outcome. We might also be interested in the accuracy of polls for all parties contesting an election (calculating the average error) or in their accuracy for major parties only and not for those minor parties receiving a smaller share of the vote (calculating the average error for a subset of the published headline figures). Thus, decisions about measurement of poll accuracy matter, since they potentially impact upon the conclusions drawn. In this evidence, I mainly use two measures of poll accuracy: the absolute error and the net error. These can be defined simply as follows:

Absolute error: the absolute difference between the estimated poll share and the vote share for a party or candidate. The mean absolute error therefore indicates how far, on average, poll estimates are from the election result across parties-candidates, pollsters or elections.²⁹

Net error: the difference between the poll estimate and the vote share for a given party or candidate. The net error takes a positive value when the poll over-

²⁹ The mean absolute error (MAE) can therefore be expressed as the mean of the absolute error $|x_i - y_i|$ across n observations where x_i is the poll estimate and y_i is the election outcome:

$$MAE = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n |x_i - y_i|$$

estimates the vote share and a negative value when it under-estimates the vote share.³⁰

A minor but important point worth noting: in most instances the absolute and net error for a poll estimate will not be equal to zero, since it is good practice for pollsters to not report their vote intention estimates using decimal places (since this could be perceived as imbuing polls with more precision than they can offer), but election results tend to be – seemingly by informal convention – reported using one decimal place. Rather unfairly on pollsters, then, it is possible that some ‘error’ will arise simply due to rounding.

We can consider these measures taking the example of the final polls for the 2017 general election, indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Final polls for the 2017 general election

Pollster	Fieldwork	Sample	Con	Lab	UKIP	Lib Dem	Green
Ipsos MORI	6–7 Jun	1,291	44	36	4	7	2
BMG	6–7 Jun	1,199	46	33	5	8	3
Survation	6–7 Jun	2,798	41	40	2	8	2
ICM	6–7 Jun	1,532	46	34	5	7	2
YouGov	5–7 Jun	2,130	42	35	5	10	2
ComRes	5–7 Jun	2,051	44	34	5	9	2
Panelbase	2–7 Jun	3,018	44	36	5	7	2
Kantar Public	1–7 Jun	2,159	43	38	4	7	2
SurveyMonkey	4–6 Jun	11,000	42	38	4	6	2
Opinium	4–6 Jun	3,002	43	36	5	8	2
Poll average			43.5	36	4.4	7.7	2.1
<u>Result (GB)</u>			<u>43.5</u>	<u>41</u>	<u>1.9</u>	<u>7.6</u>	<u>1.7</u>
<i>Mean absolute error</i>			<i>1.3</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>2.5</i>	<i>0.9</i>	<i>0.4</i>
<i>Mean net error</i>			<i>0</i>	<i>-5</i>	<i>+2.5</i>	<i>+0.1</i>	<i>+0.4</i>

Here we see that in 2017 the polling industry collectively performed well in accurately predicting the Conservative vote, with a mean net error of zero (this represented a substantial improvement on a net error of -4.1 points in 2015, cf. Sturgis et al. 2016). While some pollsters over-estimated their support, and some under-estimated it (reflected in a mean absolute error of 1.3 points across all the pollsters), these errors cancelled out. In contrast, the polling industry systematically under-estimated the Labour vote by 5 points. The mean absolute error is here the same value as the mean net error (apart from the sign of course), because all pollsters’ estimates were under the final Labour vote. If the mean absolute error on the margin is taken as our measure instead, i.e. the error on the

³⁰ The mean net error is therefore the average of the difference $(x_i - y_i)$ across n observations where x_i is the poll estimate and y_i is the election outcome:

$$\text{Mean net error} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n (x_i - y_i)$$

Conservative-Labour lead, this is equal to 5.3 points. Based on this benchmark, the 2017 election polls were misleading, given consequences of that difference when translated into parliamentary seats (as quickly became apparent on election night). This represented a reversal from the 2015 election where the Conservative lead was under-estimated by 6.5 points. In terms of polling accuracy, these were two contrasting elections. Another notable feature of the 2017 election, which has been widely ignored, was the 2.5 point error for the UKIP vote. This might appear small, but is large if one considers that the margin of error is a function of the vote proportion³¹ (i.e. for a sample of 1,000 people the margin of error is equal to 3.0 points for a party receiving 41% of the vote and equal to 0.8 points for a party receiving 1.9% of the vote).

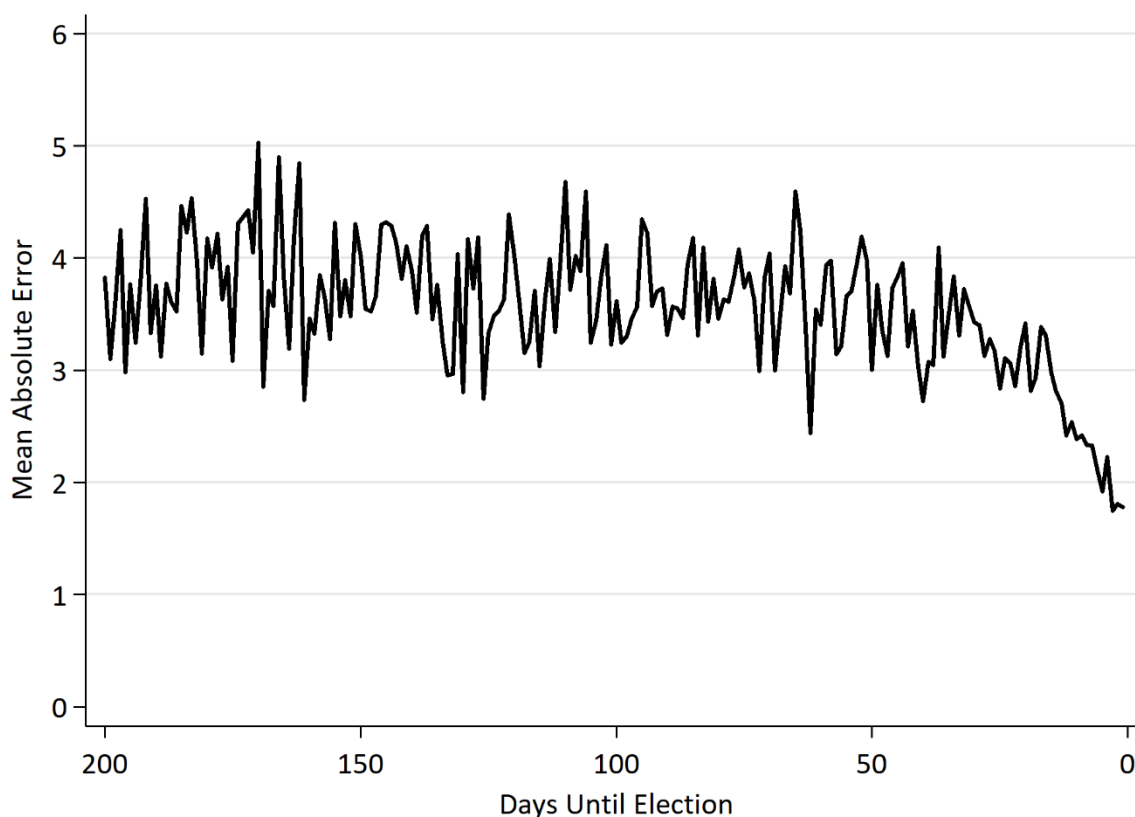
3. A comparative perspective on polling accuracy

Pollsters have sought to measure citizen's intention to vote for candidates or parties since the 1930s. While the wording of survey questions may vary due to differences in context (and language), most pre-election polls take the general form of asking how citizens would vote "if the election were held today/tomorrow". As part of a longstanding collaboration with Professor Christopher Wlezien of the University of Texas at Austin, USA (cf. Jennings and Wlezien 2016; Wlezien et al. 2017; Jennings and Wlezien 2017), I have compiled what I believe is the most extensive cross-national dataset of vote intention polls for national-level elections, consisting of nearly 27,000 polls fielded between 1942 and 2013. These cover a total of 338 elections in 45 countries, with presidential elections in 23 countries and legislative elections in 31 countries. Because the fieldwork for most polls spans multiple days, we date each poll by the middle day of the period that the survey is in the field. For days when more than one poll result is recorded, we pool the results together into a single 'poll-of-polls'. In the final week before the election, we have 1,002 polls (in 196 elections in 31 countries). These are the basis for our comparative analysis, discussed shortly.

One way to think about the information provided by polls is to analyse how the vote across all these elections match up with poll estimates at different points in the election cycle. This 'timeline' method is discussed in depth in Wlezien et al. (2017), having been introduced by Wlezien and Erikson (2002) for the study of US elections. Using this method, we simply calculate the mean absolute error of all available polls on each day of the election cycle, from 200 days before the election ($T = 200$) up until the day before Election Day ($T = 1$). This is plotted in Figure 1, where it is apparent that poll errors decline over the election timeline (much of the jaggedness is due to the changing mix of elections for which polls are available). Around 180 days before Election Day, the mean absolute error is around four points. This declines to around three points 50 days out, and becomes increasingly predictive of the election result in the final month, with the final error on $T = 1$ equal to less than 2 points. Even at the end of the election cycle, however, polls are not perfect predictors of the election outcome.

³¹ For a proportion p and sample size n , the margin of error is equal to: $\pm 1.96 \times \sqrt{\frac{p(1-p)}{n}}$.

Figure 1. The timeline of all polls, 1943-2013



Using this data, it is possible to put Britain’s historical polling accuracy in comparative perspective. Table 1 reports the mean absolute error of our daily poll readings in the final week of the election cycle for 196 elections in 31 countries. The countries are presented in the order of the earliest election for which we have poll data. From this, we can immediately see that Britain has a historical poll error that is comparable to similar advanced democracies such as the US, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Spain and Ireland, and is only slightly higher than countries such as Denmark, Germany, Sweden and Norway. Overall, the average mean absolute error by country is 2.8 points, to which Britain compares favourably.

Table 1. Mean absolute error of final week polls, by country, all elections 1942-2013

Country	Mean absolute error	Period covered
United States	2.2	1942-2012
Australia	2.2	1943-2013

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Great Britain	2.2	1945-2010
Canada	2.5	1945-2011
Denmark	1.8	1960-2011
Germany	1.9	1961-2013
Netherlands	2.7	1963-2012
Sweden	1.9	1964-2010
Norway	1.9	1965-2013
France	1.5	1965-2012
New Zealand	2.3	1975-2011
Ireland	2.0	1977-2011
Spain	2.3	1982-2011
Portugal	2.6	1985-2011
Japan*	7.6	2000-2012
Brazil	4.7	2002-2010
Peru	1.7	2006-2011
Venezuela	5.6	2006-2013
Austria	1.0	2006-2013
Finland	2.0	2006-2012
Mexico	5.2	2006-2012
Belgium	1.0	2007-2010
Argentina	1.0	2007-2011
Romania	3.0	2008-2012
Iceland	2.0	2009-2013
Bulgaria	4.3	2009-2013
Croatia	2.6	2009-2011
Slovakia	4.9	2010-2012

Poland	2.6	2010- 2011
Slovenia	4.2	2012- 2012
Malta	2.7	2013- 2013

*The poll estimates produced by Japan’s national broadcaster NHK do not exclude undecideds, which inflates the error.

Drawing on findings presented in Jennings and Wlezien (2017) we can further consider the factors associated with higher or lower levels of polling accuracy, specifically as relating to political and electoral context. In Table 2 we report the mean absolute error by election type, and for legislative elections with different characteristics. Overall, the mean absolute error of polls in the final week of the 196 elections is 2.1 points. This is higher in presidential elections than in legislative elections. In legislative elections, poll errors are lower under proportional representation (PR) and where electoral rules are ‘party-centric’ rather than ‘candidate-centric’ (which heavily overlaps with PR). They are also lower in multiparty systems, i.e. where the ‘effective number of electoral parties’³² is greater than three, and for opposition parties. Significantly, each of these features of electoral and party systems is associated with smaller party size: we find that poll errors are larger for larger parties. Results from regression analysis (not reported here) indicate that party size is the most consistent predictor of poll errors in comparative perspective. This is as would be predicted by sampling theory (as noted above).

Table 2. Absolute error by political/electoral system final week polls, all elections 1942-2013

Elections	N	Mean absolute error
<u>All elections:</u>	658	2.1
<i>Election type</i>		
Presidential	162	2.5
Legislative	496	1.9
<u>Legislative elections only:</u>		
<i>Electoral system I</i>		
Proportional representation	328	1.7
Single-member district	168	2.4

³² Following Laakso and Taagepera (1979), the effective number of electoral parties (ENP) is calculated as the sum of the squared fraction of votes (V) for each party i , divided by one. That is, $ENP_e = \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^n V_i^2}$.

Electoral system II

Party-centric	305	1.7
Candidate-centric	191	2.3

Effective number of parties

≤ 3	157	2.2
> 3	339	1.8

Party size

Small (< 20%)	219	1.3
Large (≥ 20%)	277	2.4

Incumbency

Governing party	183	2.2
Opposition	307	1.8

Note: see Jennings and Wlezien (2016; 2017) for further details of these classifications.

4. The historical performance of polling in Britain, 1945-2017

It is also helpful to further consider how polls for the 2015 and 2017 general elections compare to the historical track record of polls in Britain. Table 3 reports the vote and poll shares for the Conservative and Labour parties, along with the mean net error and mean absolute error, for all elections between 1945 and 2017. From this, it is evident that 2017 was pollsters' best performance on the Conservative vote share in many years, according to both the mean absolute and net error. However, it was also the largest miss on the Labour vote share in all elections since 1945, and was unusual in under-estimating Labour support. The mean absolute error on the Conservative-Labour margin (5.3 points) was large in historical terms, but not exceptional; the error on the margin was higher in 1951, 1970, October 1974, 1992, 1997 and 2015. It was not much lower in 1983 and 2001. It is difficult to generalize from the experiences of 2015 and 2017, not least because these polling misses were very different in character. Whereas voters' preferences appear to have been relatively stable during the 2015 election campaign (at least based on the published polls), the surge in support for Labour in 2017 was unprecedented as a shift in voter preferences during the campaign in the post-war era. It should, therefore, perhaps not be surprising that pollsters struggled to measure a fast-moving target, at the same time as trying to fix the problems of 2015.

Table 3. Mean absolute error by general election, Britain 1945-2017

Vote share	Final polls	Net error	Mean absolute error
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Election	Con	Lab	Con	Lab	Con	Lab	Avg.	Con	Lab	Con- Lab margin
1945	39.3	48.8	41.0	47.0	1.7	-1.8	1.8	1.7	1.8	3.5
1950	42.9	46.8	44.5	43.8	1.6	-3.0	2.3	1.6	3.0	4.6
1951	47.8	49.4	49.8	45.3	2.0	-4.1	3.1	2.0	4.1	6.1
1955	49.2	47.4	50.6	47.4	1.4	-0.1	0.8	1.4	0.2	1.5
1959	48.8	44.6	48.6	45.5	-0.2	0.9	0.8	0.4	1.2	1.1
1964	42.9	44.8	44.3	45.8	1.4	1.0	1.5	1.4	1.5	1.4
1966	41.4	48.7	40.1	51.3	-1.3	2.6	2.1	1.5	2.6	3.9
1970	46.2	43.8	44.0	48.2	-2.2	4.4	3.3	2.3	4.4	6.5
1974 (F)	38.6	38.0	38.6	36.0	0.0	-2.0	1.7	1.3	2.0	2.6
1974 (O)	36.6	40.2	34.1	43.3	-2.5	3.1	2.8	2.5	3.1	5.6
1979	44.9	37.7	44.7	38.8	-0.2	1.1	1.0	0.7	1.3	1.6
1983	43.5	28.3	45.9	25.6	2.4	-2.7	2.6	2.4	2.7	5.1
1987	43.2	31.5	42.4	34.3	-0.8	2.8	1.9	1.0	2.8	3.6
1992	42.8	35.2	37.6	39.1	-5.2	3.9	4.6	5.2	3.9	9.2
1997	31.5	44.3	30.2	47.7	-1.3	3.4	3.1	2.3	3.8	5.6
2001	32.7	42.0	30.9	45.1	-1.8	3.1	2.5	1.9	3.1	5.0
2005	33.2	36.1	31.8	38.0	-1.4	1.9	1.7	1.4	1.9	3.3
2010	36.9	29.7	35.4	27.5	-1.5	-2.2	1.9	1.5	2.2	1.3
2015	37.8	31.2	33.6	33.5	-4.2	2.3	3.3	4.2	2.4	6.5
2017	43.5	41.0	43.5	36.0	0.0	-5.0	3.2	1.3	5.0	5.3

5. The comparative performance of polling in Britain, 2015-2017

How did the performance of the polls in Britain in 2015 and 2017 compare to polls for elections in other countries around the same period? Some commentary has been quick to label the 2016 U.S. presidential election another polling miss, and the French presidential election a great success to which Britain should look for lessons about best practice. The data tells a rather more nuanced story. Table 4 reports the mean absolute error on the poll estimates for the two leading parties or candidates in elections in Denmark, Greece, Canada, Ireland, Spain, Australia, Iceland, the U.S., France and Britain.³³ These reveal a range of poll performances – from 0.8 points in the 2016 Australian federal election to 3.6 points in the 2016 Icelandic parliamentary elections, where support for the Pirate Party was substantially over-stated by the polls. The average absolute error across these elections was 2.4 points. Note that this is precisely the same as the average error for the 1942 to 2013 period. While the average error for the 2015 and 2017 British general elections was somewhat higher at 3.3 points, and a disappointing performance for the polling industry, this could not be considered a particular outlier in comparative context. Indeed, the much lauded French polls had a higher error (some 3.9 points) on the run-off of the presidential election (although this has been argued to be due to late swing between the final debate and the election, during the period when publication of polls is banned in France).

³³ In multi-party systems, the two parties that receive the highest vote share can differ from those receiving the highest poll share in the final polls. In the cases of Denmark, Spain and Iceland we therefore consider the mean absolute error for the three largest parties.

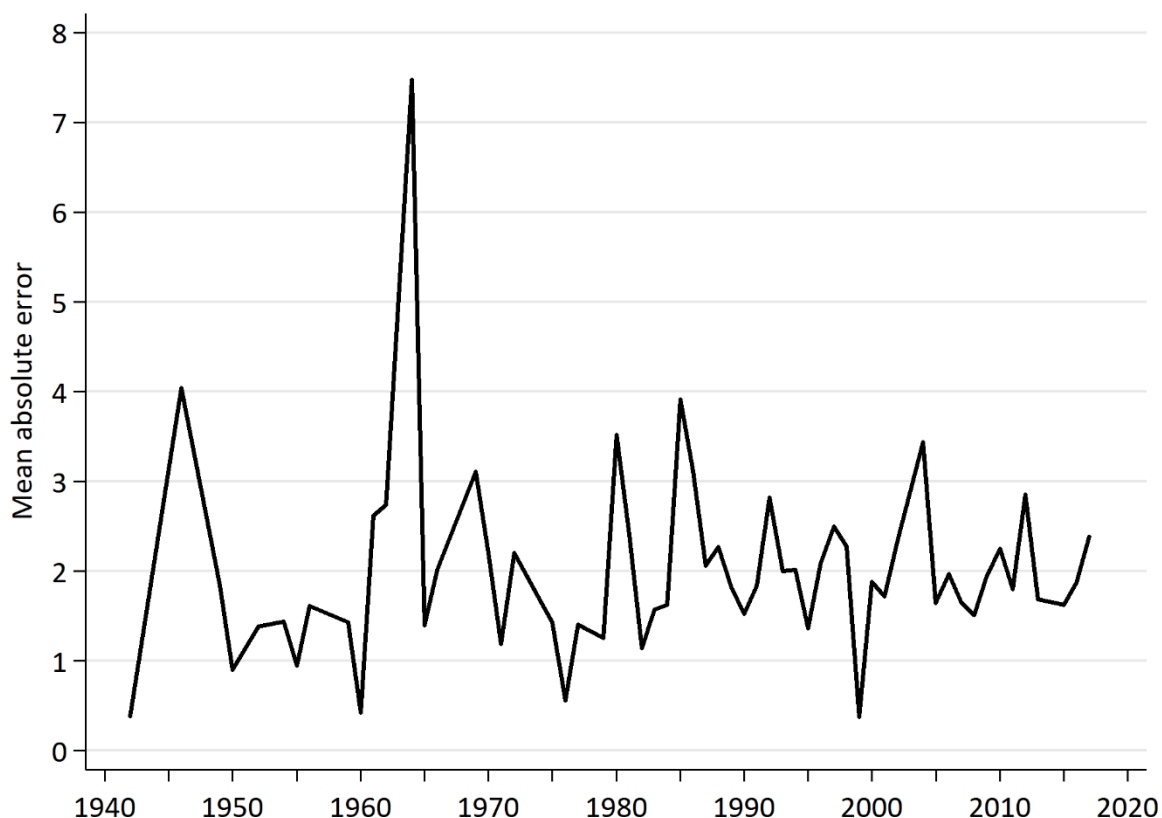
Table 4. Mean absolute error of final polls, by country, recent elections 2015-2017

Election	Year	Mean absolute error
Britain	2015	3.3
Denmark	2015	1.8
Greece	2015	3.1
Canada	2015	1.4
Ireland	2016	2.2
Spain	2016	2.7
Australia	2016	0.8
Iceland	2016	3.6
US presidential election	2016	2.6
US House of Representatives	2016	1.8
French presidential election (1 st Round)	2017	0.9
French presidential election (2 nd Round)	2017	3.9
Britain	2017	3.2

6. Polling errors over time

Recent high profile polling misses, or election surprises, have prompted claims that polling is in crisis and that polling accuracy is waning. Based on analysis presented in Jennings and Wlezien (2017) we test these claims using our dataset of 1,002 final week polls in 196 elections in 31 countries between 1942 and 2013, supplemented with 116 polls for 13 elections between 2015 and 2017 (i.e. the cases summarised in Table 4). Figure 2 plots the mean absolute error, across elections in a given year, over this 75 year period. From this, there is no discernible upward trend in polling errors in the past decade, although there are fluctuations. Further regression analysis in Jennings and Wlezien (2017) confirms that there are no significant effects of time on polling accuracy, once the features of national elections polled in a given year are controlled for. In many ways, this absence of a clear trend since at least the 1970s is remarkable given the huge changes in survey methodologies that have occurred, for example with the transition from face-to-face random sampling to telephone quota sampling to online and IVR (interactive voice response) modes.

Figure 2. Mean absolute error of final week polls, all elections 1942-2017



7. The impact of turnout adjustments on polling accuracy in the 2017 election

The final report of the British Polling Council/Market Research Council inquiry into the pre-election polls for the 2015 general election concluded that the polling error was largely due to unrepresentative samples (Sturgis et al. 2016), though it noted a number of potential weaknesses of methodologies that might impact on polling accuracy in future elections. In the 2017 election, pollsters' choice of turnout adjustment appears to have been a critical factor in the size of error on the Conservative and Labour vote share. In an article written prior to the election, 'Will turnout weighting prove to be the pollsters' Achilles heel in #GE2017?', Patrick Sturgis and I noted the substantial effects of turnout adjustments on the Conservative-Labour lead, which on average increased it by 5 points, and in some cases as much as 8 or 9 points. It was understandable that pollsters were concerned with turnout in 2017, given that Labour's support seemed to be being driven substantially by younger voters but it was widely recognised that older respondents have a greater propensity to vote. Replicating that analysis for the final polls reveals that the effect of turnout adjustments on the Conservative lead, consistent with our earlier findings, was an increase of 5 points. Without the turnout weights, the poll estimates predicted a lead of 2.6 points, just 0.1 points off the actual result. These methodological adjustments varied by pollster, with some firms using self-reported likelihood to vote to weight respondents and others using turnout probability models (based on the demographic characteristics of respondents). The average error on the lead was around 9 points for those

pollsters using turnout probability models, whereas it was just over 3 points for those using self-reported likelihood to vote. These turnout adjustments did reduce the error on the Conservative vote share, addressing the bias at previous general elections, but with the side-effect of increasing the error on the Labour vote.

While it would not be desirable to abandon attempts to better model likelihood to vote, the experience of 2017 highlights the risk of fighting the last methodological war and also that demographic patterns of turnout will not necessarily be fixed from one election to the next.

Table 5. Effects of turnout adjustments on poll estimates in the 2017 election

Pollster	Mode	Adjustment	Fieldwork	Poll estimates with weight			Poll estimate without turnout weight		
				Con (%)	Lab (%)	Con lead	Con (%)	Lab (%)	Con lead
Ipsos MORI	Phone	Self-reported	6–7 Jun	44	36	8	41	41	0
BMG	Online	Turnout probability	6–7 Jun	46	33	13	41	39	2
Survation	Phone	Self-reported	6–7 Jun	41	40	1	42	40	2
ICM	Online	Turnout probability	6–7 Jun	46	34	12	43	38	5
YouGov	Online	Self-reported	5–7 Jun	42	35	7	41	38	3
ComRes	Online	Turnout probability	5–7 Jun	44	34	10	40	39	1
Kantar Public	Online	Self-reported	1–7 Jun	43	38	5	40	39	1
SurveyMonkey	Online	None	4–6 Jun	42	38	4	42	38	4
Opinium	Online	Self-reported	4–6 Jun	43	36	7	42	37	5
<i>Mean:</i>				43.5	36.0	7.5	41.3	38.7	2.6
<i>Actual:</i>				43.5	41	2.5			

8. Conclusion

In this evidence I have sought to benchmark the performance of the British polling industry in both historical and comparative perspective. While few would suggest that 2015 and 2017 were high points for pollsters, the errors experienced have not been outside the ordinary. More widely, there is no evidence of a global crisis in polling, even if the polls periodically get it wrong. Part of the problem may be that expectations of polls are unrealistically high in terms of the accuracy they can achieve, and that there is intrinsic negativity bias in how polling errors are perceived. This is exemplified in the forensic attention given to misses (such as

Britain in 2015) and tendency to ignore those elections in which the polls were extremely close to the mark (such as Canada in 2015 and Australia in 2016). Moreover, the relative performance of the polls can be mischaracterised due to collective surprise over election results, for example with polling for the 2016 U.S. presidential election being widely viewed as a polling miss despite the error on the national vote share being quite typical, or a lack of surprise at the outcome in uncompetitive elections where the polling error was high, as was the case in the run-off for the 2016 French presidential election.

While there are admirable exceptions, the quality of discussion of polling in media and politics is poor and often lacks a basic grasp of the caution required when making inferences about public opinion based on surveys. This manifests itself in over-confident claims about 'what the public thinks', taking headline figures at face value without due thought (or more cynically exploiting poll results in search of retweets or clickbait). Polling unfortunately seems to have attracted an industry of pseudo-experts, disinterested in the nuts and bolts of survey methodology and more interested in bold predictions of the political future.

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Ron Johnston, Todd Hartman, Kelvyn Jones, David Manley, Charles Pattie and David Rossiter – Written evidence (PPD0017)

Ron Johnston, Todd Hartman, Kelvyn Jones, David Manley, Charles Pattie and David Rossiter – Written evidence (PPD0017)

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Executive Summary

- At the 2017 general election, for the first time estimates were published for the outcome in each of the 632 Parliamentary constituencies in Great Britain, by three separate organisations, using a combination of recent polling and other data: if produced for future elections, the information provided by such estimates is likely to have a substantial impact on how and where parties campaign, how the media report the ongoing campaigns, and how individuals make their voting decisions;
- These published estimates of each party's share of the votes cast, along with an estimated probability of a party winning in each seat, have been analysed to evaluate their relative success – including a comparison with a predicted outcome based on the result of the 2015 general election;
- In general, these estimates provide better predictions of the outcome across all constituencies than those based on the results of the previous election; but
- As most UK general elections are won and lost in a relatively small number of marginal constituencies the accuracy of the estimates for those seats is most important: in many cases the 2017 estimates identified trends in marginal seats that deviated from the general pattern and it is on those that methodological developments are likely to focus.

Introduction

The 2017 general election was the first for which pollsters/analysts provided estimates of each party's vote share not only for the entire country and for some subsets (Scotland only, for example, or for marginal constituencies) but separately for each constituency. Three sets of these estimates were published on the web by YouGov, Lord Ashcroft, and Chris Hanretty, with the first two being updated as more data became available until just before election day. Such detailed estimates of voting intentions, alongside estimates of the probability of a party winning each seat, are likely to be developed further and will probably play a more prominent part at future elections. They could have significant impacts on how and where parties campaign, and how not only they but also the media, individual voters and others use the information. This paper presents an initial evaluation of those first essays into constituency-level estimates.

The three sets of estimates are not based on separate, substantial polls conducted in each constituency. Two of them draw on large sets of data pooled from a number of surveys, that cover almost all constituencies, if not every one, but those data are not sufficiently representative of each constituency's electorate to provide reliable estimates of the expected outcome there. (YouGov's estimates, for

example, were based on information from 55,707 respondents across all 632 constituencies in Great Britain; the number of respondents per constituency varied between 26 and 204, with a median of 88.) To derive their constituency-level estimates, therefore, they used different statistical procedures, though with elements in common, to combine the available polling information with other survey data (such as from the British Election Study), census data and previous voting patterns.³⁴ Each methodology is briefly described on the analysts' websites, and in two cases more detailed papers are also available.³⁵

This paper provides an initial evaluation of the relative accuracy of these estimates, recognising that they were presented not as predictions of the final outcome but rather as statements of the likely outcome according to opinion poll respondents' voting intentions at the time they were surveyed.

Initial evaluations: how well did they predict the outcome?

Predicting the 2017 result in each constituency by the 2015 result

It is well-known that there is a high degree of stability and continuity in the geography of voting for the main political parties across Britain (we exclude Northern Ireland as it was not covered by the pollsters). The result – for example, the percentage voting Conservative in each constituency – at one election can be very accurately predicted by that party's performance at the previous contest in relative terms: the order of the constituencies according to that percentage hardly changes, only the absolute level (reflecting whether the party improved or not on its performance overall between the two elections.)

A simple statistical test of the predictability of the outcome in 2017 across the 631 British constituencies (i.e. excluding Buckingham, which the main parties did not contest) is to regress the 2017 vote share for each party against that in 2015. The squared correlation coefficient (r^2) associated with that regression equation indicates its relative success: the closer its value is to 1.0, the more successful the prediction – i.e. the greater the proportion of the variation across constituencies in 2017 that can be 'statistically explained' by the variation in 2015. (Again, this is in relative terms: it assesses how successfully the order of constituencies in 2015 predicts the order in 2017.) Alongside this we use the RMSE statistic as a measure of the 'failure rate': the larger its value the greater the spread of points around the regression line.

The regressions for the three largest parties contesting all 631 seats across Great Britain are:

³⁴ YouGov and Ashcroft were able to update their polls regularly until just before election day, whereas Hanretty, without access to such polls, had to rely more on 'historical' data.

³⁵ For YouGov, see <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2017/05/31/yougovs-election-model/>; for Ashcroft, see the link to the methodological note at the end of <http://lordashcrofthpolls.com/2017/06/estimated-conservative-majority-rises-final-ashcroft-model-update/#more-15319>; and for Hanretty, see <http://electionforecast.co.uk/> and his blogs on medium.com (e.g. <https://medium.com/@chrishanretty/election-forecasts-outside-the-forbidden-zone-d2119c41ede9> and <https://medium.com/@chrishanretty/winner-winner-chicken-dinner-b916155d847b>).

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$$\text{Conservative VotePerCent}_{2017} = 10.03 + 0.89 (+/-0.06) * \text{VotePerCent}_{2015} \quad r^2 = 0.86 \text{ (RMSE 5.68)}$$

$$\text{Labour VotePerCent}_{2017} = 8.35 + 1.04 (+/-0.01) * \text{VotePerCent}_{2015} \quad r^2 = 0.94 \text{ (RMSE 4.53)}$$

$$\text{LibDem VotePerCent}_{2017} = -0.26 + 0.96 (+/-0.02) * \text{VotePerCent}_{2015} \quad r^2 = 0.82 \text{ (RMSE 3.80)}$$

The geography of the 2015 result thus very successfully predicts the geography of the 2017 contest for Labour (a 94 per cent success rate!), slightly less so for the Conservatives and even less for the Liberal Democrats. (The smaller RMSE for the Liberal Democrats than the other two parties is because in most of the constituencies they obtained less than 20 per cent of the votes at both elections and the tight fit of most of those points to the regression line has a substantial impact on the RMSE calculation; the relatively few constituencies with larger Liberal Democrat vote shares have a relatively small impact. Comparison of the Liberal Democrats' RMSEs with those of the other parties has little value, therefore, but comparison of the RMSE for different estimates of the Liberal Democrats' performance is valid.) The graphs in Figure 1 show the difference between the three very clearly; there is a much tighter fit around the regression line (i.e. the best-fit straight line to all 631 constituencies) for Labour vote than for the other two and the geography of support for the Liberal Democrats was most variable across the two elections.

We have also analysed Scotland's constituencies separately, with the results.³⁶

$$\text{Conservative VotePerCent}_{2017} = 11.09 + 1.15 (+/-0.08) * \text{VotePerCent}_{2015} \quad r^2 = 0.80 \text{ (RMSE 4.91)}$$

$$\text{Labour VotePerCent}_{2017} = 3.86 + 0.97 (+/-0.06) * \text{VotePerCent}_{2015} \quad r^2 = 0.85 \text{ (RMSE 4.35)}$$

$$\text{LibDem VotePerCent}_{2017} = 0.85 + 0.80 (+/-0.05) * \text{VotePerCent}_{2015} \quad r^2 = 0.80 \text{ (RMSE 4.68)}$$

$$\text{SNP VotePerCent}_{2017} = 8.13 + 0.58 (+/-0.05) * \text{VotePerCent}_{2015} \quad r^2 = 0.73 \text{ (RMSE 2.53)}$$

There the r^2 rates were much smaller: over one-quarter of the variation in the SNP's support across the 59 constituencies in 2017 could not be accounted for by the pattern just two years previously in 2015. So could the pollsters do better?

The analysts' predictions

³⁶ These are standard linear regression equations. The first value (the constant term – 11.09 in the first equation) is the average value for the dependent variable (named to the left of the = sign; the vertical axis on the graphs) when the independent variable (named to the right of the = sign; the horizontal axis on the graphs) has a value of zero. The second value (the regression coefficient – 1.15 in the first equation) is the value by which the value of the independent variable is multiplied; when added to the constant term, this gives the predicted value. (The value within brackets (the standard error – 0.08 in the first equation) is the standard error of the prediction: 65% of all predicted values lie within this range around the predicted value.

If the three analysts' constituency estimates have value, therefore, they need to 'out-predict' those results (i.e. have smaller 'failure rates'), otherwise we get no greater value from them than by merely looking at the result last time and using the changing national state of the parties to estimate whether a party's share of the vote in each constituency will increase or decrease. We have thus regressed each forecaster's estimates for the three parties that contested all of the British seats against the actual outcome.

1. YouGov

Conservative $\text{VotePerCent}_{2017} = -3.50 + 1.15 (+/-0.01) * \text{Predict}$ $r^2 = 0.94$
(RMSE 3.89)

Labour $\text{VotePerCent}_{2017} = -3.93 + 1.16 (+/-0.01) * \text{Predict}$ $r^2 = 0.96$
(RMSE 3.64)

LibDem $\text{VotePerCent}_{2017} = -1.47 + 1.01 (+/-0.01) * \text{Predict}$ $r^2 = 0.95$
(RMSE 2.03)

YouGov's r^2 values were much higher than those reported above – for each around 95 per cent of the variation in the 2017 result was captured by the pollster's estimates – and the 'failure rates' (RMSEs) much smaller than those for the estimations of the 2017 outcome from the 2015 result.

2. Ashcroft

Conservative $\text{VotePerCent}_{2017} = -3.76 + 1.06 (+/-0.01) * \text{Predict}$ $r^2 = 0.95$
(RMSE 3.60)

Labour $\text{VotePerCent}_{2017} = -2.13 + 1.21 (+/-0.01) * \text{Predict}$ $r^2 = 0.95$
(RMSE 4.07)

LibDem $\text{VotePerCent}_{2017} = -3.99 + 1.32 (+/-0.02) * \text{Predict}$ $r^2 = 0.88$
(RMSE 3.07)

Ashcroft also performed better than the 2015 result in predicting the 2017 outcome for all three parties – again with much smaller RMSE rates for each party than those related to the regressions shown in Figure 1.

3. Hanretty

Conservative $\text{VotePerCent}_{2017} = 3.00 + 0.92 (+/-0.02) * \text{Predict}$ $r^2 = 0.84$
(RMSE 6.24)

Labour $\text{VotePerCent}_{2017} = 0.64 + 1.22 (+/-0.01) * \text{Predict}$ $r^2 = 0.93$
(RMSE 4.78)

LibDem $\text{VotePerCent}_{2017} = -2.13 + 1.12 (+/-0.02) * \text{Predict}$ $r^2 = 0.84$
(RMSE 3.58)

Hanretty's predictions were weaker than the 2015 result for the Conservatives and Labour, but slightly better for the Liberal Democrats – the only party for which there was a reduction in the RMSE rate.

In general, therefore, the pollsters' estimates of the outcome were an improvement over a reliance on the previous election result – their polling was clearly picking up local variations in changing support for the parties that a global view could not. But their estimates were not perfect! Not only did the regression lines imperfectly fit the distributions (i.e. the r^2 values were less than 1.00) but in addition in many cases they consistently either over- or under-predicted a party's share of the votes. (YouGov under-predicted the Conservative and Labour shares in many more constituencies than it over-predicted them, for example – Figure 2; Ashcroft under-predicted the Labour share in almost all constituencies – Figure 3; and Hanretty did the same for Labour whereas for the Liberal Democrats he under-predicted their performance in many of the seats where their vote share exceeded 20 per cent but over-predicted it in most of those where it was less than 10 per cent.) These patterns, despite the high r^2 values, mean it is necessary to examine further the precision of the estimates against the actual outcome.

Where did they get it wrong?

A quick way of answering that is to look at the graphs in Figures 2-4 showing each set of estimates against the actual outcome. The diagonal line in each graph indicates the situation where the estimated and actual values are the same – i.e. if a constituency falls directly on the line the estimate is correct.

For YouGov the three graphs show a very similar pattern, which is particularly marked for the Conservative and Labour parties. In general, their performances were under-estimated, however; there are more points above than below the diagonal line. In particular, at the right-hand end of the graph (i.e. those constituencies where the party gained an above-average share of the votes cast) nearly all of the constituencies are placed above that line: in virtually every constituency where a party was strong (i.e. gained 40 per cent or more of the votes cast) YouGov under-estimated how well the Conservatives and Labour would perform. Their performance was under-estimated where it was strong and was also more likely to be over-estimated where it was relatively weak. YouGov over-estimated the Liberal Democrats' performance in nearly every seat where it gained less than 20 per cent of the votes cast.

Ashcroft largely under-estimated the Conservatives' performance, with more constituencies below than above the diagonal (Figure 3), but, unlike the situation for YouGov, the over- and under-estimates were not concentrated in particular areas of the graph. For Labour, on the other hand, the outcome was substantially under-estimated in all but a small number of constituencies (with the latter almost entirely those where Labour got less than 20 per cent of the votes). Although the correlation coefficient (r^2) associated with the regression reported above was large, therefore, suggesting that Ashcroft got Labour's relative performance across the 631 seats approximately right, the estimates were not very accurate in an absolute sense: the constituencies were placed in the right general order, but the absolute levels were out. For the Liberal Democrats, the pattern of Ashcroft's estimates was very similar to YouGov's.

In many ways, the graphs of Hanretty's estimates against the actual outcome are very similar to Ashcroft's (Figure 4). There are no areas of the graph where the estimates of the Conservatives' performance are concentrated either above or below the diagonal line – although the spread of the points is much wider than Ashcroft's, reflecting the lower correlation (r^2). As with Ashcroft, Hanretty substantially under-estimated Labour's performance in most constituencies, and the pattern of his predictions for the Liberal Democrats are very similar to both YouGov's and Ashcroft's.

Given the importance of the SNP's changed performance from 2015 to the overall outcome of the 2017 election in Scotland, Figure 5 separately graphs each analyst's estimates for the 59 constituencies there against the actual outcome. None was very successful; all were more likely to over- rather than under-estimate the SNP's performance – Ashcroft only under-estimated it in two seats. The r^2 values for estimating the SNP vote across the 59 constituencies were: YouGov, 0.67; Ashcroft, 0.71; Hanretty, 0.63, each of which was worse than that for the regression of the 2017 result on that in 2015, which was 0.73. (For estimating the Conservative performance, the r^2 values were: YouGov, 0.91; Ashcroft, 0.87; Hanretty, 0.84; and the 2015 result, 0.80. For Labour the four values were, respectively, 0.92, 0.87, 0.87 and 0.85. And for the Liberal Democrats, they were 0.96, 0.87, 0.85 and 0.80.) The pollsters were least successful in Scotland in estimating the vote shares for the largest party!

Getting the margins right

Most elections are won and lost in a relatively small number of constituencies – the marginal seats, most of which are targeted by the two main contestants there for especially intensive campaigns both on the ground and through a variety of remote media. In 2017, outside Scotland virtually all marginal seats involved Conservative-Labour contests, with the Liberal Democrats and other parties occupying poor third and lower places, so the analyses here focus on the estimated and actual margin (in percentage points of the votes cast) between the Labour and Conservative parties.

Figure 6 shows the regression between the Labour-Conservative margin in 2015 and the same value in 2017 (a positive value indicates a Labour lead over the Conservatives, and a negative value shows the reverse situation). Although the overall fit is very good ($r^2 = 0.92$), indicating that in general the relative margin between the two parties was very similar in each constituency at the two contests, the goodness-of-fit was weakest where the gap between the two parties was smallest – i.e. around the intersection of the lines where the margin at each date was zero. Where the margin was wide – favouring either Labour (at the right-hand end of the graph) or the Conservatives (the left-hand end, with the negative values) – there was little change between the two elections; the points are clustered close to the regression line. But where the gap was small in 2015 estimates of its size in 2017 were less accurate – the spread of values around the line is widest near the central point.

So were the analysts any better at estimating those margins? Figure 7 suggests that at least two were, with closer fits around the regression lines: for both YouGov

and Ashcroft $r^2 = 0.96$; for Hanretty, however, it was 0.90. In addition, there was no bulge in the spread of points where the margin was tightest on either the YouGov or the Ashcroft graph. The analysts' methods enabled them to predict changed margins well – although all three in general under-predicted the margins (with more points above rather than below the diagonal line). In general, YouGov under-predicted Labour's winning margins in the seats where it had a substantial lead over the Conservatives, and under-predicted the Conservatives' lead over Labour in the seats where Labour performed badly. (This is a common feature of YouGov's estimates, especially with regard to Labour. It under-predicts support where the party performs well but over-predicts it where the party does badly. Much research has shown that there is an important geographic pattern to voting in the UK that accounts for this – parties tend to do better than expected, according to a constituency's population composition, where they are strong and less well than expected where they are weak. YouGov's estimates apparently do not incorporate this tendency.)

The ultimate test: getting the winners right

If the analysts' estimates of the election outcome are to be of value – to the electorates, to the commentariat, and indeed to the parties (especially local parties who lack the resources to conduct their own polls and have to rely on their canvassing estimates, which are usually biased in their favour because they tend to concentrate their efforts in areas where their support is traditionally strong) – then they need to get not only the margins but also the expected winners right. Did they?

Table 1 shows each analyst's estimated winners (the rows) against the actual outcome (the columns) for all 631 constituencies. YouGov performed best, getting the result right in 589 cases (93.3%), compared to 554 (87.8%) and 540 (85.6%) for Ashcroft and Hanretty respectively. All three substantially over-estimated the number of seats the SNP would win, and both Ashcroft and Hanretty expected the Conservatives to win substantially more seats than they did – 38 more by Ashcroft and 50 by Hanretty. (These over-estimates were only partly countered by the under-estimates; the Conservatives won nine seats that Ashcroft allocated to other parties, and thirteen were similarly allocated by Hanretty.)

And did they get it right where it most mattered, in the marginal seats? Figure 8 focuses on the Labour-Conservative marginals (those won by one of the two over the other by less than ten percentage points in 2015), showing the estimated and actual outcomes. For YouGov most of the seats are shown as either red (correct Labour predictions) or blue (correct Conservative predictions). Labour was only estimated to win four seats where the Conservative candidate was successful (shown in green), and all but one of those was very marginal. YouGov's main failure was the in number of seats shown in orange (most of them won by the Conservatives in 2015) that it wrongly expected Labour to win in 2017. Both Ashcroft and Hanretty wrongly estimated that the Conservatives would win a substantial number of those Labour-Conservative marginals but which turned out to be Labour victories.

For Scotland, where many constituencies were won/lost by small margins, Figure 9 shows the SNP's winning/losing margins in 2015 and 2017. Each of the analysts

correctly estimated all of the seats that the SNP won in 2017 – those above the horizontal zero line (an unsurprising result given that the SNP won 56 of the 59 seats in 2015 and remained the largest party in Scotland in 2017). However, each also estimated that the SNP would win many of those below the line, but which it lost; they picked the seats won but not many of those lost.

But how much variability is allowed for?

Because each set of estimates is based on statistical modelling there is an error term associated with each value – the expected percentage voting, say, for the Conservatives in constituency X is $Y \pm e$, where e is the error term; those error terms are shown in the graphs for each constituency on YouGov's website and indicate the uncertainty associated with many of its vote share estimates. The error terms for two of the parties may overlap in a particular constituency – for example, party A is estimated to get more votes than B , but the model cannot be sure that will be the case; B might outvote A . To deal with this, both Ashcroft and Hanretty published an estimated probability that each party will win in each seat; YouGov also generated such probabilities but did not publish them – however, they have made them available to us, and we have analysed them here.³⁷

The three graphs in Figure 10 illustrate these probabilities. The first has the Ashcroft estimates of the Conservative vote percentage in each constituency on the horizontal axis and the estimated percentage probability of the Conservatives winning that seat on the vertical axis (ranging from 0 – certain not to win there – to 100 – certain to win there). The actual winner is also shown. Clearly where the estimated Conservative vote share exceeded 50 per cent the estimated probability of the party winning there was also high (i.e. greater than 80), and in most cases the Conservatives did win. Where the estimated Conservative vote share was between 40-50 per cent, the probability of winning there was less, and in general the lower that probability the greater the chance that another party (in most cases Labour) was the ultimate victor. The Conservatives won in only a small number of constituencies where the Ashcroft model's estimated probability of success was less than 50.

The second graph shows the comparable situation for Hanretty's estimates of the probability of a Labour victory. (In this the apparent small number of Conservative-won seats – i.e. the blue dots – is because for some three-quarters of them Hanretty gave a probability of zero and these overlap at the foot of the graph.) In all but a few cases, Labour won the seats where Hanretty's estimated probability of that occurring exceeded 50, but there was in addition a substantial number of Labour victories where the estimate was less than 50. Labour won a substantial number of seats where Hanretty was fairly unsure that would be the case (and even some where his estimated probability was zero.).

The final graph shows YouGov's estimates for the Conservative party. In the great majority of constituencies where the estimate of the Conservative vote share was greater than 40 per cent and the probability of a Conservative victory greater than 50 (i.e. the Conservatives were more likely than not to win the seat), the Conservatives elected the MP there and just a small number of seats was won by

³⁷ We are grateful to Prof. Ben Lauderdale for providing these data.

either Labour or Liberal Democrat candidates. Against that, there was a larger number of seats where the estimated probability of the Conservatives winning there was less than 50, but nevertheless they were victorious – including a few where the estimated probability was close to 20.

Table 2 summarises the patterns shown on those graphs – and those for the other parties not displayed here.³⁸ The probabilities of victory have been reduced to six groups and for each party the number of seats won and lost in each group is shown. Very clearly, the more confident the analyst was that a party would win a seat, the greater the likelihood that it actually did; the ratio of seats won to lost declined down the rows. (For the Conservatives, for example, Ashcroft got every seat right where the probability of victory was 100 and was wrong in only 4 of the 136 where the probability was between 90 and 99; where the probability was between 50 and 74, on the other hand, the Conservatives won only 16 of the 47 seats. Of the three, YouGov was most successful in its estimates of both a Conservative and a Liberal Democrat victory – every seat given a probability of a Conservative win 75 or over was correctly estimated, for example – but Ashcroft and Hanretty were both slightly more successful at estimating a Labour win.)

Statistical modelling is not deterministic; it does not produce (or very rarely does) precise estimates – such as the probability of a party winning X per cent of the votes in a constituency and electing the MP there. Instead it produces probabilistic estimates, allowing for a specified level of variation around the estimated value – reflecting, among other things, the partial nature of the data available for making the required estimate and the uncertainty in the modelled values. What these analyses of these estimates show is that the greater the certainty that the estimate is correct – e.g. the probability that a party will win a particular seat – the greater the certainty that it did.

Picking the seats that would change hands

Elections are won and lost in the marginal constituencies, so the most stringent test of these estimates is whether they correctly identify those seats that might change hands among the marginal constituencies targeted by the parties. To evaluate that, we look at the estimated probabilities of each party winning there.

For Ashcroft, the first graph in Figure 11 shows, on the horizontal axis, the size of the Conservative majority in 2015 for seats where it was less than 20 percentage points, with Ashcroft's estimated probability of Labour winning each seat on the vertical axis; the actual winner in 2017 is shown by the colour of the dots. Although some of the seats that Labour won from the Conservatives have a higher estimated probability of it doing so than for those which the Conservatives won again, in others the estimated probability of a Labour gain in seats that it did win was less than that for seats that Labour failed to win. Ashcroft did give a relatively high estimated probability for Labour to win Battersea (the outlying red dot in the upper right of the graph) where it unexpectedly overturned a Conservative majority of over 15 percentage points; he also gave a relatively high probability that Labour would win Canterbury, where the Conservative majority in 2015 was

³⁸ Ashcroft produced no estimates of the probability of either the Green Party or UKIP winning a seat. Hanretty produced a small number of estimates for UKIP: the largest was a probability of 34, in Clacton.

over 18 points (This is the red dot in the bottom right of the graph.) Ashcroft's polling and modelling was sufficient to identify those outliers from the general trend; nevertheless, in both cases the probability of a Labour win was less than 50 (less than 20 in the case of Canterbury). Indeed, Ashcroft gave Labour a more than 50 per cent chance of winning in only three of those Conservative-held marginal seats, when it actually won 23. This is clarified in the next graph in Figure 11, which shows the probabilities of both Conservative and Labour success there. Most of the red dots are concentrated in the upper left part of the diagonal – i.e. Ashcroft gave higher probabilities of Labour success in the seats that Labour won – but in almost all cases his estimate of a Labour victory was much less than 50. He correctly identified the seats most likely to change hands, but was not very sure that they would.

As the first graph in Figure 12 shows, the Conservatives successfully gained only six of the Labour-held constituencies won by margins of less than 20 points in 2015, and in four of them – not the most marginal – Ashcroft's probability of their success there was greater than 60 – and for the other two it was just under 50. This apparent success, however, must be set against the larger number of seats – 15 – retained by Labour although Ashcroft's estimate of a Conservative victory exceeded 50 (i.e. a Conservative victory was more likely than a Labour success). The second graph in Figure 12 shows that Ashcroft picked the particularly strong trend towards the Conservatives in Northeast Derbyshire, Middlesbrough South & Cleveland East, Walsall North, and Copeland (where the Conservatives won a by-election in February 2017) – though less so in Stoke-on-Trent South – but overall his estimates were too optimistic, reflecting the expected Conservative victory overall according to his polls.

Hanretty's overall analyses also indicated a Conservative-majority victory in the election and so his constituency estimates had very few of the Conservative-held marginal seats likely to change hands. The first graph in Figure 13 shows that in all but seven his estimated probability of a Labour victory was below 50, and in the great majority it was below 20; of the seven, three were very marginal seats that Labour did win, but the other four had Conservative majorities of over 10 percentage points in 2015 and all were won again in 2017. (All four were in Wales.) And in the Labour-held marginals – the second graph in Figure 13 – Hanretty had an estimated probability of 50 or more that all of the seats with a majority of less than 5 points in 2015 would be won by the Conservatives (only two were).

Finally, the first graph in Figure 14 shows YouGov's estimated probabilities of a Labour victory in Conservative marginal seats. Most of those with a probability greater than 50 were indeed won by Labour, as were four where the probability was just under 50; however, in fourteen cases a Labour victory got a probability of 50 or more but the Conservatives retained the seat. The second graph shows the probability of a Conservative victory in Labour-held marginals. Only three seats had a probability over 50 and the Conservatives indeed won two of those; in four others, however, an anticipated Labour victory was a Conservative gain (with probabilities below 20 in two of the cases).

What about the Bookies?

Opinion pollsters were not the only people assessing the likely outcome in each constituency before the election – bookmakers were too and the OddsChecker website gave their estimate of the likelihood of a party winning each seat. We have translated these into probability odds (i.e. ranging from 0 to 100 as above) and summarise the estimates' success in Table 2. As with the three pollsters, where they were very certain that a party would win a seat it almost certainly did, and for the Conservatives the less the certainty the greater the likelihood that another party would win there. But for Labour even where the estimated probability was fairly low (but above 39) nevertheless the seat saw a Labour victory.

A post-election check

One of the features of the last two general elections has been the accuracy of the exit poll conducted for BBC/ITV News/Sky News with regard to each party's number of seats in the next Parliament. Unlike the opinion polls, this records the votes of a representative sample of those who actually voted on the day, modified to take postal voting into account, and those data are then used to model the likely outcome in each constituency. We have been given access to those data,³⁹ which include both an estimate of each party's share of the vote in every constituency and the probability of it winning there.

Those probabilities have been grouped in the same way as those for the Ashcroft and Hanretty estimates, and the bottom segment of Table 2 shows the number of seats won and lost by each party according to the exit poll expectations. As with the Ashcroft and Hanretty analyses, in almost every case where the estimate was certain – a probability of 100 – the expected party won. There were two exceptions for the Conservatives – Eastbourne was won by the Liberal Democrats and Vale of Clwyd by Labour; there was just one for Labour, which was expected to win in Mansfield but the Conservative overturned its 11-point majority there in 2015; and the Liberal Democrats lost Ceredigion to Plaid Cymru. (The exit poll did correctly predict the Liberal Democrats' success in Westmorland & Lonsdale, East Dunbartonshire, Edinburgh West, and Orkney & Shetland, however; Ashcroft failed to predict any of those with any certainty, and Hanretty only got Orkney & Shetland correct, with a probability of slightly less than 100.)

In general, as with the other pollsters, the less certain the exit poll was that a party would win a seat the greater the likelihood that it did not. But there were nineteen seats which the Conservatives were not expected to win – probabilities of 39 or less – where they were successful, including six in Scotland; and there were similarly eighteen where Labour won against expectations (including its four Scottish victories).

Conclusions

The estimated constituency outcomes produced and published by YouGov, Lord Ashcroft and Chris Hanretty substantially increased the amount of information available before the 2017 general election. Such exercises are likely to be repeated, and probably replicated by others, at future elections, when

³⁹ With thanks to Prof. Colin Rallings.

improvements in data collection and statistical modelling will probably lead to greater accuracy in their estimates.

This paper has not presented a detailed evaluation of the accuracy of their estimates – not least because those estimates had error terms associated with them and at least two of the pollsters (as well as those who conducted the exit poll) presented their estimates of which party would win each seat probabilistically. The main task for those developing the methods is therefore to see whether those probabilities can be improved – whether their estimates can be more certain. The results of this evaluation point to certain issues. For example, the general under-prediction of Labour’s performance across most constituencies suggests one or both of the following:

- The polls on which the estimates were based under-stated support for Labour, and this may have been exacerbated by an under-estimate of turnout by Labour supporters, especially among younger voters; and
- The swing towards Labour in the later stages of the campaign may have been under-played in the modelling, reflecting the amount of weight given to the polls conducted closest to election day.

The nature of the British first-past-the-post electoral system makes such estimation difficult. This is exemplified by the situation in Scotland. Not only was the substantial drop in support for the SNP there under-estimated – leading to the party’s number of seats being over-estimated – but the closeness of the outcome in many constituencies meant that estimating whether the SNP would hold the seat or not was extremely difficult.

At any election using the first-past-the-post electoral system the outcome in a substantial number of the constituencies is not in doubt (save in exceptional circumstances such as the surge in the SNP vote between 2010 and 2015 across the whole of Scotland); attention thus focuses on the marginal constituencies where the parties and their candidates campaign and canvass intensively and where victory or defeat is likely to have a strong influence on the overall outcome. In these seats, not surprisingly, the pollsters’ estimates were most equivocal: their data allowed them to identify where the major shifts were occurring among the marginal (and some of the non-marginal) seats, but their estimate of which party was most likely to win there was strongly coloured by their overall estimate of the vote shares that the parties would gain. Since those local estimates are of greatest interest to the political parties and their candidates, and to the media, it is on them that further development of the estimating methods will undoubtedly be concentrated.

Table 1. Predicted and actual number of seats won

YouGov							
Predicted/Actual	C	L	LD	SNP	PC	G	Σ
Conservative	294	5	4	1	0	0	304

Ron Johnston, Todd Hartman, Kelvyn Jones, David Manley, Charles Pattie and David Rossiter – Written evidence (PPD0017)

Labour	17	251	0	0	1	0	269
Liberal Democrat	0	0	7	0	1	0	8
SNP	6	6	1	34	0	0	47
PC	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
Green	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Σ	317	262	12	35	4	1	631

Ashcroft

Predicted/Actual	C	L	LD	SNP	PC	G	Σ
Conservative	307	40	7	1	0	0	355
Labour	2	212	0	0	2	1	217
Liberal Democrat	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
SNP	7	6	4	34	0	0	51
PC	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Green	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tie	1	4	0	0	1	0	6
Σ	317	262	12	35	4	1	631

Hanretty

Predicted/Actual	C	L	LD	SNP	PC	G	Σ
Conservative	303	55	8	1	0	0	367
Labour	5	199	0	0	0	1	205
Liberal Democrat	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
SNP	8	6	3	34	0	0	51
PC	0	0	0	0	3	0	3
Green	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tie	1	2	0	0	0	0	3
Σ	317	262	12	35	4	1	631

Key to parties: C – Conservative; L – Labour; LD – Liberal Democrat; SNP – Scottish National Party; PC – Plaid Cymru; G – Green.

Table 2. Seats won (W) and lost (L) according to the estimated percentage probabilities of a party winning there

Probability	Conservative		Labour		LD		SNP		PC	
	W	L	W	L	W	L	W	L	W	L
<i>Ashcroft</i>										
100	130	0	55	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
90-99	132	4	81	0	0	0	24	2	0	0
75-89	29	13	32	1	0	0	7	5	0	0
50-74	16	31	48	3	1	0	3	10	0	0
40-49	6	17	19	1	1	1	1	2	0	0
<39	4	250	27	365	10	619	0	5	4	36
<i>Hanretty</i>										
100	241	2	116	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
90-99	46	27	41	0	1	1	20	4	1	0
75-89	9	17	19	4	0	0	9	7	1	0
50-74	8	18	24	1	1	0	3	6	1	0
40-49	1	8	6	1	0	3	1	3	0	0
<39	12	243	56	364	10	616	0	4	1	36
<i>YouGov</i>										
100	193	0	173	0	1	0	5	0	0	0
90-99	55	0	48	4	4	0	23	5	0	0
75-89	24	0	15	4	2	1	4	5	1	0
50-74	20	11	15	11	0	0	2	3	1	0
40-49	6	4	5	4	1	3	1	0	0	0
<39	19	300	6	347	4	616	0	11	2	36
<i>OddsChecker</i>										
100	203	1	40	0	0	0	4	0	0	0
90-99	71	12	74	0	0	0	25	5	0	0
75-89	28	14	42	0	1	1	1	2	3	0
50-74	6	43	35	1	5	3	3	8	0	0
40-49	4	13	21	0	1	2	2	2	0	0
<39	6	229	52	369	5	614	0	7	1	36
<i>Exit Poll</i>										
100	228	2	205	1	4	1	10	0	0	0
90-99	35	9	17	5	1	1	10	2	3	0
75-89	11	6	2	6	2	1	5	3	0	0
50-74	16	4	17	14	0	3	3	2	0	0
40-49	8	9	3	4	0	2	2	3	0	0
<39	19	285	18	340	5	612	5	14	1	36

Figure 1. Estimating the 2017 outcome for each party (percentage of the votes cast in each constituency) from its 2015 result

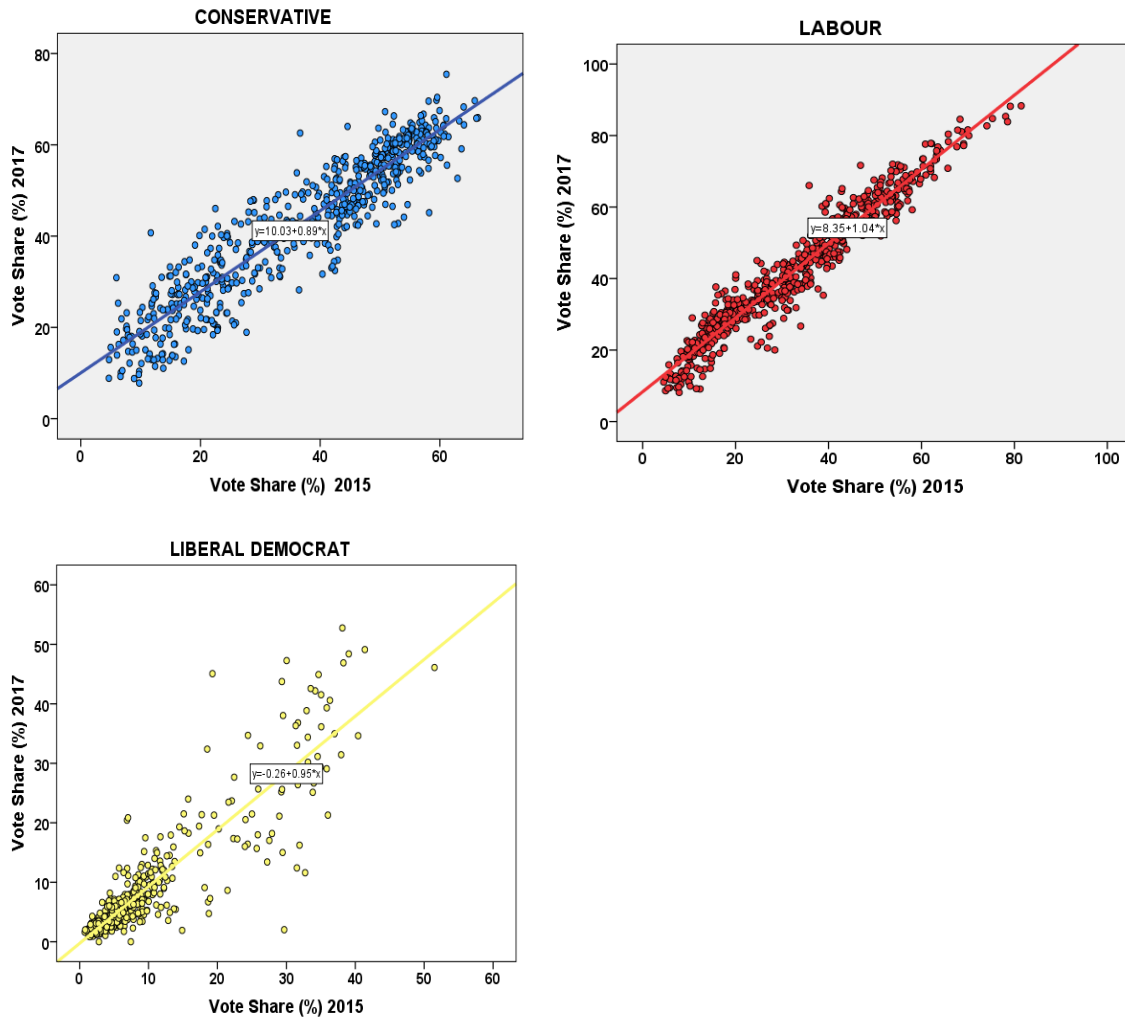


Figure 2. YouGov's estimates and the actual pattern of votes

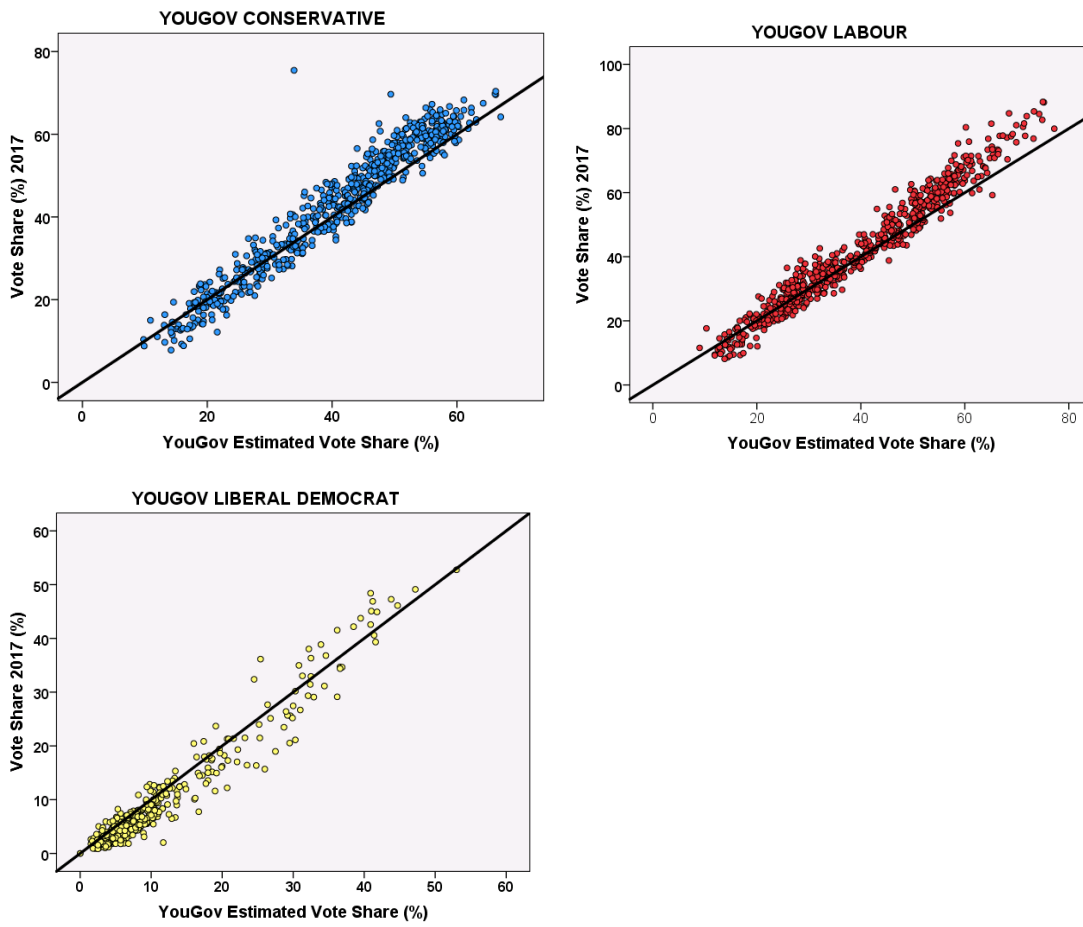


Figure 3. Ashcroft's estimates and the actual pattern of votes

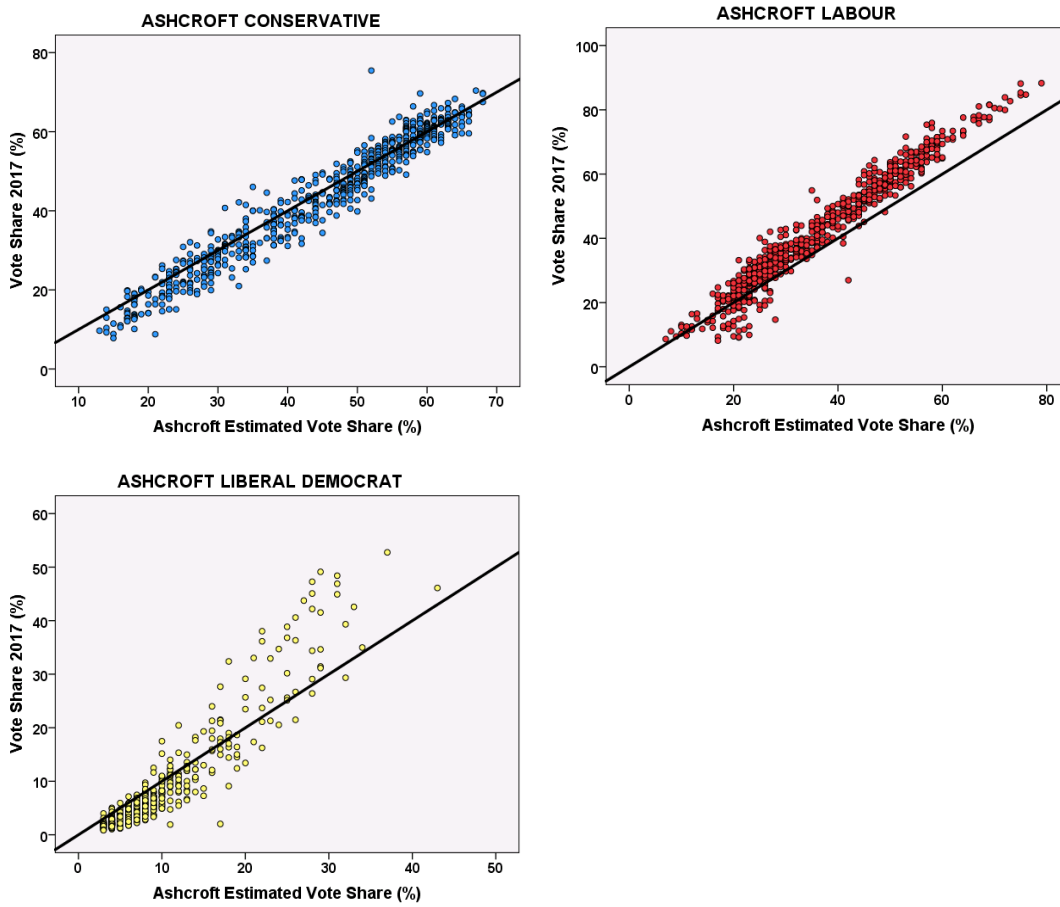


Figure 4. Hanretty's estimates and the actual pattern of votes

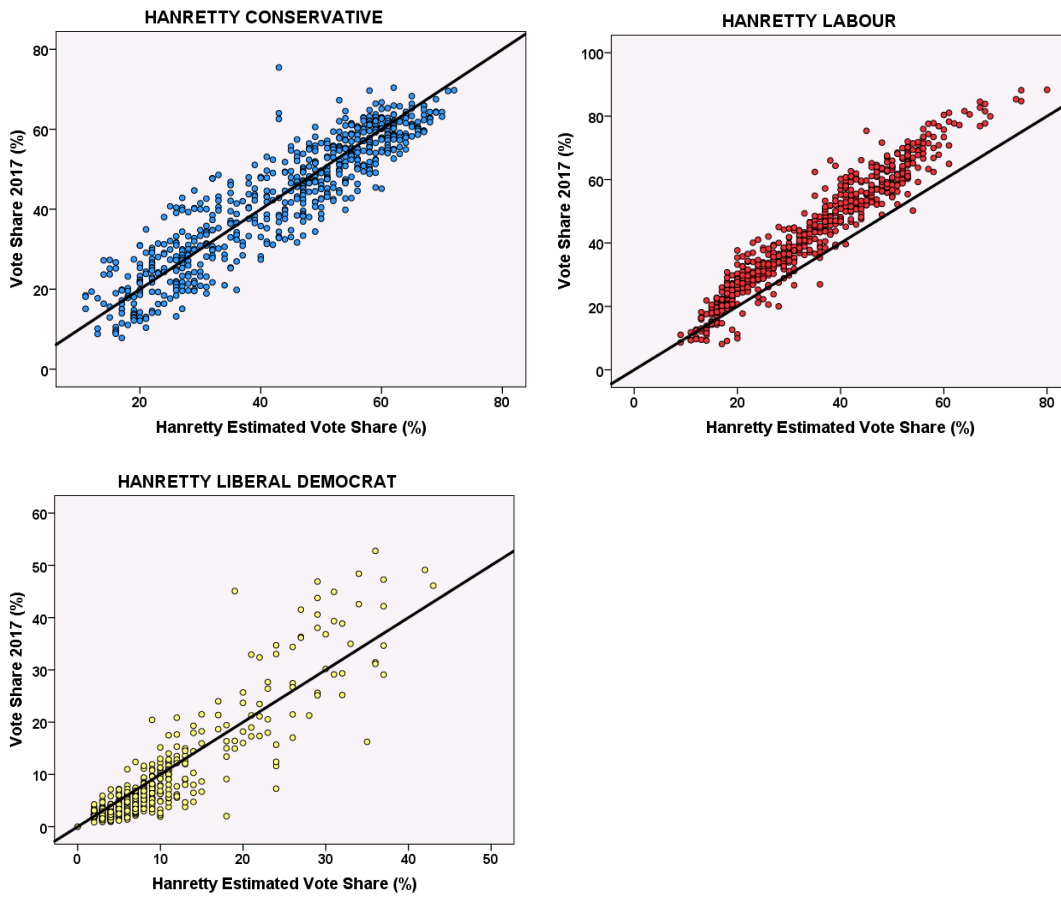


Figure 5. Estimates of the SNP's performance and the actual pattern of votes

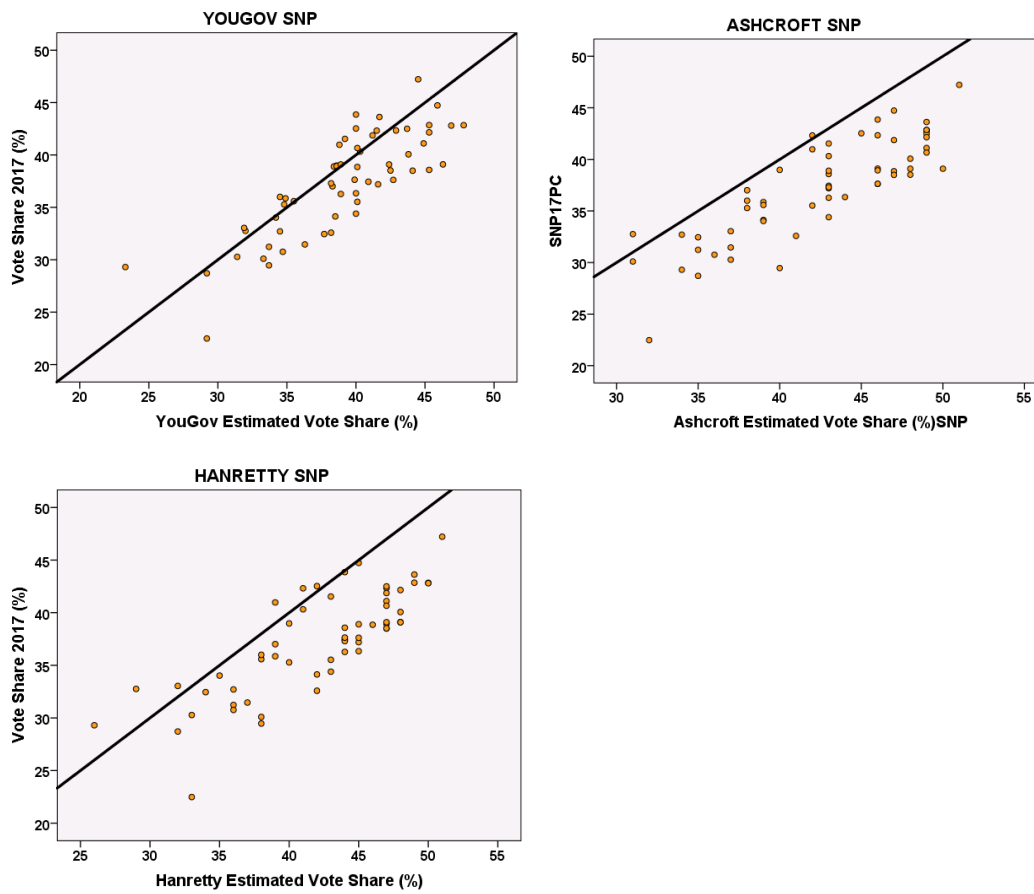


Figure 6. Estimating the Labour-Conservative margin in 2017 from the 2015 outcome.

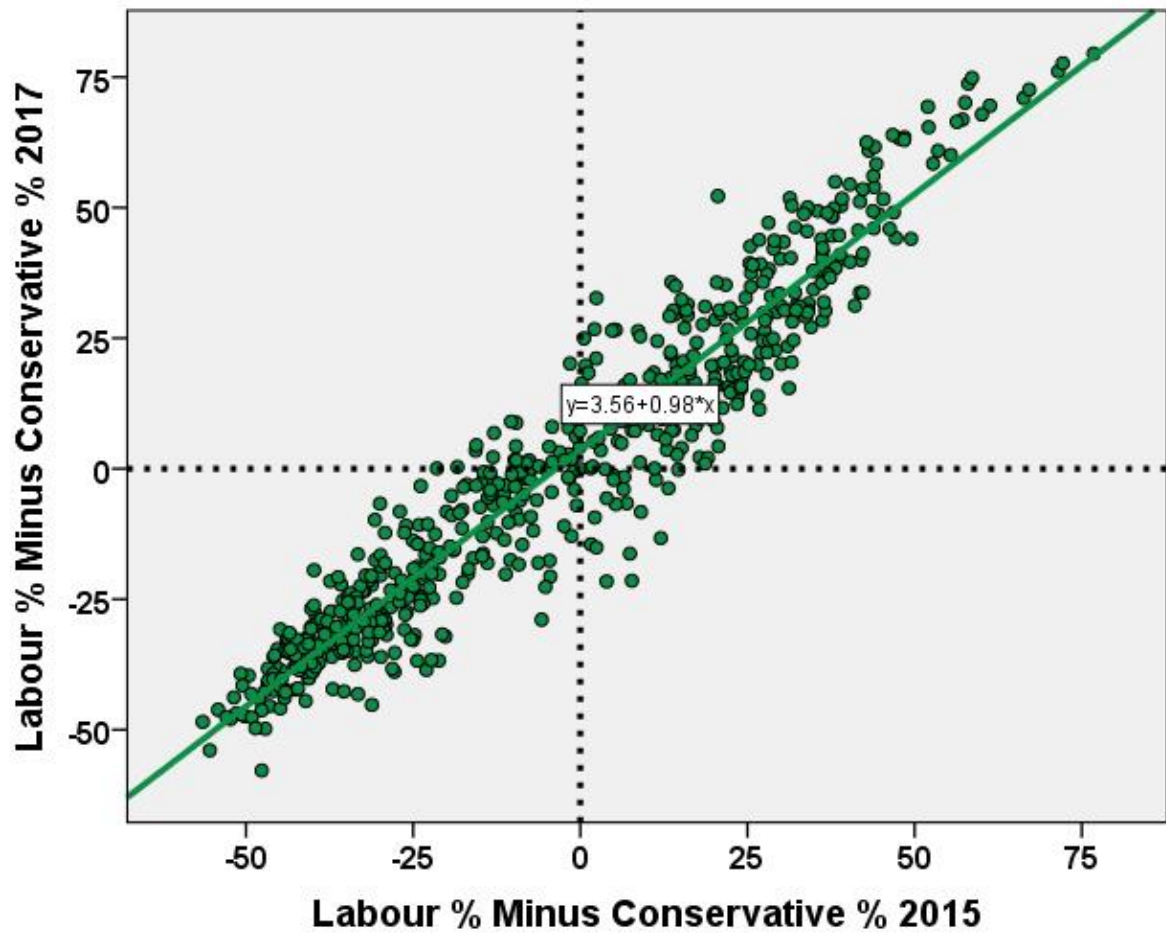


Figure 7. Estimating the Labour-Conservative margin in 2017 by the analysts.

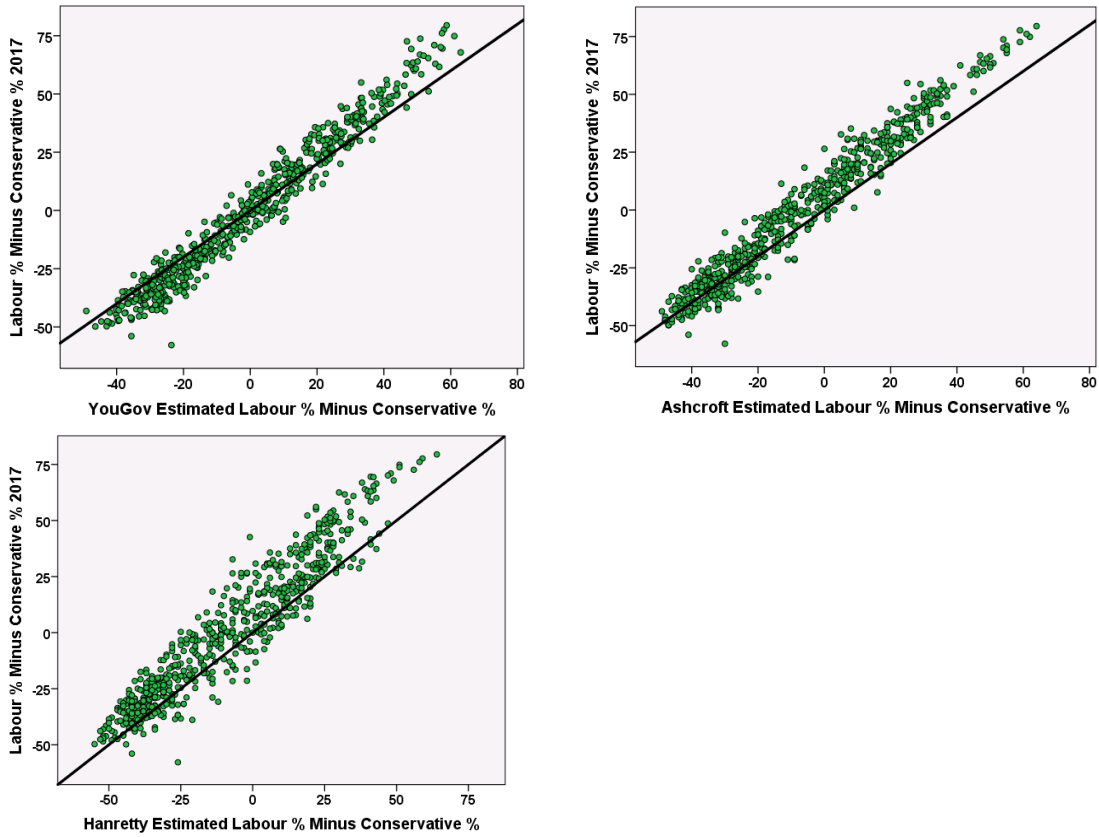


Figure 8. The estimated and actual outcome in the Labour-Conservative marginal constituencies

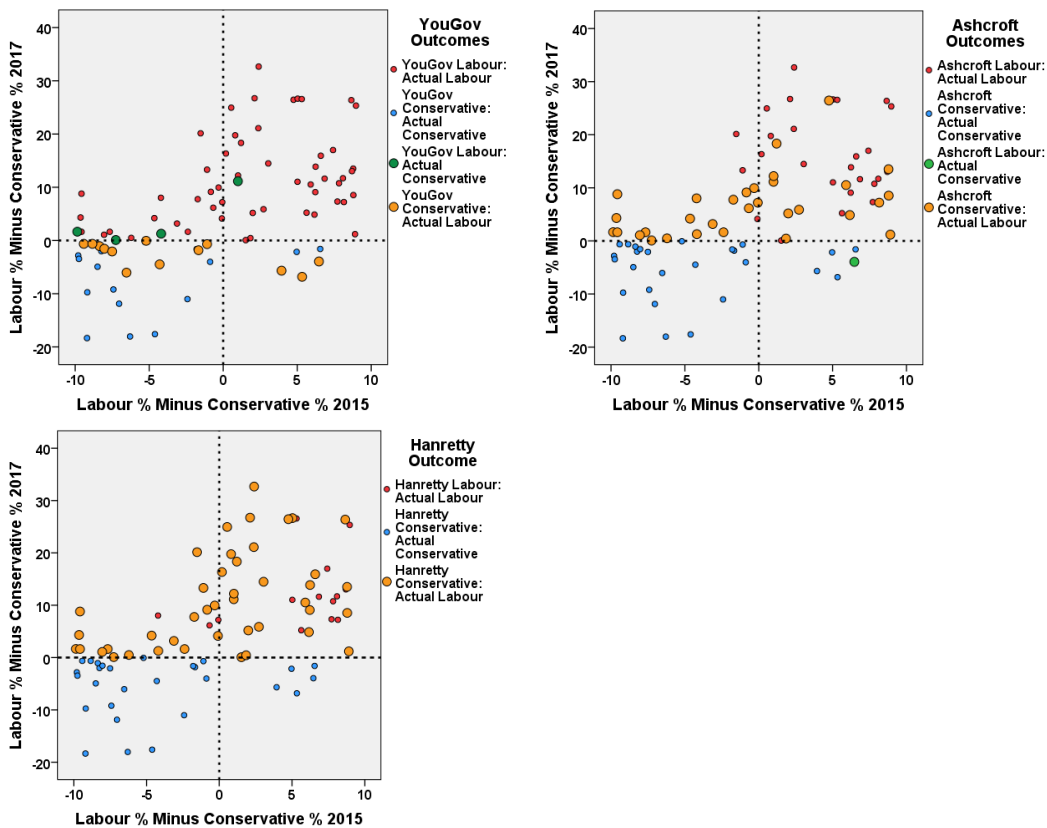


Figure 9. The estimated outcomes in Scotland

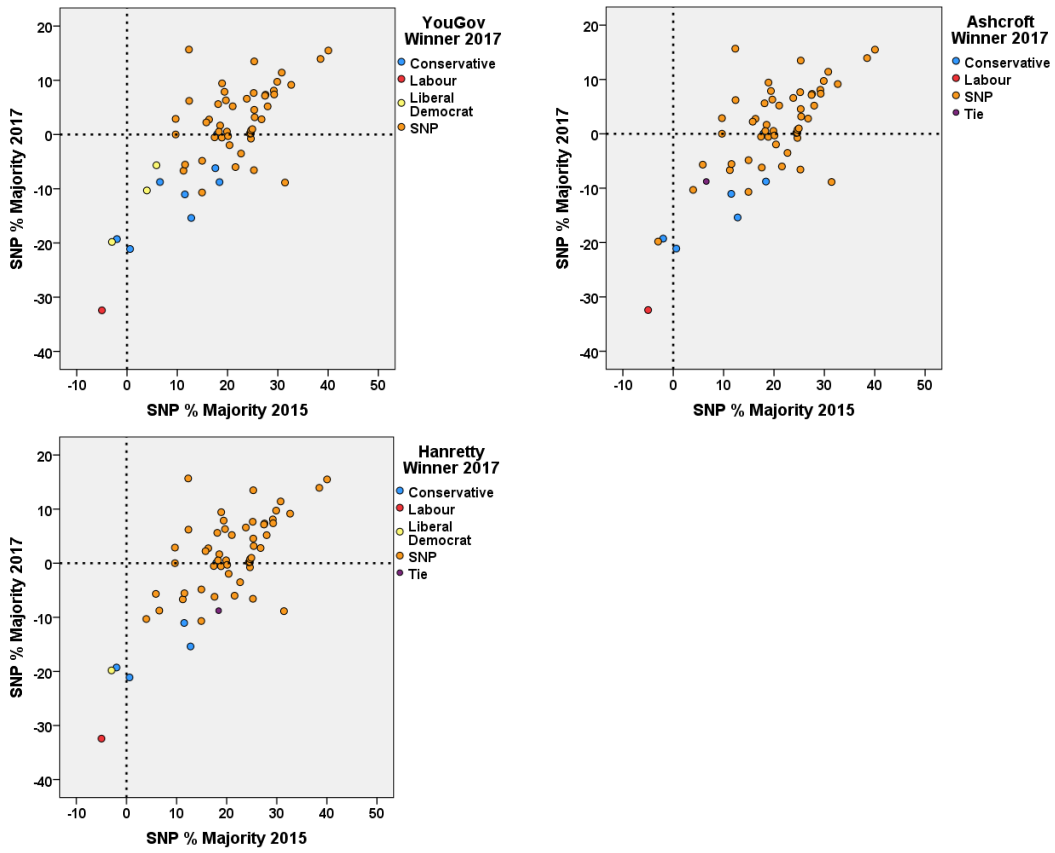


Figure 10. Estimated party vote percentages and the percentage probability of them winning the constituency.

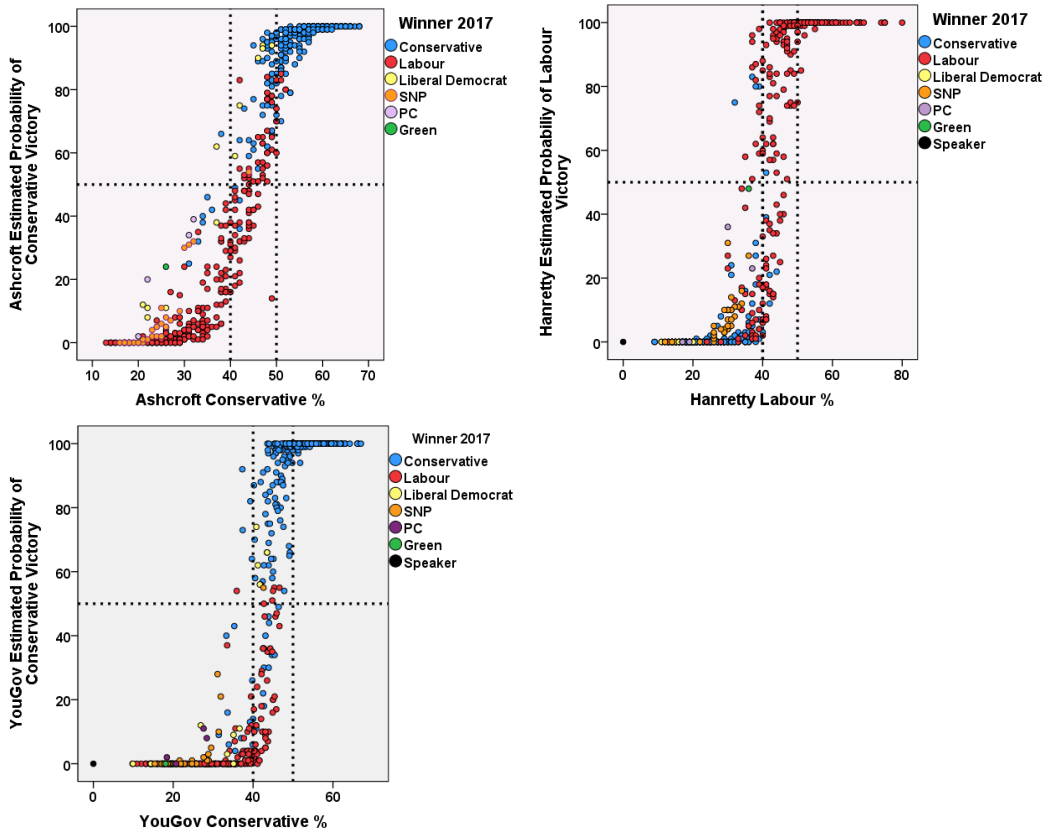


Figure 11. Ashcroft's estimated percentage probabilities of victory in Conservative-held marginal constituencies

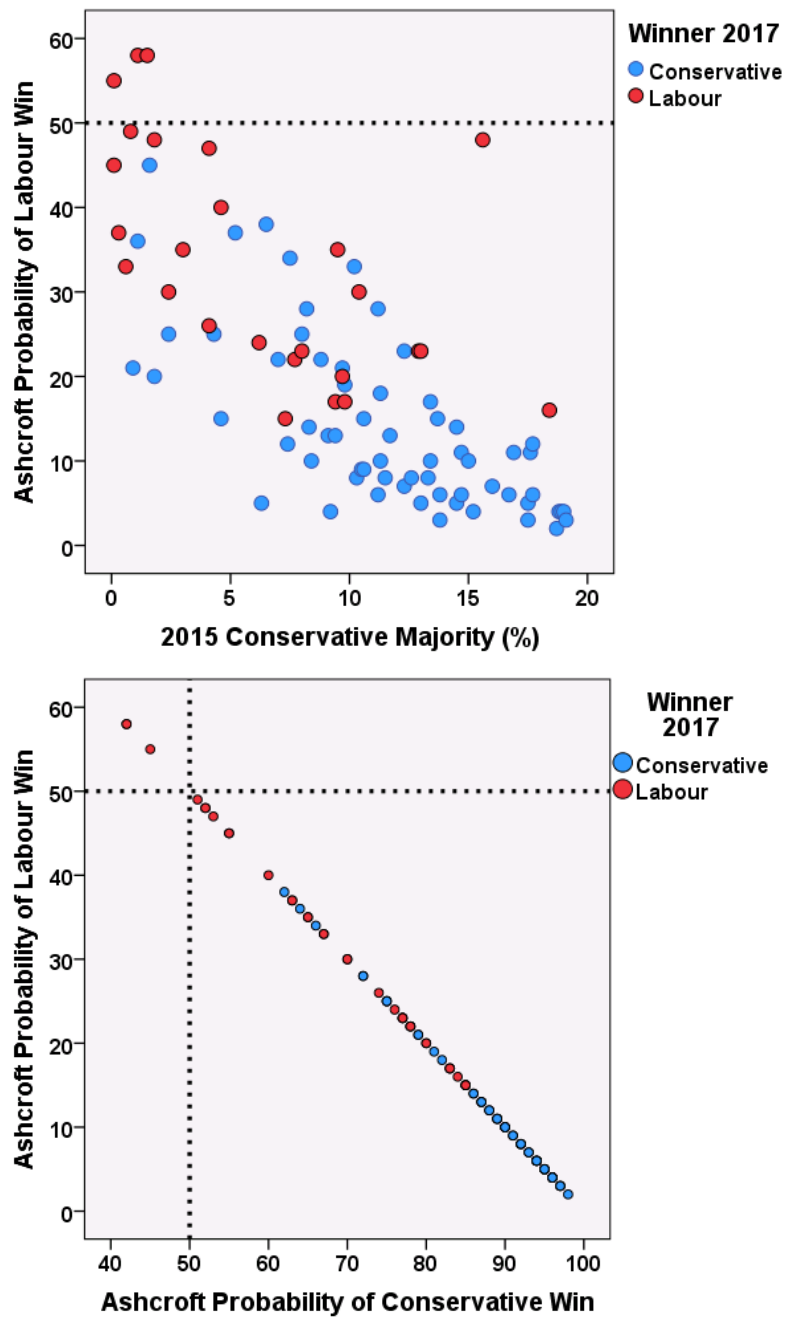


Figure 12. Ashcroft estimated percentage probabilities of victory in Labour-held marginal constituencies

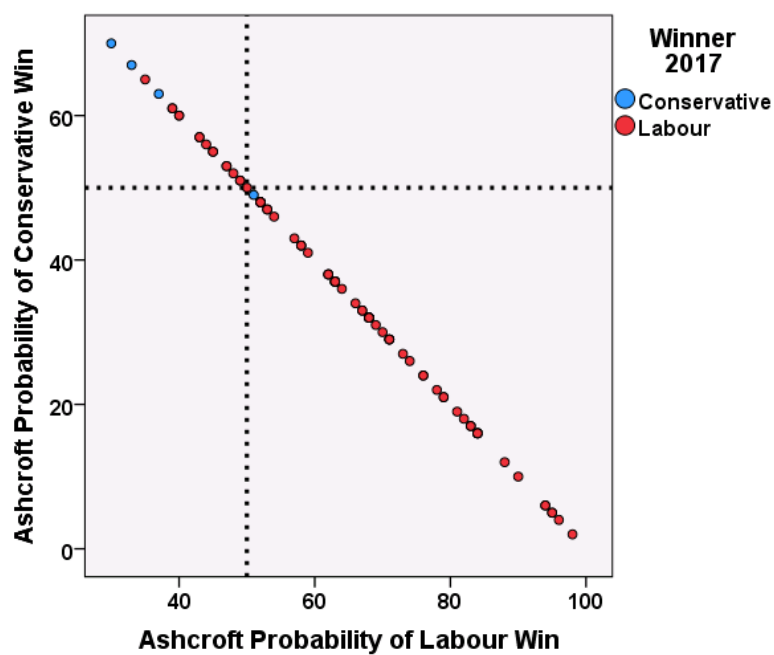
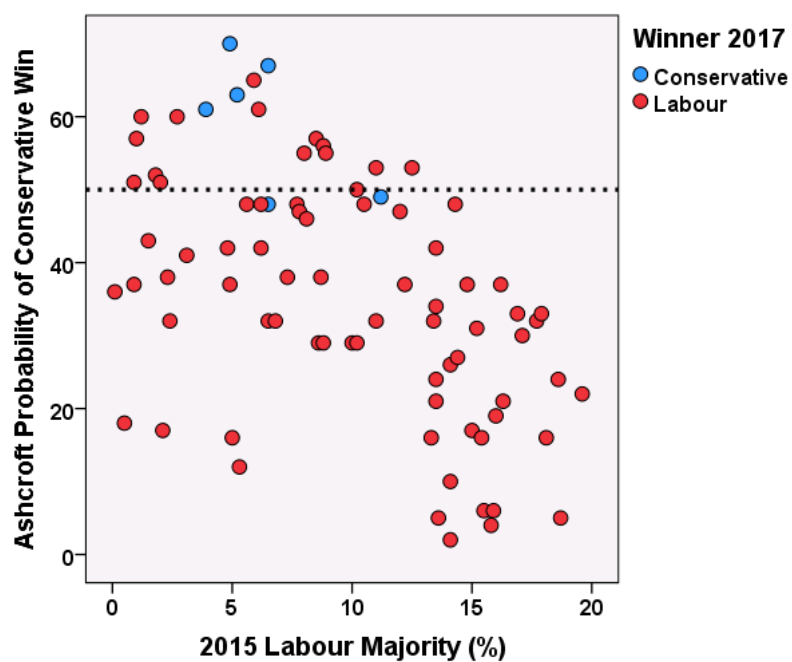


Figure 13. Hanretty's estimated percentage probabilities of victory in marginal constituencies

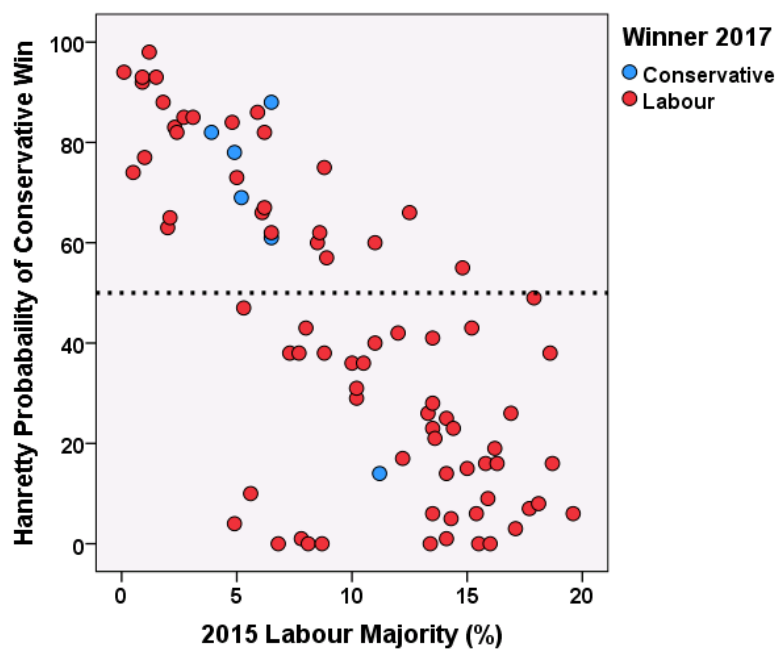
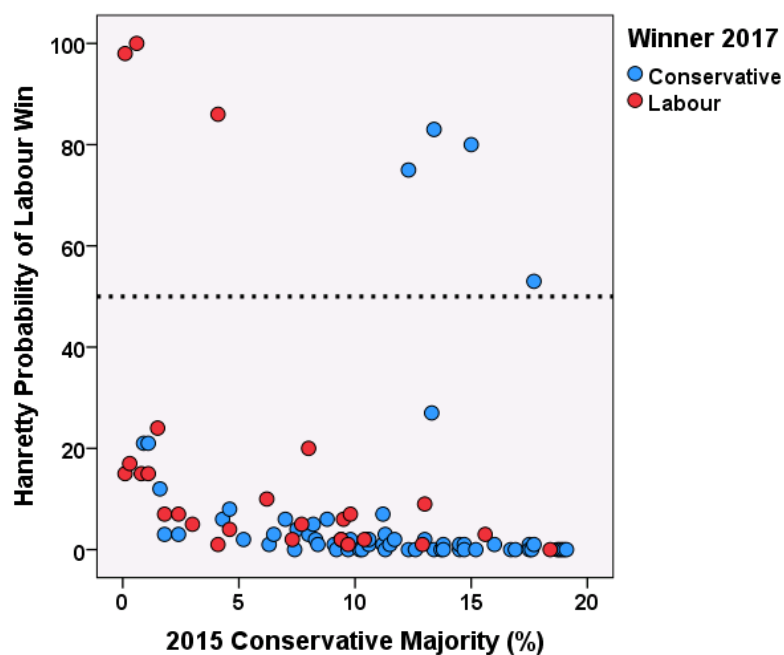
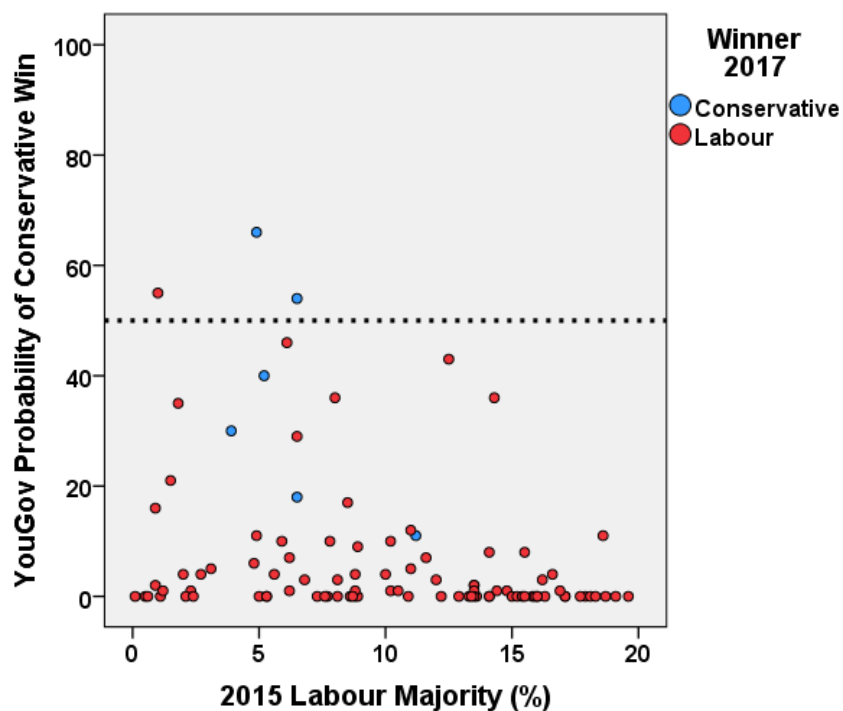
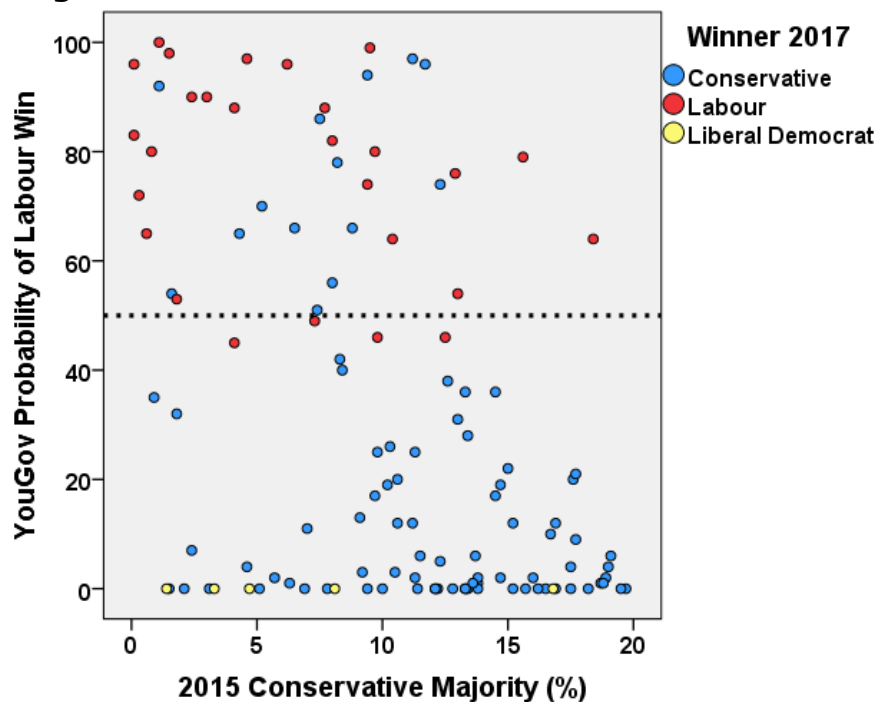


Figure 14. YouGov's estimated percentage probabilities of victory in marginal constituencies



1 September 2017

Kelvyn Jones, Todd Hartman, Ron Johnston, David Manley, Charles Pattie and David Rossiter – Written evidence (PPD0017)

Kelvyn Jones, Todd Hartman, Ron Johnston, David Manley, Charles Pattie and David Rossiter – Written evidence (PPD0017)

[Submission to be found under Ron Johnston](#)

Lord Kinnock – Oral evidence (QQ 132–138)

Evidence Session No. 18

Heard in Public

Questions 132 - 138

Tuesday 28 November 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Baroness Fall; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve; Lord Rennard; Lord Smith of Hindhead.

Examination of witness

Lord Kinnock.

Q132 **The Chairman:** Good morning, Neil. Thank you very much for appearing before the Committee. We invited about 10 or a dozen ex-leaders of parties, ex-Chancellors of the Exchequer and so on, from all parties, to give evidence before us, but you were the only one with the balls to say yes.

Lord Kinnock: Right.

Lord Hayward: Is that a parliamentary term?

The Chairman: I meant golf balls, of course. We are genuinely grateful to you for appearing before us, because the effect of polls on politicians and how they think is central to the kind of report that we are trying to do.

Without wanting to pick at a scab, I would like to start by remembering back to 1992. This was the polls' worst-ever performance; you were about eight percentage points up. I remember you saying afterwards that, despite the fact that the polls were showing you well in the lead, you were never confident that you were going to win. Is that right?

Lord Kinnock: That is right. Can I take up the point that you have just made about the other apostles or disciples—if there are a dozen of them, I suppose; it is anybody's guess—not coming? I want simply to enter for the record that my initial reaction was to say no, for the very basic reason that it is 25 years since I addressed the polls in anger. Not only was that a very long time ago—although an eye-blink in the memory of this distinguished Committee, as it is in mine; I can hardly believe that it was that long ago—but so much has changed since. I am certain that, in your reflections, you comprehend that and take it all into account.

The greatest change, I suppose, in the context of the polls is due not to the increased sophistication of polling, which has occurred partly because of the errors and miscalculations that were made back in 1992, but to other changes, particularly technological changes and the advent of anti-social media. I refer to it in that way very consciously—indeed, self-consciously. Taking all that into account, I had a real reluctance to come, but after you told me exactly what the context was and what you were looking for, I readily agreed. I am just surprised that the other 10 or 11

fellow egotists did not choose to give you the benefit of their wisdom, or lack of it. Nevertheless, perhaps they will reflect further on the matter.

Rolling away the mists of history, back in 1992, I felt in the first week of the campaign, partly on the basis of polling but partly because of the treatment of our campaign more generally, that we were in with a slight chance of having a hung Parliament and even as a consequence of that of forming a minority Government. That faded in the last two or two and a half weeks. By the time that we arrived at polling day, I knew that it was not going to be our victory, partly on the basis of our private polling—I know that you will address a question to that later on—and partly on the basis of my sense of political smell, having been actively involved in politics and political campaigning since the age of 14.

It is worth reflecting on the fact that my wife, who had been in the business of campaigning for almost as long as I had, came to that conclusion very specifically on the Monday before the election in 1992. She said to me very late at night, over a cup of tea, “We are not going to do it”. I said, “No, I know that. Why do you say that?” She said, “It’s not in their eyes”. She had been campaigning that day in Norwich, as it happens, which is a pretty good place to make a judgment about the movement of public sentiment. She said, “Everyone was very polite. The welcome was very warm, but it just wasn’t in their eyes”. Polling apart, that kind of instinct is what tells you what the probabilities really are.

Q133 **The Chairman:** You referred to private polling. When I was briefly Jim Callaghan’s adviser on polling, Gavyn Davies, Huw Wheldon and I were reflecting on politicians and their attitude to polls. We came up with a rule: first, that politicians are much more interested in polls in marginals than they are in national polling, despite the fact that polls in marginals are demonstrably less accurate; and, secondly, that they are affected much more by private polls than by public polls, despite the fact that the private polls use precisely the same techniques and probably have smaller samples. Does that accord with your experience of looking at polls?

Lord Kinnock: Yes, but it is because of the natural superstition of politics—which is shared much more widely. However much you try to safeguard against it, it is a natural human instinct to want news, information, facts or something near to facts that reinforces not so much your assumptions but your preferences. Consequently, a great deal of weight is attached to favourable or very unfavourable polling in circumstances where the pluses or minuses reinforce the understanding that you have of a particular political situation.

I have never linked the two things in my mind before, but I suppose that has an application to your reference to public, general polling and private polling. However much you try to guard against it, your disposition will be to think that the private polling, conducted presumably in circumstances of slightly greater intimacy and with a degree of extra thoroughness, although both assumptions are probably wrong, will give you a closer indication of what is really going on. That can be misleading. Having said that, the fact is that our private polling in 1992 turned out to be closer to the realities of the outcome than the general, public polling, which was more favourable.

Q134 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** I declare my interest as a resident of Norwich. Unfortunately, as a Member of the House of Lords, I do not have a vote in parliamentary elections. Anybody can look into my eyes and see what they will.

Lord Kinnock: I think that, idiotically, we do not have a vote. However, there you go. That is a view.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Can I ask you to reflect on the relationship between opinion polling and leadership, not necessarily by reference to your particular experience as a political party leader but by reference to your broader political experience? Do you think there is a danger that the availability of opinion polling tends to sap leadership, in the sense that a leader can be tempted to put the dipstick in, and will probably do so too often, just to test where conventional opinion is and to remind themselves of people's prejudices and nervousness of change, when what is actually needed is leadership?

Lord Kinnock: That is less true of quantitative polling than it is of qualitative polling. Individuals who are making decisions about the fate or standing of parties, which obviously includes leaders as well as lots of other people advising those leaders, will, like me, have made a distinction between quantitative and qualitative polling. You pay more attention to the qualitative polls, simply because they are literally more focused, whether they are conducted through so-called focus groups or using other methods. That is because you want a particular issue, question, public disposition, sentiment, attitude or prejudice—whatever the thesaurus of variations on the theme is—to be tested. You want a degree of precision in the responses to give you insights into nuance, presentation—which obviously includes language—and perceptions.

In a sense, you are searching for the holy grail. You want the inquisition not to do the business of political comprehension for you—far from it—but to see whether your instinct, your insights and the views that you have formed about the shift in public opinion are within five degrees of reality or 25 degrees out. Given the existence of polling in general and qualitative polling in particular, the use of such an instrument is almost irresistible for political parties and their leaders.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Do you think that it may be inhibiting to leadership?

Lord Kinnock: It is not so much inhibiting as falsely encouraging or falsely daunting, although, as an instinctive depressive, in my case I would look for evidence of bad news more keenly than I would hope for evidence of good news. You can always manage good news.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Alternatively, might it be thought that the availability of opinion polling inflates the importance of leadership excessively, given that the polls are endlessly telling the public what the ratings of the party leaders are? That, combined with 24-hour media, tends to place an excessive emphasis on the personality of the leader. Political parties are movements of people with shared values and principles, reflecting a broader constituency across the country. It may be a fault in our modern politics that such excessive importance is attached

to the personality of the leader. Do you think that opinion polls are in part responsible for that phenomenon?

Lord Kinnock: They may be, I suppose. However, I think this phenomenon existed before polling existed, or before it existed in its relatively sophisticated form of the last 30, 40 or 50 years. It would have been there in any case.

In one sense, the emphasis on individuals, including leaders, is natural, because it is simple. People in democracies tend to formulate views partially, in some cases substantially, on the basis of the perception that they have of individuals. For pollsters and those responding, narrowing down choices and explanations of gut feeling or sentiment to your attitude towards an individual—a leader, a Chancellor or a shadow Chancellor—has the appeal of simplicity. There are very few individuals in the world who are not attracted by the appeal of simplicity. I suppose the ones who are not are called intellectuals, which I have never professed to be.

Q135 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** I move forward to 2015. You were very close to Ed Miliband during that election. It has been suggested to us that the polls, which turned out to be inaccurate, showing the parties running neck and neck influenced the outcome of the election, rather than just measuring opinion, in that there was a concentration on the horserace, and the possibility of the SNP controlling Ed and having power throughout the United Kingdom. Do you think that that is right? Is it a correct interpretation?

Lord Kinnock: It would be difficult to disprove it; let us put it like that. I will put the balance of judgment in that way, partly because, in the outturn, something had the effect of persuading at least a proportion of the electorate—probably a small proportion, but size does not matter a terrific amount when you have a first past the post system—that if they voted for Ed Miliband in England and Wales, there was a real possibility that he would unavoidably be in thrall to the Scottish National Party. Knowing Ed and knowing the politics, that would not have been the case. Even if the outcome had been slightly different and the SNP had held the balance of votes in the House of Commons, I am certain that there would not have been undue concession to it—certainly no form of DUP bung, for instance. Nevertheless, what matters is perception, and that was certainly the perception. I think it was a perception founded substantially in the unfolding of the opinion poll story throughout the election.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Does that, or your experience of 1992, or indeed 2017, persuade you that there ought to be greater regulation of the polls?

Lord Kinnock: No. I do not think that in a free society you can have greater regulation. I do not even think, although from time to time I have been tempted to think that it is not a bad idea, that in the United Kingdom we should emulate democracies that ban the publication of polls in the last couple of days before an election date. I think that is an impractical effort to regulate and a denial of information; I am intellectually and instinctively against it, in any case. In the UK, with the public perception and, indeed, the press that we have, not to say the polling organisations

and politicians that we have, not only would it be an unnecessary infringement of expression but it would simply not be very practical.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: George has asked you about the effect of polls on the electorate: did more turn out, or did more vote one way or the other? What about the influence of the polls on politicians and their actions? We have had two specific examples of that in the recent past. One is the question of whether Gordon Brown would or would not, or should or should not, have called an election in 2007 had the private polling been different. The other is the final poll in the Scottish referendum, which said that the independence party was going to win. That produced extraordinarily public actions by UK politicians, with all the vows, et cetera. In your experience, is that sort of direct influence common?

Lord Kinnock: I suppose that it is one of the influential factors, but I have stood it back a little. The existence of the polls of themselves, producing the results that they do day on day, week on week, means that there is information generally available that the human beings who are leaders cannot not be expected to ignore. If they sought to ignore it, that dismissal would take on an entirely different public perception: that they were scared of hearing “the truth”, that they were fearful of the results of their own actions, and that they were ignoring “the will of the people”, as reflected in opinion polls. All kinds of other presumptions and allegations, most of them false, would be made. In those circumstances, even when we are talking about private polling—“private” is a very relative term in this context, of course—results are produced and a narrative arises from the results. It would take a particular form of resolution or arrogance—there is a thin dividing line between the two sometimes—simply to ignore the “evidence” of the figures.

In those circumstances, although the question is very apposite, there is no neat, compartmentalised, all-defining, all-applicable answer to it. People, movements, parties, executive boards and companies respond to the evidence that is available. If the nearest thing to evidence is a polling result, or an accumulation of polling results, a response to that can be expected.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: George pinched the question that I was about to ask, and not for the first time.

Lord Kinnock: The moral of the story is that if, like George, you ask enough questions about everything, you are bound to ask the question that everybody else was going to ask. This is 40 years of experience.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: In that case, I will ask the same sort of question, but in a different way. On “Mastermind”, your specialist subject would perhaps be 1992, but I want to get into your general knowledge area. Earlier you mentioned your sense of smell, your gut reaction to these things. Bearing in mind that you have been in politics for your whole life, do you think, based on your experience of these things, that polling has an effect on turnout and voting intention, not just in by-elections or Assembly elections but as a general thing? Do people like to be part of what they think will be the winning side or tribe? If you think that it can have an effect, or has more of an effect now than it had in the past, do

you share my and perhaps our concern that if polls are not correct they can have quite a significant impact on the democratic process, and that too much attention is paid to the polls rather than to the policies? We are concerned, because recent polling has not been that great. If it gets things consistently wrong, that may have an effect on the democratic process, which is a massive concern.

Lord Kinnock: Yes. I comprehend completely the concern voiced in your question. To some extent, I share it. As democrats, we do not want in any case for there to be a disproportionate or unfair influence on the conclusions that voters reach or their inclination to vote or not to vote. We would like the business of forming opinions, and applying those opinions through voting or not voting, to be a very clean, hygienic process. However, it is never going to be, not least because the only evidence of what other people are inclined to do in a by-election or a general election, apart from an individual's field of acquaintances, which can be small or very large, is opinion polling figures.

Consequently, some people take a decision out of a desire to be on the winning side, as you put it. I have no means of quantifying this, but a lot of people also take a decision on the basis that by voting in a particular way they can stop an outcome that they do not want. That must always be taken into account. I say that partly because there have been a few occasions, both in by-elections and in general elections, when I have felt that the evidence available to people, which is more comprehensive than their field of acquaintances—that is to say, the evidence of opinion polls—has persuaded sections of the public to stop an outcome that they do not want even more than it has inspired them to try to be on the winning side or to promote a set of values, arguments and policies that they prefer.

Taking all that into account, I simply come back to the original point that I made: if opinion polls were not available as an influence, positive or negative, on voting disposition, we would probably have more hygienic elections. We might even have a general public who were sufficiently intrigued by the political process to find out more about policies, alternatives, the real quality of a candidate and the truth about a personality. However, we deal with what we have. What we have, in this and other free countries, is opinion polling. We are confronted by that reality. If there is an exercise to be undertaken, it is an examination of motivation—why people come to the conclusions that they do—rather than an assessment of execution, or what they do, given that polling and polling figures exist and that a proportion of the public will roll their voting dice on the basis of what the polls are indicating to them. In my view, it is an unavoidable reality, so we have to live with it, although I share the regret that I think you voiced in your question.

- Q136 **Baroness Fall:** The Committee has started to look mostly at the integrity of the poll in relation to polling, but we are also a digital Committee. I liked your expression “anti-social media”. You did not have to deal with this in 1992, but sitting where you sit now, with all your experience and a long political history, do you think that the integrity of elections, and democracy more widely, is threatened by social media? If so, what do you think we can do about it?

Lord Kinnock: Again, we are dealing with an extant reality. It would be useless, as well as open to misinterpretation, if I were to use the term “threaten”. The phenomenon that we are witnessing with some use of social media long predates social media. In *Felix Holt, the Radical*, which is a study of the 1832 election, although one rather more stirring than social media, George Eliot produced a phrase that I have had to use from time to time: “There is nothing more dangerous than a self-righteous mob”. They did not have social media in 1832; they barely had the vote. However, the reality is that the phenomenon of stimulated excitability and simplistic slogans, which can, if they gather numbers, make a massive and generally regressive difference to the conduct of affairs, is a human phenomenon, not a social media phenomenon.

That said, the ease of communication, the superficiality of many opinions and the capacity for anger about meaningless and marginal issues come together in this age to produce an identifiable and influential reality, especially in the cockpit of elections. Maybe that will pass; hopefully it will. It happens otherwise and can be benevolent. We will witness it now with the announcement of the royal engagement. There will be tsunamis—I presume that that is the plural of tsunami—of good will and pretty kindly sentiment expressed through social media. In a different context, including the political context, or a showbiz or football context, a shift in the wind can produce an entirely different public sentiment.

What bothers me is not that the sentiment is invented by social media—these attitudes exist in any case—but that in their communication they can have either a benevolent or a toxic effect. Almost inevitably, in the context of politics, the effect is much more likely to be toxic than it is to be benevolent. If it is not toxic, it can often be very misleading. I am not going to sit on a high horse and condemn my fellow men and women for their use of social media; I just think that it is a phenomenon that society generally, including the law, has not yet learned to regulate for the general benefit of society. Given the human capacity for inventiveness and innovation, we will probably learn how to do that. I hope to live to see it.

Q137 **The Chairman:** I have been around politics for nearly as long as you, but I do not think that I have known a major politician with such an instinctively hostile attitude to opinion polling as Jeremy Corbyn. He ignored the polls when he was doing badly, and he still expresses great scepticism about them. The funny thing is that, contrary to many of our expectations, so far that has not served him too badly. He came from a long way behind, and his own ratings increased greatly, partly because he was not playing along with the polls. Do you observe the same phenomenon? Do you think that it shows that politicians have a greater capacity to be immune to polling findings than is frequently believed?

Lord Kinnock: You will have to dig deeper to discover what Jeremy Corbyn’s attitude to polling really is. I do not presume to have done that. I am inclined to make a general assumption that the fact that polling originated and is generally conducted as a marketing tool may account for Jeremy’s disregard for polls. “Disregard” is the word that I would use, rather than “hostility”. I do not know the man very well. He is my Member of Parliament, and we worked together for about 30 years in Parliament, but I cannot say that I know him. My general guess would be that he

disregards the polls as a potentially misleading but, in any case, essentially superficial feature of political life, and thinks that it is therefore not worth bothering about them too much.

If that is the attitude, or even if I have got it completely wrong and his disregard of the polls arises from something different, it has certainly stood him and John McDonnell in good stead. Although the polling against them was worse than it has been for just about anybody, generally speaking, they said the kinds of things that all politicians say when confronted by bad polls: “Things will change when people put real votes in real boxes. This is an opinion poll. It is not voting day”, and so the story goes on. They turned out to be right. I do not know whether that was simply temperamental fortitude, or plain defiant guts, or whether they were able to anticipate, in a way that nobody else was, the quite extraordinary change in the weather of the election in the days following the publication of the manifestos. I witnessed that real alteration in sentiment on the streets, in contrasting constituencies.

If they have that gift of foresight, I would like them to tell me the winner of next year’s Derby, because it was almost superhuman for them to have been able to guess that. Given that, and given the fact that neither of them would claim to be superhuman, it is more likely to have been a steadfast disregard and a determination to carry on making the arguments that they were making, come hell or high water. It was done with much less than the usual political regard for the signs of the times, produced by the oracle of polling organisations.

The Chairman: Increasingly—it was particularly a Blair phenomenon—politicians have become very sensitive to polls, changing their policies in response to bad findings. It tends to lend force to the view, which was traditionally associated more with the left than with the right, that you put your case and, if it is a good one, people will follow.

Lord Kinnock: If you were to get in Tony or Alastair Campbell, for instance, that might assist your inquiry. My perception, as someone who was very close to Tony and his organisation in the years before 1997—and afterwards, come to that, but particularly in those years—is that their attitude was derived much more from the nature of the 1992 result than from an over-consciousness of the facility of opinion polls. They reacted to that further defeat for the Labour Party, under my leadership, with an utter determination to identify, on the basis of their judgment—assisted, to some extent, but not very much, by opinion polls—certain policies and features of my leadership of the party and to exclude them from the future argument.

I participated in those discussions, which were entirely right. When you have made errors, you revisit them only to learn, never to emulate. That had a great deal more to do with the construction of purpose, procedure, policy and personality that became known as the Blair phenomenon than over-attention to opinion polls. In attributing shifts and nuances in policy and vocabulary to focus groups, for instance, a lot of commentators have failed to comprehend what was going on. Focus groups existed and were deliberately planned. Account was taken of them, but we never had dictatorship by focus group.

Q138 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** Can I go back to something that you said in an earlier answer about the impact that you feel the polls can have by persuading people not so much to vote for, but to vote against? Some of the most interesting evidence that we have had from polling experts has been on the impact of polls on turnout. David has just asked about the 2015 and 2017 elections. It has now become a sort of cliché that that was also true for the Scottish referendum vote. The outcome was different from what it was expected to be not so much because of a change in opinion, but because of the nature of the turnout. Do you accept that? In the case of Corbyn, for example, do you accept that it was the young people who voted unexpectedly—those who would probably have supported that kind of position, anyway, but who had not voted before—who made the difference?

Lord Kinnock: Yes. It got them out to vote. Opinion polls may have had something to do with that. I am talking about the 2017 election. In that specific case, it had much more to do with the divergent messages of the manifestos. I am not saying that people read them in detail—they never do, never have and never will; that is one of the reasons why we have a democracy—but that the messages that people derived from the absence of policy or direction on the Conservative side, and the insistence on hopeful purpose and declaration on the Labour side, persuaded lots more young people that they would make a difference if they turned out and cast their vote.

To some extent, that may have been assisted by the changing narrative of the opinion polls—the closing of the gap—but it originated in and was energised by people’s subjective perception of what was happening over those two and a half or three weeks. Whether I was actively canvassing, shopping or bumping into people on the street, I kept bumping into that. In Tufnell Park in north London, in Jeremy’s constituency, as well as down in Aberavon—an entirely different constituency in socioeconomic make-up and every other respect—and other places where I canvassed, I got it all the time. I could taste it, and taste it within a day or two. Typically, I tended not to take it very seriously in that first day or two. However, after a week passed, I knew that there was a real sea change going on.

A substantial part of it was to do with the extra motivation to vote among young people, who of course also influenced workmates and members of their families to move their votes or to vote as well. On election night, on the way home from campaigning to change into a nice suit, or what passes for a nice suit, for the count in Aberavon, my son’s constituency, I passed several polling stations. This was at 10 to eight or eight o’clock at night. There were queues forming in Port Talbot. In the queues, there were young women with pushchairs. It was a long time since I had seen that phenomenon. I saw it in my own constituency in the 1970s, when we used to get turnouts in the upper 70s and low 80s, but I had not seen it since, not even in by-elections. When I got back and met my wife, I said, “There’s something really on here. There is going to be a hell of a big turnout. Steve’s majority is going to shoot up”. I could really feel that happening, and I had been feeling it for some time past.

I do not know about the Scottish referendum, although I think that the motivation to stop something people were either against or very unsure

Lord Kinnock – Oral evidence (QQ 132–138)

about was derived partly from the news that it was conceivable that, if individuals did not vote, the result could be a vote that favoured independence. Either the news from the opinion polls or the reaction to them, which produced much more energetic campaigning on the no side, with particular influence from Gordon Brown, who spoke in terms and with a force that people much more widely could comprehend and identify with, and who made a terrific difference, shifted it. However, I am pretty certain that inside that oyster there came from the grit of opinion polls.

The Chairman: We have taken up an awful lot of your time. We are very grateful to you for appearing. You have contributed very richly to our understanding of the ecological system between politicians and the polls.

Lord Kinnock: Do not make it sound scientific, David, because it is not, despite what the pollsters say.

The Chairman: I would not accuse you of being a scientist, Neil, although you could be many other things.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: The title of our report should be *They Could See It In Your Eyes*.

The Chairman: Exactly. The refuseniks will deeply regret not having been here when they read the transcript and see what an opportunity they had to affect opinion in this area. Many thanks. We are very grateful to you.

Lord Kinnock: Thank you very much for your patience.

Dr Jouni Kuha and Dr Benjamin Lauderdale – Oral evidence (QQ 14–22)

Evidence Session No. 2

Heard in Public

Questions 14 - 22

Tuesday 5 September 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Baroness Fall; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve; Lord Smith of Hindhead; (Professor Patrick Sturgis, Specialist Adviser to the Select Committee)

Witnesses

[I](#): Dr Benjamin Lauderdale, Associate Professor in Research Methodology, London School of Economics; Dr Jouni Kuha, Associate Professor of Statistics and Research Methodology, London School of Economics.

Examination of witnesses

Dr Benjamin Lauderdale and Dr Jouni Kuha.

Q14 **The Chairman:** Thank you very much for coming. You have in front of you a list of the interests that have been declared by members of the Committee. You are being broadcast live via the parliamentary website and there may be a BBC Parliament programme, so please do not insult anybody who you mind finding out that you have insulted them, because it will get back to them. A transcript of the meeting will be taken and published on the Committee's website, and you will have an opportunity to make corrections to that transcript where necessary. On the whole, we are using surnames, simply because it is easier for people following the broadcast, but do not worry if it lapses into Christian names from time to time, because we want to be quite informal with this and give you a chance to say what you want to say in a reasonably relaxed manner.

If I could start with you, Dr Lauderdale, perhaps you could explain the methodology you invented or used for your constituency polling at the last election and the results it obtained.

Dr Lauderdale: The methodology, which is usually referred to as multilevel regression and post-stratification, is a set of tools that have been developed over the last 20 years in statistics, and developed further for political applications in political science. It takes a different approach to translating the raw responses you get back from a poll into estimates at

the national level but also at subnational levels. The logic of the approach is to build a model for voting behaviour as a function of known characteristics of individuals—who they voted for at the last election, where they live, whether they are male or female, their age, et cetera—and then, taking data on the distribution of those types of people across different constituencies or other kinds of subnational geographies, to extrapolate those patterns out to all those geographies of interest. For the general election, that is constituencies. We did a similar thing for the EU referendum. There, we were interested in local authorities because that was the reporting area, even though it was not electorally consequential.

The Chairman: In this, you have very large panels of data on voting intention. How are those very large panels created? Where do you get these huge samples from?

Dr Lauderdale: Different pollsters have different online panels set up. I am not employed by YouGov generally at the moment, so I can give you only the very rough version, but there is open opt-in to people online. They also make efforts periodically to recruit individuals with characteristics that they feel are underrepresented on their panel. I do not know the exact number of active users at the moment, but it is in the hundreds of thousands in this country. Then, when you go to run a particular poll on a particular subject, you send out invitations to individuals selected out of that larger pool, and usually selected to be representative of the country on a set of characteristics that you already know about those people, because they have already signed up and answered some questions.

The Chairman: If I could give you a question to start off, Dr Kuha, you are a proper statistician, as it seems to me, and you have been involved with the exit polls. The exit polls have been very accurate but there is a problem, which all statisticians are aware of: sometimes, you get a case where something comes out with an accurate result because the errors have cancelled each other out. I think that was broadly true of the opinion polls in the 2010 general election. Have you looked at whether that could be the case with the exit polls, and are you confident that the methodology has delivered the results without such a phenomenon?

Dr Kuha: We are confident in the principles of the methodology itself. It is a very well-designed instrument for what it is trying to do and under the constraints under which it is trying to do it. As far as we can tell, every element of it follows the best principles and we cannot see any logical flaws in there but, as you said, that does not rule out the possibility that two things could go wrong in opposite directions. We have looked at both the 2010 exit poll, from which we published an academic article, and 2015, from which we prepared an article, which then became redundant because there was an early election. In both those papers, which we call the post-mortem papers, we have looked through the various elements to see whether there were errors in them and so on, and we have not found anything particularly dramatic. There were slight errors in representation in 2015, but we have seen nothing even close to the kind of cancelling errors that you were referring to.

The Chairman: It would be very helpful if you could supply us with a reference for those, so we can have a look through them.

Dr Kuha: Yes. The 2010 paper is in the public domain. The other one is just notes.

The Chairman: For 2015, I understand you did not publish; for 2010, it would be useful to see.

Q15 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** Dr Lauderdale, are people paid to be on some panels?

Dr Lauderdale: There is usually some element of compensation on the panel. Usually, if you have answered a certain number of polls, they will send you some money. Often it is more of a lottery. You are basically entered into a lottery for a small chance at a larger payout.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Does that influence the results in any way? Could it?

Dr Lauderdale: It may influence the set of people who sign up for panels. It is not clear how much it does, in part because I do not know of large panels that do not have that characteristic, so we do not have an obvious point of comparison. With any online panel—and, indeed, with any poll that does not have a very high response rate—you always have to worry that the people you are able to get in contact with and to get responses from are different from the people you are not. At the very least, you know they are different in that you were able to get in contact with them and you were not able to get in contact with the other people. The question is whether that is associated with anything else you care about.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: We heard from one of our previous witnesses that there is a possibility that some pollsters may revert to face-to-face interviews. Would that be rather more ethical than paying people to be on panels?

Dr Lauderdale: I do not think it is necessarily more ethical. Many face-to-face social science surveys provide compensation for people's time. You are potentially taking 15 minutes, or as much as an hour for some large-scale surveys. These would presumably not be of that type. Compensation of some kind is frequent. It is typically not large enough that it is going to make a huge difference to anyone's life. I do not think there is an ethical problem with compensating people for their time.

Q16 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** This question follows up the points about selection: how these people are selected. As we all know, although it surprises us, the political interest of most people in this country is extremely marginal. Is there a real concern about measuring the way in which that particular phenomenon—people's lack of interest in politics—will be reflected in any sort of polling, paid or not, or online or not?

Dr Lauderdale: Differences in levels of political interest are an endemic problem in electoral polling, but also in the large-scale, carefully done social-scientific surveys that have been done. Everyone who has looked at this has found it difficult to get people who have low interest in politics into a survey. One way in which this manifests itself is that, typically, the

people who you are able to contact will be people who are much more likely to vote than the people you are not able to contact, which is okay if you are trying to get a measure of voting intention—you are missing the people who will not vote disproportionately—but it presents certain problems.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: It seems to me that it does more than present certain problems. If you look, for example, at the inaccuracies in forecasting—I am not necessarily talking about polling—of the referendum result last year and of the election this year, it was not so much about intention; it was about the fact that people who did not normally vote or were not included in the kind of survey you are describing, whether paid or not, were simply not involved in the polling.

Dr Lauderdale: This can be a problem. Turnout in particular is very difficult to predict in advance because it is a future behaviour. It is one that changes in ways that are a bit more difficult to measure, precisely for this reason: the people who are difficult to contact are different in their turnout behaviour and their engagement in politics than the people who are not. It is absolutely a problem. It is a challenge. From what I have seen, it is not clear to me that that was a particular problem for the EU referendum, although it certainly could have been a problem in the sense that, as you noted, turnout was substantially up from a typical general election.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Turnout was up among people who had not voted previously at general elections. It was substantial.

Dr Lauderdale: That is almost inevitably true.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: There were a substantial number of people who said, “I never vote but I was going to vote in this election”.

Dr Lauderdale: Yes. The people who tend to vote in one general election tend to vote in almost all general elections, and the people who tend not to vote in one tend not to vote in most of them. There is a little flow in and out in any given election, but, yes, if turnout goes up by 5% or 10%, those people are, inevitably, almost all people who rarely vote at most.

Dr Kuha: I have a very brief addition to make to that on a very general level. I have two comments. First, that sort of situation, in which a poll is unrepresentative in something, is only a problem insofar as that thing is correlated with what we are trying to measure—in this case, votes. When it comes to political interest, there is very likely to be an association. People who are interested in politics may have a different distribution of intended vote than those who have no interest in politics, but it is not automatically an insurmountable problem for a poll.

Secondly, in the analysis of the polling data, which is and should be more than just taking the percentages from the raw responses, we can in principle do something about it if we also have measures of political interest. Again, that is not easy and it can go wrong, but it is not something that inevitably and automatically leads the poll to be biased.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: No, I understand it is not theoretically impossible. I am just saying that in certain practical situations it seems to affect the result of the poll.

Lord Howarth of Newport: It is fair to say that opinion polls normally ask rather broad-brush questions seeking simple responses—yes or no answers, or 4, 5 or 6 out of 10—on complex policy issues. It is not a terribly satisfactory way of trying to ascertain what opinion is and report on opinion about policy options for the environment, immigration, social security or whatever it may be. I am wondering whether the very large online samples that you are working on, Dr Lauderdale, may allow for greater nuance in the reporting of opinion.

Dr Lauderdale: The larger samples allow for greater nuance in the reporting of variation across different groups of people, whether defined through geography—where they live—age and so forth, or combinations of these factors. We are able to see in our data from the EU referendum that there is a very clear association between educational qualifications and vote choice in the referendum, but it was different among people who voted for different parties at the last general election. That interaction is the kind of thing that we can learn.

Your initial point, though, was about the difficulty of getting at the more nuanced issues of policy with survey questions, and that is a real challenge. Both my colleague here and I work primarily with quantitative data, with survey data; we have colleagues in our department who do qualitative research. There are limitations on what you can get at with a survey instrument that you have written in advance. There are other things that you can get at through other methods of eliciting public opinion that may allow more back and forth, but which would not necessarily allow you to make the generalisations about the entire population that are possible in a survey. There are methodological trade-offs to be made between different types of research as to which kinds of nuance you are interested in.

Q17 **Baroness Fall:** I would like to ask a bit more about exit polls and the methodology. What do you think the reason is for their greater accuracy, and could that method be used for the increasingly popular constituency polling that people are beginning to do during campaigns?

Then, just to ask about the so-called shy voter, does this really exist? We had a lot of so-called shy voters, for example, in the Scottish referendum campaign, but I do not know whether this is just something that is reported or whether it might affect an exit poll's accuracy: people are standing there, they do not care anymore and they just say it, whereas before they might be a bit shy.

Dr Kuha: I have a few words about the general idea of the exit poll and what makes it work as well as it has so far done. It has two crucial elements. One is the data collection and the other one is the analysis of the data. For the data collection, first of all, we have to acknowledge the crucial contribution of those hundreds of interviewers who stand outside their community centres, primary schools, churches and so on through that day, rain or shine, to collect those responses. In a different way, concerning the design of the data collection, the absolutely crucial part of the exit poll is that it goes back to the same polling stations as it did last time. It is what we call a longitudinal or a panel design. That is absolutely crucial.

On the data analysis side, the equally crucial part is that the data from the interviews is then turned into the prediction that we all see through a fairly elaborate sequence of statistical analysis and statistical modelling. Both of those are needed for the results to come out as they do, and both have been designed for the particular situation of trying to predict the number of MPs for each party, based on these kinds of exit interviews at a fairly small number of polling stations, which is what we have to do.

In terms of the lessons that might have for other kinds of polling, for general polls—the kinds of pre-election polls that are the main topic here—the short answer is virtually none. Apart from being about voting in the election, the exit poll and the pre-election polls are different in every single methodological respect. There is virtually nothing that can be translated from one to the other. You referred to one aspect where, in principle, there is a sort of analogy, which is the constituency-level polling. The exit polls have to take place in certain locations, because that is where the people stand when they do the interview. If you tried to force an exact or near enough analogy of what happens in the exit poll design on other polls, it would be, basically, a constituency poll.

Constituency-level polls may well have an important role to play, and my colleague may have something more to say about those. Thinking about them with reference to the exit poll, if you wanted to translate the exit poll design, you would also have to translate the longitudinal aspect: in effect, pollsters going back to the same constituencies where they did the constituency poll last time. It would not be the same and would not work if you just compared the results last time against your poll this time, because they are different things. Even there, what the exit poll can teach us about how to do other kinds of polls is really not much.

Finally, we looked at the question of shy voters—whether they be shy Tories, shy Labour voters or whatever—in some detail in the 2015 Sturgis polling inquiry, the inquiry, and there was no real evidence that that made a big contribution to the error in 2015. That is not to say that it is not possible. Whether the exit poll is better in that respect is, again, an open question. That one is a secret ballot, because it is in fact a mock ballot, so the people being interviewed in the exit poll are given a copy of the ballot paper and they do exactly what they did in the booth two minutes ago, drop it into a mock ballot box, and that is it. It is the world's shortest survey, but it is also secret in the sense that the interviewers do not know the answer. Of course, that could reduce shyness but it is not guaranteed to do so. If a person does not trust the interviewer, how the interview is conducted is not going to reintroduce that trust, so that can happen. Similarly, the polls can employ methods that do not force you to reveal your answer. They do not have face-to-face interviews anyway, so you do not reveal things. There are ways of reducing shyness there.

I have one last point about this, with reference to the exit poll. Another key element of that longitudinal design, going back to the same places, is that, if there are constant biases of this kind—if, in an exit poll interview this time and last time, everybody exaggerates, or they exaggerate, say, the Labour share a bit, but it is the same exaggeration both ways—it cancels out when we take the difference from last time to this time. The

design itself has a certain inbuilt protection against these kinds of constant biases, which does not exist for the regular polls.

Dr Lauderdale: I have a very quick point to make on what the exit poll can teach us about how to do better pre-election polling. Perhaps the most important advantage of the exit poll is that there is only one time when all the people who voted in an election can be easily found in one place, and that is on election day as they walk out of the voting booth. So much of what we have already talked about here and what has been talked about in the various enquiries is about the difficulty of getting a representative sample. That problem is solved on election day, at least until some people refuse to participate in the exit poll. You have a very good starting point, which is that you can identify everyone who actually voted.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Do you know what proportion of people refuse to participate?

Dr Kuha: I am not sure if we know exact numbers, but it is not nothing. It is in the double digits; that is my best recollection. Even then, they refuse. Maybe they are in a hurry when they exit the building or whatever, but it happens.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: How do you get to the postal voters?

Dr Kuha: We do not. One of the inherent and unavoidable challenges, difficulties, flaws of an exit poll is that it does not get to postal voters, unless there is some separate exercise to try to get to them, and we do not have one of those. If they voted very differently from those who vote in person, and, crucially, if the difference between them and the in-person voters changed from one election to another, we would be in trouble. If there is just a constant difference—postal voters are this many percentage points more for this party and against that party than the in-person voters—that difference gets cancelled when we take the difference between the two elections, so we have, again, a bit of insurance. This time, for example, there were some worries in advance. We got some information from a colleague, did some back of the envelope calculations about how worried we should be and concluded that we would not be worried, partly because there was nothing we could do about it, but it turns out that it was fine. Yes, postal voters are definitely a potential problem. Fortunately, so far, they have not been an actual problem for the exit poll.

Lord Hayward: Can I ask about the exit poll? You said earlier on that you did not adjust the polling stations that you used in both elections—2015 and 2017—at all. Yet, in 2015, you were dealing with a multidimensional election. You had UKIP; you had the Liberal Democrats representing 10% of the seats; you had the Scottish nationalist surge in Scotland, as well as the standard Conservative/Labour position. When you come to 2017, the structure of the election is very different. Were you minded to change polling stations in any way, or do you feel that you were doing so many that you would pick up this very different structure of an election?

Dr Kuha: I have two or maybe three separate points about that. First, whatever happens, we would not be minded to change the set of polling stations in any dramatic way, or to throw away existing ones for no

reason and add new ones. The methodological value of this design of going back to the same places is so absolutely central to the operation of the exit poll that that will not be given up. That is where we start. Everything else is subservient to that design.

Secondly, they are in no way a random sample of polling stations themselves. They are selected with some care, with other things in mind; for example, marginal seats are vastly overrepresented. What we have now is largely a historical legacy from when the—at the time separate—ITV and BBC exit polls were brought together for 2005. Whatever they happened to have at the time were the ones where they started. There have been some changes so far, and mostly the answer is that we hope it is robust enough to work, even when there are changes in patterns.

To a very small extent, there are changes in every election when the broadcasters can afford to add new polling stations. New ones can be selected freely, and they are always selected looking at whatever seems to be missing. For 2005, it was mostly focused on Liberal Democrats. In 2010, it was Scotland: plenty of extra seats in Scotland. This time, it was a bit of this and that, with two or three new ones, given things such as the UKIP situation. The new ones that get added—a small number—are selected with these sorts of things in mind, but those are really marginal tinkering.

Q18 Lord Smith of Hindhead: We have heard from the previous witnesses that polls just show a snapshot of the position or opinion on that day. It is not really surprising, therefore, that the exit polls are right and are more likely to be accurate than the other polls, because plainly that is the position on that day. We would be astounded if the exit polls were wrong, to be honest with you. Bearing in mind that these pre-election polls are just snapshots but unfortunately are often being used by media to forecast, do you think there is any purpose in pre-election polling?

Dr Lauderdale: If there is a purpose to electoral polling at all it is to give information—ideally, accurate information—to the public about the current disposition of the election, and to help people understand the opinions of their fellow citizens and the political context in which they are going to have to make a choice. That may evolve as the election approaches. In fact, most people do not change their votes, but some do. This election, more did than usually. If one is going to make an argument for the value of electoral polling in advance of an election, it is that it is another kind of information available to the public as they make their decision. This matters in certain contexts for local tactical reasons: if you understand, in your constituency, that two particular parties are going to be very competitive and the others are not going to be competitive, that might shape how you make a decision there, so there is constituency-level relevance. Then there is a broader relevance about simply what the electoral situation is.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: If a poll is influencing a vote or a vote intention but the poll is actually inaccurate, is that right?

Dr Lauderdale: Unfortunately, a great deal of inaccurate information is given to people over the course of an election. Polls have the advantage that they are attempting to get the details right, by and large, to the

extent that I have observed it. It is always unfortunate when voters are presented with inaccurate information in advance of an election, but I do not think polls are a particular source of that; nor do I think they are particularly influential on people's votes, except in some marginal cases.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: It would not be unfortunate; it would be a concern if inaccurate polls were being published specifically to change how people might vote—their intention—or the turnout. That would be not just unfortunate; that would be a serious concern, would it not?

Dr Lauderdale: If it were the case that people were knowingly publishing polls that were designed poorly on purpose—that can be anything from outright fabrication of data to making a variety of analysis decisions—with an aim of pushing the number in a particular direction, that would be concerning. I do not think that is happening to any great degree, but it would be difficult to know.

Dr Kuha: The original question had to do with the fact that polls are done before an election, which is a true fact and a difficulty for polls. To continue with the bigger question of whether it matters if they are wrong, they are public information, and equally public information is the fact that they are not always right. There is a history of what polls have achieved and what their accuracy has been. There is no denying or hiding that, so the information is there for the public to use. This is not really my professional business, because I am involved with the analysis, but it is not obvious to me why a poll—a particular piece of public information—with all the associated information about it being known, should somehow be treated differently from all the other information that is out there. There is absolutely no sign that they are conducted deliberately to try to mislead, for one thing because they are the one type of survey that, after the election, we know exactly whether they were right.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: But they have not been accurate, and they have been used to forecast.

Dr Kuha: That is true, but we know that.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Do you think that is right? What is the purpose? Is there a value of there ever being pre-election polling?

Dr Kuha: I do because, if we do not have that, we have other information, and most or all of the other information does not even try to be right.

Q19 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** As academics—Dr Lauderdale, you have already suggested this—you must sometimes be pained at the misrepresentation, the simplification, the manipulation of polling data, whether by the media or, indeed, by political parties. Do you think that academics should be more ready to step into the public arena, to alert the public to what may be going on and to elevate the quality of the public discussions about these matters, just as you are both doing today, but perhaps even more in the heat of battle—during election campaigns, for example?

Dr Lauderdale: I have made, possibly, the error of attempting to do this in the heat of elections in the past, so I think that would be a reasonable thing to do. To go back to the beginning of your question, yes, the way

polls are presented is often not ideal. There are particular pathologies in the way the media presents polls, which are frequent and well known: overemphasising small changes from the last poll or a poll done by a different pollster, changes that are consistent with the random variation inherent in any kind of survey.

These are known problems. There is value in trying to help the members of the media who would like to present this information more accurately to do so by providing them models of how you would do it. If people want to hype particular polls, it is difficult to stop them from doing that, just as they would hype other kinds of information around an election to make a point. As academics, we have many things to do. We have many things to do in advance of elections, as people who study elections. I would certainly encourage my colleagues who know about polling to be engaged. I am at least somewhat engaged myself, so I am happy to endorse that proposal.

Dr Kuha: I completely agree with all that, in that I think collaboration is the key. If an academic stands up during an election campaign and announces in some forum that this or that newspaper did not report things accurately, that is shouting in the wind, really—hence their power. We should work with both the polling companies and the media, as far as possible, to provide, where necessary, better models and tools. My own keen interest is in measures of uncertainty. When one newspaper's poll goes from plus two to plus 2.5, that is almost certainly not a change at all and well within the margin of error. Making that information and that sort of uncertainty more prominent in presentation, and having the tool of having those numbers, is really important.

I think it is being done. I suspect, in terms of academic statistics in my own field, that there already is and that will be more interest in working on these kinds of polls, based on the non-probability samples that we are talking about here, as we go forward.

Q20 **Baroness Couttie:** I would like to build on the points made by Lord Smith, who I think made some very interesting points. I do not think we would necessarily believe that polls are deliberately being set up to influence, but maybe, unintentionally, they are getting at incorrect advice, which you have just said provides information on which people then make up their voting decision. If, for example, polls were saying that one party was going to achieve a landslide, giving confidence to people who were not entirely happy with that party, and would like to register a protest vote, to vote in protest, and that poll turned out to be wildly wrong, we could have rather an undemocratic result. Surely, you would agree with that.

Dr Lauderdale: I would not say it is undemocratic. It would have been based on what proved to be erroneous information. It is important to ask how the information came to be erroneous, which is why I raised the issue of intent. Based on what I have seen of how polling works, errors tend to be towards the conventional wisdom, because pollsters live in the world that everyone lives in and they, just like everyone else, have a sense of what people are expecting. If anything, the tendency is that, when you get something out of your polling analysis that looks strange or is not what you expected to see, you are more likely to go and interrogate the

way you have done the analysis and potentially make amendments, in such a way that brings it back towards what you might call the herd.

The point is simply that, when polls are erroneous, they are often erroneous in a way that reflects what people already thought was going to happen, so the mechanism you have described, whereby people are forming these expectations and voting in response to those, in some sense, would have happened anyway.

To sum up the two points I made, it depends on the intent but it also depends on how big these errors are, whether they tend to reinforce conventional wisdom and things like that.

Baroness Couttie: I am sorry to bang on about this, but if the polls are consistently saying that one answer is going to be the result, and that, therefore, influences people to vote differently than they otherwise would—particularly in the case where you have a landslide versus it being very close—surely that is a very serious issue that we should be looking at.

Dr Lauderdale: I may simply be repeating myself, but it is clearly unfortunate when people make their voting decisions on erroneous information. Whether that is erroneous information about the likely outcome of an election, or erroneous information about the policies that are on offer or their likely consequences, these are all problematic.

Baroness Couttie: Yes, but we are talking about only one set of problems at the moment. We are not talking about media reporting of policy; we are talking about polls.

Dr Lauderdale: We are talking about these other things because there are lots of ways that people form expectations about an election. In some sense, I am agreeing with you that it is unfortunate when people make decisions based on incorrect information; I am simply noting that, as my colleague said very well, polls, by and large, are making a very serious effort to get it right. They will get it wrong sometimes. There is lots of other information out there that does not even meet that standard.

The Chairman: “Unfortunate” is a terribly weak word to use in this context. In 2015, we got the result we got because it was believed that there would be an alliance between the Labour Party and the Scottish National Party, because the polls said that was what would happen, and it was not. In 2017, Labour did a lot better than had been expected because voters felt they could go to the polls and vote for Labour, confident that they were not actually going to elect a Labour Government. Why did they think that? It is because that is what the polls told them. Look, in a democracy, it is not a small thing if you change the result. In particular, it is not a small thing when the thing that is changing the result is something that masquerades as concrete, reliable fact—numerical fact, backed by statisticians—when it is, in fact, not at all sound in its basic construction.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: This is my primary concern. I begin to think that, goodness, I have spent 40 years or more being incredibly naïve. I have assumed that this was one reasonably objective ingredient in an election campaign, with all the caveats that you very well described.

Going back to Lord Smith's very pertinent question, what is the point, given all the variations, of having these polls before the election? We have all agreed about the significance of the exit poll. The only simple answer we have had to that was from a previous witness, who said, "We like to think we know what our neighbours and others' opinion is and whether we are in tune with it". This seems to me not a very adequate reason for conducting polls or, indeed, putting the amount of weight that we do on them, as the Chairman has just described. We have to think very clearly about whether we are talking about something which is about psychology or social psychology, or actually something which is about a political decision or a statistical reality.

Dr Kuha: There is a premise in this discussion that it influences people's vote, and I am aware of hardly any actual research and not much convincing social science research that gives us any measure of what influences people's vote—whether it is this sort of thing. This premise that it was the polls that lost it in any particular election is at least questionable.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: That is not what I am saying.

Dr Lauderdale: It is speculative.

Baroness Couttie: Has the research been done into the previous two general elections?

Dr Lauderdale: There is simply no good way to do it, because we only observe the election campaign that occurred. You are describing such a profound change in the electoral context that it is very hard to imagine exactly what would occur, and it is very hard to show very precisely what it would be.

Baroness Couttie: That is the point, though, is it not? It has not been shown by research, because the research has not been done, probably for very good reasons. That is fine, but we do not know, so to say that it is not happening because there is no research to support it cannot be substantiated.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Following up on your particular point about 2015, we are not saying that it was the polls that influenced. The polls were inaccurate. They were then used. If you remember, the posters that the Conservatives had produced of Ed Miliband in the pocket of Alex Salmond, and then Nicola Sturgeon pulling the strings of Ed Miliband, were very powerful images, and they were based on inaccurate polls.

Dr Lauderdale: They were based on expectation. Those posters would have worked just as well, I think, without any numerical basis whatever. Similarly, in the 2017 election, certainly the conventional wisdom, even absent any polling information, seemed to suggest that a landslide victory was coming.

Lord Hayward: I challenge what Lord Foulkes has said as to which followed which in 2015, because it may have been that the alternative system of influences applied. Can I pick up on the question of methodology recently and deal with one major error? I am now going to quote from the American analysis of their opinion poll errors in 2016. They were incredibly accurate in the national vote; they were inaccurate in the

state votes, and the polling organisations undertook a review of why they got it wrong. On page 3 of their executive summary they say, “Adjusting for overrepresentation of college graduates was critical ... Many polls, especially at the state level, did not adjust their weights to correct for the overrepresentation of college graduates”. Since you have both worked in the States at one point or another, can you explain how polls could make such an error at state level in weightings when they did not make the same error at national level, and is there the possibility that we could have a similar error in the United Kingdom in terms of weightings?

Dr Lauderdale: I have not worked on US state-level polls. I have done similar multilevel regression and post-stratification approaches as applied to the US. Those are simply not particularly high-quality polls; that is very clearly revealed there. There is, essentially, no self-regulation of the polling industry in the US. There is nothing equivalent to the BPC. People looking at polls do not even that have that sort of stamp of approval to suggest that this is a reputable pollster. A further consequence of that is that much less information is provided by pollsters about their methods, so it would not necessarily have even been apparent to someone who saw one of these polls what they were weighting to or what they were not weighting to. There may also be some issues with data availability, although, certainly with education, I would expect that data to be available to have more reasonable targets. It is certainly the case that some polls are done poorly, and that seems like a relatively elementary error.

Dr Kuha: Just to build on and clarify that, I will make one point very clear. In the US, the national polls—the ones that were better or quite good, at least for the popular vote if not the Electoral College—are not the sum of the state-level polls. The national polls are done by big companies as one simple exercise, so they are the nearer equivalent to what happens here, because the UK is basically one market for the polling companies; it is so important to them, so they do it in that way. The state-level polls are done by a set of various organisations, some of them less well resourced and less competent than others, so it is there, in those state-level polls in the US, where a variety of quality arises, which is simply not there for the UK polls.

The Chairman: Do they have an equivalent of the British Polling Council that makes them publish the full details of what they are doing?

Dr Kuha: Does Professor Sturgis know the answer to this?

Professor Sturgis, Specialist Adviser: There is the American Association for Public Opinion Research, which has the transparency initiative. There are many more pollsters to regulate, of course, but that would be the closest to them.

Q21 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** We asked the previous witnesses about the 16 countries in the European Union that have banned polls before elections, and three of them for more than a week. Why do you think they came to that conclusion?

Dr Lauderdale: My sense is that they came to that conclusion due to some of the same concerns that have been raised by the Committee here about the possibility of polls influencing people’s decisions. The

consequences of that are very mixed. The quality of polling in many of those countries is not very good, although in some sense we do not really know because there is no way to evaluate the quality of the polling.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: It is not that good here either.

Dr Lauderdale: My sense is that it is those kinds of concerns.

Baroness Fall: Maybe we do not have time to explore this today, but I would be interested to know. In a world of free information, Google and all the rest of it, have the countries that have banned official polls had a mass of rogue polls, informal polls or hedgy polls? Before we chase the questioning down that route, do you lose control of something that was not great but get a mass of informal stuff coming from abroad or whatever? Maybe this is a question for another time but, for example, in those countries where they have banned polls for a couple of weeks, have there been lots of other polls—random, rogue polls?

Dr Kuha: Yes, and it does not have to be many, in the sense that, when you have an absence of other information, even a single thing that presents itself as a poll is likely to have influence. France, for example, had the Radio Carolines of the polling world, so they had polls done in Tunisia, Belgium or somewhere like that. Internet crosses borders these days. It happens in those countries where there are no regulated polls within the country. They are likely to be done elsewhere, and then the information filters back into the country, so that it is very likely to happen. I do not think that is a better situation than regulating polls within the country. I have no particular information on how many of those there have been and the perception of how influential they were, for example, in the most recent French elections, but that is clearly a possible and very likely consequence of this scenario.

Q22 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** You have told us, Professor Kuha, that there is no evidence that published opinion poll findings influence voting behaviour. I assume you were referring to publication in newspapers. Would you say the same about data collected and distributed through social media?

Dr Kuha: When I talk about evidence, I refer to social science research into evidence of such an effect, whether through newspapers or anything else. In that respect, I have no knowledge of the different avenues of impact, whether through newspapers or social media. I guess, these days, if there were any effects of anything, they would be likely to go through social media in one way or another, but that is not saying much at this point, because they are so pervasive.

Dr Lauderdale: On the same point, I do not think either of us would say there is no influence of any poll on any voter. The question is of magnitude, and there is no evidence of the sort of large effects that you would be able to detect. I certainly do not want anyone to come away with the understanding that I think no poll has ever influenced anyone—they surely have—but the evidence for them broadly shaping the outcome of elections is simply not there.

Baroness Couttie: Is there evidence, though, that they do not? It goes back to my point: has the research been done?

Dr Lauderdale: What one can say is that there are bounds on the plausible sizes of these effects, based on what we observe going on in the world, including how many people switch from voting for one party at one election to another. I do not have a number to give you, but my sense of the evidence and what is plausible, given the patterns we see, is that these effects cannot be that large.

Dr Kuha: I would ask the question: which way round is the burden of proof here?

Baroness Couttie: It is about making sure we have the right system.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: Are professional pollsters nervous about the inroads of social media into providing an alternative route to knowing something about what other people think?

Dr Lauderdale: Not being a professional pollster myself, it is a bit presumptuous of me to speculate, but I do not think they ought to be particularly worried. All the issues we discussed—the difficulty of getting representative samples and all this—are real in polls. There are tools to address them. They have not always been successful but there are reasonable prospects for them being successful. Those problems are far more serious than any kind of inference about public mood on the basis of social media, so I do not think pollsters should be particularly concerned about accurate predictions on the basis of social media. I think we might all be concerned about inaccurate predictions.

The Chairman: Thank you very much. I have long held the theory that if you want to have a really interesting and lively meeting, you invite two statisticians to speak. It could be because I am chairing the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Statistics, but it really has been a very lively session and you have brought out many of the issues that we will have to address in the course of our work, so thank you both very much for your time and your excellent and interesting answers.

Ladbrokes and Political Betting — Oral evidence (QQ 56–63)

Evidence Session No. 7

Heard in Public

Questions 56 - 63

Tuesday 17 October 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Baroness Jay of Paddington (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Baroness Fall; Baroness Ford; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Howarth of Newport; Lord Lipsey; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve; Lord Rennard; Lord Smith of Hindhead.

Witnesses

I: Mike Smithson, Editor, Political Betting; Matthew Shaddick, Head of Political Betting, Ladbrokes.

Examination of witnesses

Mike Smithson and Matthew Shaddick.

Lord Lipsey took the Chair.

Q56 The Chairman: Mr Shaddick and Mr Smithson, welcome to this evidence session. You should have in front of you a list of interests that have been declared by Members of the Committee. The meeting is live on television, so you need to be careful to that extent. However, you are protected by parliamentary privilege, so you can be as rude as you like about anyone you like and will not get sued, although you may be attacked on social media. There will be a transcript. When that transcript comes to you afterwards, you can correct anything about which you feel you misspoke.

I suppose that I should declare an interest, having taken a very nice three-figure sum off Laddies by backing the Lib Dems to get fewer than 10 seats in the 2015 election. The only other political bet that I have had in recent years was on Jeremy Corbyn to become Labour leader, at 16/1. However, collecting on that made me feel so ashamed that I missed the political bet of the century—on leave in the Brexit referendum, which was around 6/1 or 7/1 on the day and about a 2/1 or 9/4 shot on the polls. I just could not bear to back leave to win. It was a great mistake.

We would very much like to hear from you on this point, in particular. We have the polls. Clearly, to a considerable extent the betting markets reflect poll findings. I am interested in what you think betting markets can add by way of information that is not apparent from a study of the polls.

Mike Smithson: I do not think that betting markets add very much. When people make bets, they are trying to make money—it is as simple as that. To try to create some sort of alternative forecasting model out of things is crazy, because the people who tend to bet are very influenced by the odds. That is why during the referendum a lot of money was going on leave. Who wanted to bet on remain at 1/3 when you could get 3/1 or 4/1

on leave? It is the odds that determine it. I do not think that you can read too much into it.

The Chairman: Do you agree with the proposition that the markets largely reflect the polls, because the views of punters in the market are largely determined by the polls?

Mike Smithson: Not necessarily. The last general election was absolutely fascinating. The overwhelming narrative was that the Conservatives were going to win a landslide. That was reinforced by the local elections on 4 May, when the Tories did extremely well. The polls had been proved broadly right then, so people were not looking at it sceptically. The overwhelming narrative that was created affected any polls that came out that were outside that narrative. I think of the Survation poll in the *Mail on Sunday* on the Sunday before the election, of the YouGov model, which was giving very different information, and of the Andrew Neil interview on the day before the election with the boss of Survation, who was completely derided when, in fact, his poll was almost spot on. Punters were going with the narrative, rather than the actual poll numbers.

The Chairman: One of which you provide. Mr Shaddick, do you want to add to that?

Matthew Shaddick: Yes. I take a slightly different view. When there are polls for elections—of course, we sometimes offer odds on elections where there is not any polling—polling data tends to be the most important factor, I imagine, in motivating people when they are deciding whether or not to have a bet. Of course, it is not the only piece of information that you can use in order to try to predict an election result. The EU referendum is quite a good example. In my opinion, one of the reasons why the betting markets were more confident, on the face of it, that remain would win than the polling data suggested was that there was some political science evidence that in votes like this around the world on big constitutional issues the status quo side tended to do a bit better on the day. That was a perfectly valid reason why the markets and the polls differed, based on that extra piece of information.

Q57 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** I am grateful to have the opportunity to ask Mike Smithson a question. I retweet him regularly, in spite of my scepticism about polls. I have a very simple question. When you post your tweets, what is your motivation?

Mike Smithson: My motivation is to spread information. It is as simple as that. I think that I have built up a reputation for fairly straightforward, honest reporting. I report the numbers. I would like to think that I am a good source for that.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Answer this question from your heart of hearts. Do you report them in what you believe to be a totally impartial way, or does your own political persuasion affect it—as does mine, by the way?

Mike Smithson: I like to think that it does not, but you could probably analyse my tweets and come to the conclusion that it does. I like to report what I think is factual. I like to be regarded as a reliable source of polling and other data on Twitter and through my site.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: When we look at your tweets, most of us know your background and that you may be putting something forward because you have a particular point of view. You tweet under your own name, but there are so many tweets now under false names. You do not know about anything about them. In their biography, they put up some rubbish about themselves. That is a worry about social media, is it not?

Mike Smithson: Yes, but I think that good money chases after quality people on Twitter. People who are seen to be reliable build up a follower base. It is as simple as that. If you are not seen to be reliable, it does not get there, although I worry about the apparent involvement of outside forces and the supposed so-called bot factories in Leningrad. Aside from that, people tend to follow what they have come to trust.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: As you know, on the Scottish scene there have been a lot of problems with cybernats and abuse. There is a particularly obnoxious person who tweets under the title Wings Over Scotland.

Mike Smithson: I know him.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: He is really awful. All that leads some of us to believe that there needs to be some kind of regulation. What do you think about that?

Mike Smithson: When people get offensive to me personally, I simply block them or mute them, so that I do not see them. It is a hard issue, but it will sort itself out naturally. That is the hope. The thing that I really dislike is the way in which prominent women on Twitter face the most massive levels of abuse, which is absolutely appalling.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Diane Abbott is a notable person who has suffered a lot.

Mike Smithson: Just about any prominent woman on Twitter is liable to have to face abuse on an awful level—threats of rape and all of that. I find that absolutely appalling.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: I suppose that it also happens in the mainstream media, if anyone reads the *Daily Mail* from time to time.

Q58 **Baroness Ford:** My question is to Matthew. Like the Chairman, I am a bit of a punter, so I must declare an interest as well. I have a Ladbrokes account. I bet mainly on horses, but I am always interested in the political polling. If you look over the long run, you guys tend to be closer, by and large, than the opinion polls are. I am intrigued as to what your methodology is when you set and change those odds. What methodology do you use, as a company, to come to your conclusions and to set odds?

Matthew Shaddick: If you are talking about the initial setting of odds—if, say, a by-election was called tomorrow and we had to come up with some prices straightaway—it mostly involves looking at national opinion polls and at the results.

Baroness Ford: So you use the polls to start with.

Matthew Shaddick: Yes. In so far as there is much maths and stats behind it, it is mostly polls based. However, pretty quickly the main thing

that matters is the weight of money that we are taking on the various options that we are presenting. It is mostly a supply and demand situation, where the balance of punters' money is what ultimately decides where the odds will end up. There is not a lot of election forecasting from me once we have got to the stage where we have a very big liquid market. It is more about managing liabilities and risk.

Baroness Ford: So it is purely the movement of money. Once the initial odds are set, as with everything else, it is just—

Matthew Shaddick: Yes. Our opinion may play a small part, but a very small part compared with the amounts of money that are being placed.

Baroness Ford: Do you have political advisers or a group of people whom you use? Do you simply look at the polls to set the starting odds?

Matthew Shaddick: It is the latter. We do not have a team of advisers or insiders, or anything like that.

Baroness Ford: Do other companies use people like that, or do you all tend to use the same kind of methodology?

Matthew Shaddick: To be honest, I think that most other comparable companies of a similar size to us do not even employ a dedicated political specialist. I could be wrong about that. I think that Ladbrokes Coral is unusual in that regard. It is not completely unique, but I doubt very much that any other bookmakers are paying any money to people to advise them. There may be some.

Baroness Ford: Is that your sole job at Ladbrokes, or do you do other things?

Matthew Shaddick: It is about 95% of what I have been doing for the last three or four years. I have some input into a few other things—things like "Strictly Come Dancing". Most of my time in the last few years has been taken by politics, because we have had a lot of interesting, competitive elections recently.

Baroness Ford: What was your background before you came to this job?

Matthew Shaddick: I have an academic background in political science and statistics. Although I worked at Ladbrokes beforehand, it was mostly to do with horseracing.

Q59 **Lord Rennard:** Could both of you develop a bit further the thesis that Mike Smithson announced—that, basically, people bet on political outcomes just to make a bit of money, as they might with horseracing? Do you think that there is any evidence that people bet politically in order to influence the betting market, with a view to influencing the outcome of the election? I have evidence that people sometimes place their bets in the early stages of a by-election, for example, when not much money has been placed. At that point, a substantial bet can change the odds significantly, which affects the media perception of what the horserace, if I can call it that, is in the election. I have also seen it in leadership elections, when people bet on their favoured candidate in order to shorten the odds and to be seen to give them a better chance. If that is happening, should there not be greater health warnings from Ladbrokes or social media sites such as PoliticalBetting.com to tell people it may be happening?

Mike Smithson: Indeed. There was a very good example of that in the Lib Dem leadership race in 2006. A lot of money was going on Chris Huhne, who was a new MP; he had been in Parliament for only about eight months. He moved in from 200/1 to tighter than evens within a very short time. There were all sorts of suggestions about some notable Lib Dem figure who was trying to boost Chris's chances. I approached him directly, because I included this in my book as an example. He denied it, so I take it that he had no involvement. You can see that in local by-elections, as well. There was a very interesting one, on which Matthew will probably expand in greater detail: the Bradford by-election that George Galloway won. As I recall, Ladbrokes was finding people going into the shops to back Galloway at 10/1 or 5/1—at long odds. You assume that they were trying to influence the market, rather than trying to make money on the election.

The Chairman: How much liquidity is there in these markets? If it is a very thin market, getting Chris Huhne from 200/1 to even money might—

Mike Smithson: At that stage, there was very little liquidity. In Lib Dem leadership markets, it is only a six-figure, or maybe a five-figure—

The Chairman: Can you give us an idea of what liquidity is in the main general election market? What can it be for the biggest parties? What would Ladbrokes take?

Matthew Shaddick: In the most recent UK general election, Ladbroke Coral took £5 million or so on the election as a whole. If you took all the UK fixed odds for bookmakers—not including exchanges, spread-betting and so on—you might be up to £50 million or, perhaps, £100 million. I am not sure.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: What proportion of your business is it? For Mr Smithson, this is a specific thing. For Ladbrokes, is it a very small proportion of the business?

Matthew Shaddick: The individual events are quite important and would figure in our top 10 events of the year in money taken. I do not know the exact figure for politics as a whole, but it would probably be less than 1% of all the sports bets that we took.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: So it is very small.

Matthew Shaddick: It is pretty small.

The Chairman: When Hill's started in this a long time ago—I think that it was Graham Sharpe, who retired recently—it made no bones about the fact that it was doing it to get publicity in newspapers, rather than to make money. Do you make money on your political book, over time?

Matthew Shaddick: I think that that is true. Ten years ago, this was mostly a PR-led operation, but these days it is fairly serious. Amounts to date have grown quite a lot. We have been lucky enough to turn a small profit, if you take all the major events recently.

Mike Smithson: I used to advise one of the other big bookmakers. I got quite frustrated that all it was interested in was getting headlines. It wanted stories; it was not really interested in the betting aspects of it. That is quite common. General elections are very different, because of

their sheer scale. On the Betfair markets, you were seeing £60 million, £70 million or £80 million of bets traded within a very short time. That is very different. Bookmakers are very keen to be reported on the front pages, rather than on the back pages, because they are aiming for a different sort of audience. Of course, politics gets them into prospective punters whom they would not be able to reach otherwise. If they can get them to sign up to accounts, it is even better. It is used as a loss leader. However, general elections are totally different. They are real betting events.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Maybe we can find out why the Liberal Democrats were doing so well in by-elections a few years ago.

If the polls are incorrect for a newspaper, the editor just gets a red face. If the polls are incorrect for you, you will lose a significant amount of money, so you have a bit more interest in this. Clearly, there has been a huge rise in political betting. We have seen the figure of up to £100 million at the last election. It is probably attracting those who are not always attracted to gambling—those who want to bet on horseracing, dog-racing and other sports. There is a different section of society that may be involved in this and will open up accounts, although obviously there will be some crossover as well. Have you found that the increase in tipsters—or affiliates posing as tipsters—on social media and the internet is leading people into political betting?

Matthew Shaddick: No. I do not have those figures in front of me. I would be surprised if it was significant in this area.

Q60 **The Chairman:** Are you worried about the use of polls to manipulate markets—where somebody has either an imaginary or a real, but phoney, poll that is used to knock out one party and back the other one?

Matthew Shaddick: I do not know whether it was at the general election—it may have been at the US election—but I saw one or two instances where, essentially, people had forged press releases from polling companies. I do not know what the motivation behind that was. I do not remember seeing any link between that and any betting activity afterwards. If it does exist, it is fairly small, I imagine.

Baroness Fall: My question follows on from Lord Smith's. Are you aware of who the people who bet are, especially in general elections? Do any women bet? It is an odd question, but I find it interesting. Clearly, betting is quite influential—especially when it comes to the leaders of the parties. Does it involve way more men than women? Are we seeing a very influential thing take place that is more male than female?

Mike Smithson: I think that that is very much the case. I reckon that the traffic on my site is 95% male. We have some prominent females as well, but it is very much a male obsession. Males love digging deep into data, and that sort of thing.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Baroness Ford and I are raising our eyebrows at each other across the table.

The Chairman: We know that in other forms of betting, such as on horseracing, there are very few people who make money at it—or, at

least, who would make money, if you did not limit their bets. Are there people who are similar in the political betting field?

Matthew Shaddick: There are certainly accounts that I would expect to turn a profit from betting, in the long run. I am not aware of anyone who can make a full-time living out of it—there are simply not enough election betting opportunities to do that—but there are plenty of very shrewd people out there of whom I would be a bit wary.

The Chairman: You have shut everybody up by taking them into this strange and unfamiliar world.

Q61 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** I was wondering about Brexit, which is causing great anxiety. I know that Mike Smithson has been doing some work on this. How do you see it developing? I do not mean, “How do you see Brexit developing?” How do you see the coverage of it and the polling in relation to it? For example, will what someone has described as “Brexit buyer’s remorse” be measurable and measured regularly?

Mike Smithson: Yes. We are seeing a lot of polling questions. The sorts of polling questions that I like are those that are in a standard format and that we see all the time, because you can make valid comparisons. Peter Kellner has a piece in the latest *Prospect* in which he suggests that there is some buyer’s remorse coming in. I can see his argument, but it is based on a minute amount of data. We need to wait until we get some more polling, from other sources, before we can come to any conclusions. YouGov’s tracker—which I regard as the most reliable, in that the question has been asked in the same way so often—has gone from about a lead of 4% of people thinking that it was right to 5% thinking that it was wrong, in the latest poll, but that could easily pop back. This is all margin-of-error stuff. However, there is something there. I would not have gone as far as Kellner, in making the observations that he did.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: The result of the referendum took a lot of people by surprise—not least the Brexiteers. You will remember the looks on the faces of the three stooges, as I call them. They looked just as surprised as the rest of us, because they had not expected it to turn out in that way. Do you think that the polls were manipulated in any way? Do you think that the betting was manipulated? There were lots of very rich businesspeople on the leave side. They are still in this Leave Means Leave campaign. Do you think that there was any manipulation of the polls? Is there any evidence of that?

Mike Smithson: I have absolute faith in the operations of the polls that come under the British Polling Council—proper polls. Sometimes they may get it wrong, but they are honest polls. What happened with the referendum polling—I was monitoring and tweeting on this daily—was that polls that showed remain leads tended to get more prominence in the media than those that showed leave leads. In fact, if you look at the whole of June 2016, you will find that more polls were showing leave leads than were showing remain leads, but that was not the narrative that was coming out. There was a big argument going on at the time about whether telephone polls, which tended to be more prone to remain than to leave, were more accurate than internet polls. There were those effects,

but I do not believe that there was any actual manipulation of the polls to get the results.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Matthew, do you know whether there was a lot of money put on the leave side as we got close to the referendum?

Matthew Shaddick: If there was a problem with the EU referendum betting markets, it was the other way around. The issue was that the most affluent sections of society were mostly behind remain, which may be a small part of the explanation why remain was relatively well favoured by the betting markets versus the opinion polls.

Q62 **Lord Smith of Hindhead:** Why do you think that the pollsters in 2015, the referendum and the last election got it so wrong?

Mike Smithson: In 2015, it was clear. They took the view that when people said, 10 out of 10, that they were going to vote on election day, all voters were the same. In fact, from some of the analysis that Patrick has done, we know that there were issues. In 2017, they were trying to correct the mistakes of 2015, to the extent that the massive influx of new voters, plus the dramatic decline in elderly voters—the 65-plus group—took everybody by surprise. They were fighting the last war. I suspect that at the next election they will be fighting the last war again. That is a big problem.

One of the things that I always say is that voting intention polls are perhaps not as indicative as leader ratings. Look at the other big polling errors. In 1992, it was massive. John Major won by 7% or 8% and won a majority, completely against the run of polling. However, if you look at the leader ratings, he had very solid leads—right across the board—over Neil Kinnock. In 2015, David Cameron had very substantial leads over Ed Miliband right to the end. In 2017, there was real evidence in some of the final polling that perceptions in relation to Theresa May had moved very much against her. The final YouGov leader rating had her in negative territory. I think that that was a better indicator.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: If your view is that the same mistakes are going to be made at the next election—

Mike Smithson: Not the same mistakes.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: If they will be fighting the same war again, where will you get the information to fix your odds, Mr Shaddick?

Matthew Shaddick: I largely agree with Mike's analysis of the problems in the last two elections. Luckily, from my experience, the polling companies are mostly full of very clever, diligent people who will try their best to learn the lessons. I still think that it will be the most reliable source of information in the long run.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: So you would advise us to look at the polls, not at your odds.

Matthew Shaddick: No, I would advise people to look at both. Essentially, polls are not predictions of results—certainly not this far out—whereas betting markets are attempting to take on that information, with all the other available information. The side-effect is that they should be another source of prediction, if you want to look at that.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: The biggest betting market, of course, is the City of London, which wants to know exactly what the outcome is going to be, because it affects all sorts of things. Do you have links with the City of London, to find out what it is seeing? It has its own forms of getting this type of information.

Matthew Shaddick: We have no formal links like that. There was a lot of interest, especially around the referendum, in looking at the differences, or the similarities, between the way in which the foreign exchange markets and the betting markets were working. There seemed to be some overlap there. However, we certainly have no formal ties with anybody like that.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Following on from what you have just said, some people have said to us that the difference between the polls and the betting odds is that you are trying to make a forecast, whereas the polls are just taking a snapshot, as they always say. Do you recognise that as being possible?

Matthew Shaddick: That is absolutely true. If you have a reliable average of polls a month out from an election, there is no particular reason to think that that average of polls is going to be replicated a month later. In fact, you can see tendencies in previous elections for one party to do slightly differently. You are right. They are trying to do two different things.

Q63 **The Chairman:** Can I ask about the betting markets and social media? Jean Pierre Kloppers, the representative of one of the most reputable companies that are trying to do social media forecasting, has been in front of us. He did not claim that they could outperform polls, but he did claim that social media could be a forward indicator of how polls were likely to move. He said that they might be two weeks ahead of opinion polls and claimed that in the last election, when there was a big movement, the social media were showing that two weeks before it happened. Do you follow social media as an indication of what may be likely to happen, or do you prefer to rely on the hard data of polls?

Matthew Shaddick: I much prefer to rely on the hard data. I try to expose myself to as many different opinions as possible on social media. I think that that is quite important if you are trying to gauge the public mood, as far as that is possible, from Twitter and so on. However, I am quite sceptical as to whether it is a forward indicator.

Mike Smithson: You find that there is a bias towards the young and the left. I know that if a poll comes out and Jeremy Corbyn is seen to be doing well, it will get many more retweets than if he is not seen to be doing well. That is just the nature of it. It reflects the Twitter audience, which is clearly not representative of voters as a whole.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Does Ladbrokes try to predict the date of the next election?

Matthew Shaddick: Yes, we have a market on the year of the next election.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: What is the favourite?

Matthew Shaddick: I think that 2019 is a narrow favourite at the moment—5/2, maybe.

The Chairman: I am not rushing to take that price. I think that it may be 2020.

Mike Smithson: It is very hard to see how another election takes place. I think that it will be 2022.

Matthew Shaddick: That is a 3/1 shot.

Mike Smithson: I am not tying up my money for that length of time.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: David is the big better here.

The Chairman: As I said, I have had only two bets in two years. That is probably why I am a bit ahead.

You have given us a very fascinating insight into this realm. It is interesting to think how much it will affect our deliberations. It is also very interesting that neither of you has claimed that political markets are some miraculous tool for forecasting that should make polls redundant. It is very helpful for us to know that. Unless my colleagues have any further questions, we can let you go. Thank you very much for spending time with us this morning.

Matthew Shaddick: Thank you. It has been a pleasure.

Dr Benjamin Lauderdale and Dr Jouni Kuha – Oral evidence (QQ 14–22)

Dr Benjamin Lauderdale and Dr Jouni Kuha – Oral evidence (QQ 14–22)

[Transcript to be found under Dr Jouni Kuha](#)

Dr Benjamin Lauderdale – Written evidence (PPD0002)

Submission to House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media

Benjamin E Lauderdale

11 August 2017

I am an Associate Professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science. I served as an academic member of the British Polling Council inquiry into the 2015 pre-election polls that was published in 2016.⁴⁰ Subsequently, I was commissioned to develop models for YouGov to generate national and sub-national polling estimates of voting in advance of the 2016 UK referendum on EU membership,⁴¹ the 2016 US general election,⁴² and the 2017 UK general election.⁴³ The last of these correctly predicted a hung parliament and 93% (589/632) of the individual seats in England, Scotland and Wales.⁴⁴ I have also provided consulting services for financial institutions regarding these elections. This statement is submitted on an individual basis in response to the call for evidence posted at <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/lords-committees/political-polling-digital-media/Call-for-evidence.pdf>.

1

The most significant challenges for conducting political opinion polling and achieving accurate results surround the difficulty of collecting representative samples of the set of individuals who will vote, at reasonable cost and speed in advance of an election. Eligible voters vary in their willingness to respond to polls and the ease with which pollsters can contact them. One class of measures which could be taken to improve the accuracy of political opinion polling is to improve the quality of raw samples. Political polls are usually done quickly using readily available respondents (those who respond to a small number of attempted phone calls or those who are already members of online panels). In contrast, official surveys are completed more slowly and at higher expense. This involves many attempts to contact individuals once they are selected to be in the sample, to ensure that the sample is representative of those who are difficult to contact as well as those who respond immediately. Thus, one concrete set of measures available to increase the quality of raw samples is to increase the level of effort that is made to contact potential respondents. In the context of phone polls, this means trying phone numbers many times; in the context of online panels, it means actively recruiting panelists rather than relying on people who opt in. The face-to-face component of the British Election Study is an example of a political opinion survey completed with a high level of effort to secure participation, resulting in high response rates, and which has proven to be of high quality against relevant validation benchmarks (vote and turnout) compared to online and phone polls. However, I want to note here that there is still a potential downside associated

⁴⁰ http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/3789/1/Report_final_revised.pdf

⁴¹ <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2016/06/21/yougov-referendum-model/>

⁴² <https://today.yougov.com/us-election/>

⁴³ <https://yougov.co.uk/uk-general-election-2017/>

⁴⁴ <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2017/06/09/the-day-after/>

with attempting to make more recontact attempts: this only helps accuracy if opinion is not changing very quickly. In a fast moving election like the 2017 general election, lengthy field periods can hurt rather than help the accuracy of final polls.

A second class of measures which could be taken to improve the accuracy of political opinion polling is to improve the quality of the analysis done by pollsters to adjust their raw samples for known ways in which they are unrepresentative. In 2017 some pollsters used ad hoc adjustment strategies, presumably because they did not trust their raw data after the 2015 polling miss. Other pollsters attempted to better model demographic turnout patterns, but did so in ways that effectively double-counted those demographic patterns, creating a bias towards the Conservative party in their polling. The underlying problems faced by political pollsters are long-standing ones in survey research, there are no easy solutions. Nonetheless, there is room for significant improvement in the approaches pollsters use to address those problems.

2

When we ask individuals which party they will vote for, and whether they will vote at all, this can be a sensitive survey question. While the vast majority of respondents will give truthful answers of their intention at the time, not all will do so. Individuals who support certain parties may not wish to say so to an interviewer, depending on their perception of the interviewer's own views. Individuals who have not or will not vote may wish to say that they did so. These social desirability biases are not unique to political polls/surveys, they occur in other types of survey research. There is little evidence to suggest that the accuracy of political opinion polling is fundamentally different from other forms of opinion surveys that use the same data collection and analysis methods, and ask similarly sensitive questions.

3

One methodological innovation of the 2017 general election versus previous general elections was the multilevel regression and post-stratification (MRP) model that I developed to analyse YouGov's polling data, in collaboration with Delia Bailey (YouGov), Jack Blumenau (UCL), and Douglas Rivers (YouGov & Stanford). This project was a result of YouGov's efforts to explore alternative approaches to analysing their polling data, and so the estimates from our "polling model" were released daily in parallel with YouGov's conventionally analysed polling for the Times, which was produced by another team.⁴⁵ MRP is an alternative strategy for survey analysis that has been developed by statisticians and political scientists over the last two decades, but which has only begun to be applied to pre-election polling in the last few years. Whether MRP is better than conventional weighting strategies for national-level polling has no general answer, either strategy could work just as well in theory. What is clear is that MRP can yield informative sub-national---in the case of a UK general election, constituency---estimates with far fewer respondents than would be required to conduct 600+ constituency polls using conventional weighting strategies. The reason that this is possible is that MRP uses information about the patterns of vote intention across different types of individuals in combination with data on the distribution of those types across constituencies to extrapolate

⁴⁵ <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2017/06/07/two-methods-one-commitment-yougovs-polling-and-mod/>

the patterns in a national sample onto each constituency. Effectively, this means that MRP uses information from similar constituencies to make up for limited sample size in each constituency. For example, in the 2017 election, for example, the level of support for Leave and Remain in a constituency was a good predictor of swings between the different parties. Because Leave and Remain supporters could be seen to be switching between parties in different ways in the pre-election polling, these variable constituency level swings could be predicted. The MRP approach applies this logic not just to a single predictor of vote choice like EU referendum vote, but to all of those that are available, finding which patterns are relevant to vote choice and calculating their implications at the constituency level.

In the 2017 election, our approach produced a good estimate of the national margin between the Conservatives and Labour (estimated 3.4%, actual 2.5%), while somewhat underestimating both the Conservatives and Labour relative to the minor parties. These predictions had the Conservatives at 41.6% with an interval of 39.2-43.9% and Labour at 38.2 with an interval of 36.1-40.6%. The actual GB (not UK) result was Conservatives at 43.5% and Labour at 41.0%, both of which were around the top of the respective prediction intervals. It is important to emphasize that it is possible to get lucky on a national vote prediction in a single election, even if the underlying methodology is not sound. In contrast, it is almost impossible to get lucky on 600+ constituency-level predictions. As mentioned at the outset, 93% of the individual seat predictions from our model were correct as to the winner. This is better (by 1%) than one would have done if one had known the true swings in Scotland, Wales, and each region of England, and had applied uniform swing within each separately. The model correctly predicted Labour gains in seats that had been held by the Conservatives for decades (Kensington, Canterbury) while also correctly predicting Conservative gains from Labour in constituencies Labour had held for decades (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, Stoke-on-Trent South). As with the national vote predictions, the constituency point estimates were provided with an interval assessment of uncertainty. The constituency-level predictions were necessarily less precise, and were clearly presented as such. For example, in Canterbury, Labour was predicted to win 45% (38-53%) against the Conservatives 43% (36-49%), compared to a result where Labour won narrowly with both parties on 45%. Overall, the 95% prediction intervals that we published included 86% of the constituency vote share results for the Conservatives and 87% for Labour, indicating that the model was overconfident in its stated level of uncertainty, but only slightly so. Examples of the way that the predictions were presented on YouGov's website are included as Figures 1 and 2 at the end of this document. YouGov's political and web design team put a great deal of thought into how best to present these estimates so as to clearly convey a level of uncertainty.

Our application of MRP is an example of technological innovation improving the accuracy of national polling as well as providing novel estimates of the politically relevant outcome of the election, the seat totals for each party. The model was not perfect, but it got the general picture right and a remarkable degree of the details as well. We have learned a great deal about how to generate good national and constituency-level estimates for a UK general election, and we think there are ways we can improve on what we did next time. Given the short timeline of the snap election we were unable to prepare estimates for Northern Ireland, but we hope to do so in the future.

4

Assessing public confidence in the accuracy of political opinion polls is difficult. The question is not whether individuals say (in polls) that they are confident in polls but rather whether they are influenced by the results of those polls in how they think about what is likely to happen. As of a poll on 30-31 May, 62% of Britons expected the Conservatives to secure a majority, 20% said they did not know, and only 7% expected the type of hung parliament that actually occurred. Given that this was both broadly consistent with the polls available at that time as well as conventional wisdom among commentators, it is difficult to know which led the public to these expectations.

5

Polling data does not speak for itself, analysis is required to correct for the ways that raw samples are unrepresentative of voters. This means that the decisions of analysts can shape the reported estimates, and their preconceptions and preferences about elections may do so as well. Risks of 'cherry-picking' results can be mitigated by adopting a standard analysis methodology and strictly maintaining it throughout an election period, but even this comes at the cost of being unable to fix emergent problems should they arise. The BPC solution of transparency with respect to methodological changes is an attempt to balance these concerns.

It is my view that conventional wisdom about the likely result of a referendum or election is a far greater threat to pollsters making sound methodological decisions than any desire to get particular results for those who commission the polls. The less confident that pollsters are that they have good raw data and good analysis methods, the more they will tend to explore alternative "tweaks" to their methods until they find one that gives them the results that they expect to find. YouGov was widely referred to as "brave" for publishing the hung parliament prediction on 31 May⁴⁶ and was more explicitly ridiculed by many who confidently expected a Conservative majority.⁴⁷ The team that worked on the MRP model was sufficiently confident in the soundness of the method that we did not make changes in our methods to find the answer others were expecting to see, however I am not sure that all pollsters are as confident in the soundness of their data and analysis.

6

Political opinion polls certainly shape the political debate and interactions between voters, politicians and political parties during election campaigns. However, so does the pre-polling conventional wisdom: what really is shaping these interactions are expectations about what results are likely. People will form expectations regarding the likely outcomes of elections regardless of whether there are polls or not. I know of no convincing evidence that the publication of voting intention polls in particular affects voters' decisions with respect to turnout or party choice to any significant degree. This is not to say that it could not occur.

⁴⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/31/yougov-poll-predicting-hung-parliament-brave>

⁴⁷ <https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-05-31/may-s-u-k-election-campaign-adviser-hits-back-over-yougov-poll>

7

It is my hope that Will Jennings (University of Southampton) will make a contribution regarding how the accuracy of political opinion polling in the UK compares internationally, as he is the foremost expert on the subject. In short, based on my reading of his research, polls are worse in the UK than many countries because of structural features of the electoral system, but there is no evidence that polls are getting worse over time either internationally or in the UK.

8-10

It is my personal view that the polling industry's current model of self-regulation is fit for purpose. The UK polling industry is more transparent regarding methodology, and methodology changes, than the industry elsewhere, precisely because of the BPC's disclosure rules. I am not inherently opposed to new regulation, but I have heard no regulatory proposals that would improve the quality of polling or its public interpretation. Countries that restrict polling in the run-up to elections and referendums create poor incentives for pollsters to be accurate, and do little to quell discussion of who is likely to win the impending election. They merely guarantee that the discussion occurs on the basis of rumour rather than commonly available information. It is difficult for me to comment on the merits of increased transparency of the use of private polling by financial institutions without a specific proposal.

11

The way that the media reports on opinion polls could be improved. There is a long-standing tendency to over-interpret small differences from poll to poll, or between polls by different pollsters. One step that could be taken to improve how the media reports the results of political opinion polls would be to prepare a set of guidelines for the presentation and contextualisation of a new poll. For example, if an article reports that the latest poll from Company A has moved X% towards Labour versus the last poll from Company A, the article should also report some kind of interval estimate on that shift (typically these are larger than one might suspect). The interval estimate would indicate the range of actual shifts in support that are broadly consistent with the observed shift between the two polls. For example, a +2 movement towards Labour between the two polls might be broadly consistent with a -2 to +6 movement to Labour in reality over the same period, and thus only weakly suggestive that the public is actually shifting in that direction. Clearly the suggested language needs to be more carefully thought out than I have done here: I am using "broadly consistent" here for a 95% confidence interval, which itself is not precisely calculable for all polls. Other types of comparisons (between polls of different pollsters, between subgroups, etc) could have their own suggested presentation and contextualisation. The goal should be to help journalists who want to present polling evidence carefully to do so.

12










I do not know if increased media demand for political opinion polls, or the speed of their reporting, has had an impact on accuracy. For that to be the case, it would need to be true that in past election cycles greater effort was made to achieve high response rates, which is the most time intensive component of doing a high quality social survey.

13

I do not know of any reliable evidence regarding the impact of increased use of digital media channels on how the public engages with political opinion polling. There is no plausible mechanism I can see by which there would be any non-trivial impact of social media on the accuracy and reliability of political opinion polling.

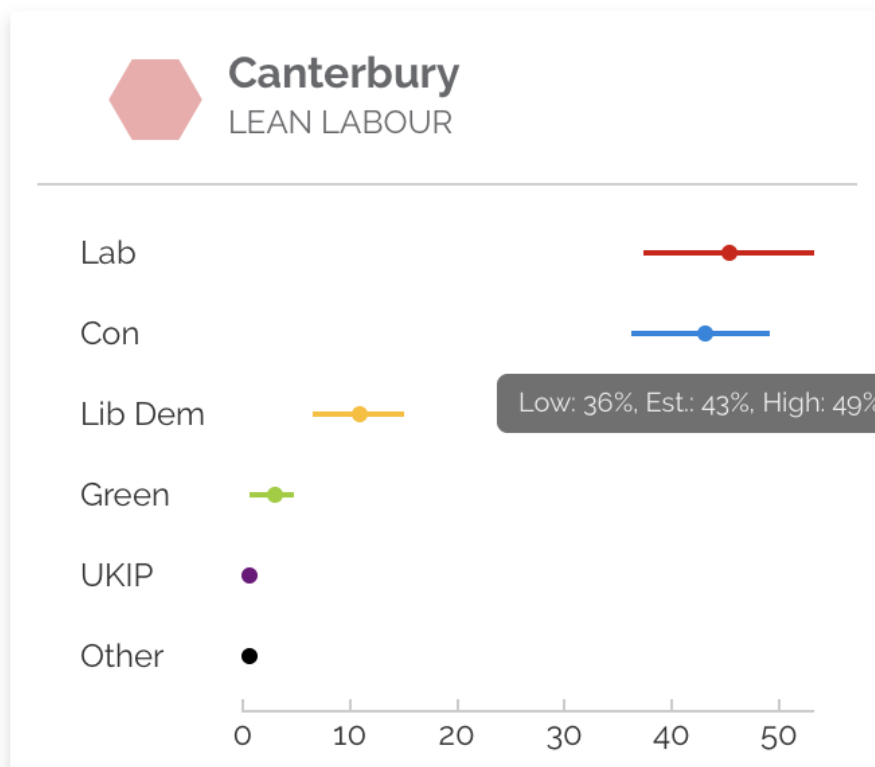
14

While some have claimed that social media and other new forms of data have been used to successfully predict election outcomes, those claims are extremely premature. The challenges associated with using new forms of data to predict elections surround the difficulty of calibrating what patterns in social media usage imply about voting, and the likely instability of those patterns from election to election. It is important to be wary of claims to have "successfully predicted" an election based purely on national vote shares, as noted above one can get lucky in a single election. I personally think the prospects for using social media data to infer levels of support are very poor because the problems of unrepresentativeness are far more extreme than in polling data, where they are already substantial. Social media data may more plausibly be useful to infer trends in support for parties, but even here I think the prospects are not great.

		VOTING INTENTION ESTIMATES	SEAT ESTIMATES
	Conservative	42%	302
		95% confidence interval 39–44%	
	Labour	38%	269
	Liberal Democrats	9%	12
	UKIP	3%	0
	Green	2%	1
	SNP	4%	44
	Plaid Cymru	0%	2
	Other	1%	2
	Northern Ireland		18

YouGov Model updated 7th June using data up to 6th June — Hover to see intervals

Presentation of YouGov model national vote and seat predictions, with mouseover on Conservative vote share.



Presentation of YouGov model constituency prediction for Canterbury, with mouseover on Conservative vote share.

11 August 2017

LucidTalk, BMG Research, ComRes, Ipsos MORI, Opinium, ORB International, Panelbase and Survation – Written evidence (PPD0014)

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David Manley, Todd Hartman, Ron Johnston, Kelvyn Jones, Charles Pattie and David Rossiter – Written evidence (PPD0017)

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Professor Helen Margetts and Full Fact - Oral evidence (QQ 47–55)

**Professor Helen Margetts and Full Fact - Oral evidence
(QQ 47–55)**

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The Market Research Society – Oral evidence (QQ 155–162)

Evidence Session No. 21

Heard in Public

Questions 155 - 162

Tuesday 12 December 2017

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Members present: Baroness Couttie (The Chairman); Baroness Fall; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Lord Lipsey; Lord Smith of Hindhead.

Witness

I: Jane Frost CBE, Chief Executive Officer, Market Research Society.

Examination of witness

Jane Frost.

Q155 **Baroness Couttie (The Chairman)**: Thank you very much for being with us this morning. You have about an hour, during which we will all ask you questions. You have in front of you a list of our declarations of interest.

You should be aware that this session is being broadcast on the parliamentary channel. You can say pretty much what you feel like saying, because you are covered by parliamentary privilege. Although you may meet the wrath of the people you have spoken about outside, they cannot do anything about it.

I will start with a question to clarify your membership. Your membership is voluntary. Do you feel that there are certain organisations that should be part of your organisation that are not? I am referring to significant gaps; I do not mean small, minor organisations. Where are those gaps?

I have another question linked to that. When a complaint is made about one of your members, do you feel that there may be a certain conflict of interest? Obviously, you need to keep those voluntary members, yet at the same time you are pronouncing judgment on whether they have behaved within your rules. How do you work that potential conflict through?

Jane Frost: About 80% of all research companies are accredited through our system. We are always targeting, in order to get the figure to 100%. The key players tend to be the American companies, such as Nielsen, whose attitude tends to be, "We don't get membership of anything in America, so we are not going to do it over here". We work quite hard on that. It does not mean that we do not engage with them; it just means that they are not accredited companies.

The important thing about conflict of interest is that we take it on the chin. We have always ruled as appropriate. If that means that organisations decide that they are not going to renew their membership,

that means that organisations are not going to renew their membership. We always have certified individual members within those organisations. That relationship does not tend to change.

Baroness Couttie (The Chairman): Are you conscious of any of the organisations that are not members diverging significantly from your regulations and guidelines on what makes a good market research programme?

Jane Frost: No, they tend not to, partly because we as an organisation are the world's biggest qualifier. A lot of people go through their careers in research having qualified with our certificates, advanced diplomas, and so on. If you talk to a number of large client-side organisations, they will say that they certify all their graduate trainees to ensure that the standards are equivalent, even when they move out of that line of management control.

Baroness Couttie (The Chairman): What is the process of seeing a complaint through? How long does it take? What sanctions do you have to make the organisation behave better in the future?

Jane Frost: In general, it takes an average of three to five months. Our process starts with trying to resolve a complaint before it goes into formal process, because a lot of complaints do not need the heavy weight of going through a really formal process. We have a standards board with investigatory powers, but we can go all the way up to judicial-type review, if that is what is demanded by either of the parties.

It can take longer if the person complained about decides to exercise all their rights under the system. They do that because having been disciplined by the MRS is not a happy place to be professionally. We can remove their professional status. We can, and do, publicise the findings of the disciplinary inquiry. People lose business as a result of that. That is why we are so careful that the process includes all the appropriate steps. Just as people win business if they win an award, they lose business if they lose their status.

Q156 **Lord Hayward:** Will you clarify your relationship with the British Polling Council and its members?

Jane Frost: We work with them very closely. We always ensure that we are in contact whenever there is a big occasion that is likely to generate interest. Most of the members of the British Polling Council—all except three—are accredited by us or include accredited members. We have about 530 accredited companies. The BPC is much smaller; it has only 15 or 16.

Lord Hayward: The BPC's broad guidelines relate to transparency. What is the difference between its regulation—if I can use the term—and guidelines, and yours? Do you impose yours on the BPC's members? What is the relationship between the members of the BPC and yourself?

Jane Frost: You are right to say that it has one core rule, which is transparency. We have 60, because research covers a lot more than polling. It is a £4.8 billion industry that covers everything from neuroscience investigations through to the larger polls. Polling in and of itself is about 3% of the volume of the sector. Our regulations cover the

whole process of conducting research, of any format. We are unique worldwide in that we cover each step of the process of generating research.

A key difference is that we cover the development of questionnaire design. Equally, we have a regulation that says that members are bound to ensure to the best of their ability that their research is used accurately and appropriately, when it is given to the client. The whole process is covered by rules and regulations. Anyone who is a company partner of our organisation is bound by our rules, and by the additional rule of the BPC.

Lord Hayward: You touched on the question of having members worldwide. In a number of the countries in which your members work, polls are banned for a period or regulated in some form or another immediately before an election. Will you give us your thoughts on the difference between what we have in this country and what exists in other countries that are more strictly regulated?

Jane Frost: The UK research industry is probably the most respected worldwide. That may be one of the reasons why, per capita, we are the biggest country in the world for research.

As regards professional standards, the UK, Australia and parts of America tend to be the places that come together to look at the implications of cross-border issues. Most of our members are in the UK, so it would be invidious for me to generalise, but clearly the cross-border issue these days is whether you can control digital media coming into this country, rather than whether you can control the activities of professionals inside boundaries.

We have what we regard as a major issue with what we call selling under the guise of research, which is wonderfully named “sugging”. That can frequently be done by companies that we cannot identify. It is a major problem, as they can do that from wherever they exist as a trading entity throughout the world. Control of electronic borders is the key issue there, I would suggest.

Q157 **Lord Smith of Hindhead:** You said that the UK research market is the most respected in the world. I would expect you, as the chief executive of the Market Research Society, to say that. Recently, political polling in the UK has not been great; in fact, it has been very poor. A lot of people are now very dismissive of the political polls—quite rightly so, if you think about some of the recent track record. Do you think that the fact that political polling has lost a lot of faith and that people just do not believe political polls has had a knock-on effect on other market research, with people saying, “You do not want to believe that. The polls are always getting it wrong”? If that is the case and it is affecting your wider field of business, how do you think that the political polling companies can get it better?

Jane Frost: That is a lot—

Lord Smith of Hindhead: It is only two questions.

Jane Frost: They are very wide. We looked at whether the discussion around polling had had a knock-on effect on wider client commissioning of research. We did not find one. In fact, the market is continuing to grow. When we asked the client side of the research sector—which, increasingly,

we accredit as well—what its intentions were, we found that they were to grow the budgets for almost every form of research for the foreseeable future. Therefore, we do not see an impact from these discussions professionally and as regards commissioning.

The other issue is that not all the polls were wrong. The exit polls were remarkably accurate.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: The exit polls ought to be accurate, because an exit poll is not a pre-election poll. Exit polls are completely different; they are not part of the same ballgame. In the last election, one political poll got it right. Another got fairly close, but all the others were way out. They also got the previous election wrong.

Jane Frost: I used to be a commercial commissioner of research. I am well aware of the fact that what you pay for is what you get. When going into uncharted territory with new questions and new consumer and public attitudes, you will have to invest in trying to work out how to get the best answer. Frankly, that is not what happens these days with political polls. We have margins as small as 1.4% in polling commission costs. That is not conducive to investing in ensuring that you have done everything that you possibly can.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: You are saying that the polls will inevitably be inaccurate because the pollsters are not spending enough money and the sample size is too small. So what is the point of having political polls?

Jane Frost: Everyone has a right to exercise their ability to investigate public opinion. That is not an issue.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: It is an issue if the polls are wrong and if the polls can influence voting intention or turnout.

Jane Frost: Frankly, we have seen no hard evidence that the polls influence individual voter behaviour. We do not have that evidence, so I would not say that that is an issue. We know that controversy around polls drives newspaper sales. Therefore, it is a content driver for publications. What they are prepared to pay is in direct correlation to the sample size and the methodology that the pollster uses.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: You do not think that there is any problem at all with political polling.

Jane Frost: I did not say that. I said that I did not think that it influenced the outcome of individual choices on how to vote.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Other witnesses have taken a very different view. Bearing in mind what you do and the responsibilities of your organisation, which polling companies fall within or come under, we have an interest in this. There have been consistent inaccuracies from polling companies before recent elections; forget about the exit polls, which are completely different. Some of us think that the polls can have an influence on how some people vote or on turnout. If the pollsters are not investing enough money and are not getting it right, why should that be allowed to continue without any regulation?

Jane Frost: There are a lot of polls that we never see, of course. There are a lot of private polls conducted. I suppose that one could stop those.

However, if polls were consistently wrong, you would find that people would stop doing them. They are still commissioned privately, by a whole range of people, who get value from that activity. I cannot comment on exactly what they are, because they are private, but we know that they continue to exist.

Q158 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** Welcome. If I am about to set up a dodgy research company, there is no incentive for me to join the Market Research Society.

Jane Frost: There is an incentive. Increasingly, very large clients will insist on people on their shortlist being properly regulated. There is a very clear and swift change to people's behaviours if the money says, "You will have to be regulated to participate in our business".

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: If I am setting up a dodgy research company, how do you know that it is dodgy?

Jane Frost: You will be listed or accredited by MRS. We have a freephone—

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: But how do you know? I am applying for membership. How do you know that I am reputable?

Jane Frost: You must have included in your staff a number of people who are qualified and have certified Market Research Society individual membership, so that we know that they have both the technical knowledge and the qualifications and seniority to be able to take responsibility for delivering behaviour under the code.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: I could still set one up and carry out dodgy research in which the other people who are qualified were not involved, could I not?

Jane Frost: We would then get a complaint. We get 1,000 calls a year from members of the public asking whether people are accredited with us. We get several hundred email inquiries about the behaviour of market research, which we can answer. All of that is free, because we want members of the public to ring us. Anyone who is part of a market research exercise, if it is face to face, should get a thank you note telling them who to talk to and where to complain. If it is on the telephone, our members are required to give people a telephone number and an email address to which they can make any comments.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Would some statutory regulation not be more effective?

Jane Frost: Statutory regulation is quite slow. We amend our code of conduct every three to four years—another one is due out next year—and we issue a number of guidelines and regulations to which people are required to adhere. We develop those in conjunction with the ICO, DCMS and other areas of governance. If you were to talk to our accredited companies, they would say that we verge on the tough side. They think that that is good for the reputation of the sector.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: What was the last company that you expelled?

Jane Frost: We have not expelled a company. This year we had an issue on which we found against someone. We have only two a year that go to that length. As a result of the way in which previous inquiries were conducted, we have changed our regulations to ensure that nobody can resign before a finding is made against them. They will get an automatic finding against them, which they will carry with them. They cannot resign and get away with it.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: If I am a company, what is the subscription for your society?

Jane Frost: It depends on who you are and what you are. For an individual, it is £150.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: For a big company?

Jane Frost: It depends on turnover.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Give me an example.

Jane Frost: For basic accreditation, it could be a few thousand pounds, but most of them are involved in training programmes with us, which puts the money up significantly.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: It is many thousands. Tens? Hundreds?

Jane Frost: Many thousands.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Hundreds?

Jane Frost: No—I wish.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Tens of thousands?

Jane Frost: It could be tens of thousands, if it is an extensive programme.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: If you expelled them, you would lose that money, would you not?

Jane Frost: Not necessarily, because we have alternative ways of doing it. We have grown our revenue by growing our membership on the client side. We now have a number of significant client companies accredited. That number is growing all the time. Over the past four or five years, our membership has grown by 100 companies.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Do you see what I am getting at? You have a conflict of interests, when a membership society is carrying out regulation. In other words, if you expel someone because they are doing something wrong, you lose the income.

Jane Frost: Our income is growing. We have two separate sides to the organisation. We can grow the commercial income, anyway. This is not an issue for us.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: A statutory body would not have that conflict of interest. It could say, "Look, you have transgressed against the regulations. You are doing this dodgy polling or research. You are out. You are no longer recognised". Everyone would know that that was done above board and that there was not a conflict of interest or any incentive for the body to keep someone on the roll, would they not?

Jane Frost: I would argue that that question is about regulating 1% of a very successful industry. We are respected by both the client side and the participants. We do not find that there is an issue with the majority of market research.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: I get complaints from elderly people about constant telephone calls and people who purport to be carrying out research. There is a whole range of such things. You must know about that.

Jane Frost: We are very active in identifying those people—it can be big business—and bringing them to account, not only by ourselves but by the ICO, to which we refer them. I am in regular contact with CEOs who are conducting surveys that we do not regard as appropriate and that do not fit with our regulations.

You will be aware that last year we took issue with some political parties' use of surveys to acquire data, rather than to acquire research. That was the last time that we got quite a high profile for the work we do. We work regularly with Radio 4 and with consumer programmes to point out citizens' rights and what citizens can do about people who come to them purporting to be doing research. Our advice is always, "If you are in doubt, don't do it. There is a list of regulated people. If they are not on that list, you should not answer questions".

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: How does an 85 year-old in Penicuik get hold of that list?

Jane Frost: They can either ring us or email us. It is a freephone service.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You do not know much about 85 year-olds, do you?

Jane Frost: I am not 85, but I have an 85 year-old mother.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Does she have a list?

Jane Frost: She knows where to ring.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Good.

Lord Hayward: Her daughter.

Q159 **Baroness Fall:** Over the course of this inquiry, we have heard from quite a few organisations that oversee the broader polling issue. We have heard from you, the BPC, IPSO and Impress. There is a theme: these bodies are voluntary, they are largely complaints driven and they do not have a huge amount of money. They are all doing a very good job in their own way, but their reach is quite limited by those three factors. In a digital age, we cannot help but feel that they are not extending into the digital world in the way one would hope.

Is this a failing form of oversight? Would it be better to merge these bodies, so that we had one body with oversight of polling, for example? It would follow a gold standard of polling, which would be a flexible thing—not just something that was written down, but something that was alive and renewed, so that we were not sticking with an old methodology. Such a body would have a bit of clout behind it, although not necessarily

through regulation; the BPC said that it would not necessarily have the money that it needed to take someone to court, for example. What are your thoughts on that?

Jane Frost: We do have the money to take somebody to court; we allow for that in our budget. We also know that, if I ring up the CEO of a polling company, my call will be taken and we will discuss things early. We are a very proactive professional body and regulator. For example, we spend a lot of our time developing guidelines ahead of where we think there are going to be issues—the latest ones on gender are a case in point. We know that that changes behaviour. We issued guidelines recently on handling people’s gender preferences in research. There has been a marked change in research companies’ behaviour since.

You have to be very careful to keep apart the users and commissioners of research—the press—and the suppliers of research. They are very different, and they have very different regulatory requirements. Despite being worth £4.8 billion, this is still quite a small sector. The polling element of the sector is even smaller. We need to ensure that we are reinforcing good behaviour wherever we find it. You will find that all the people we regulate are very concerned about putting their people through training, getting the calls and helping us to develop better standards going forward.

I have always been very proud of the fact that, as a sector, we have been more careful than any other professional sector in our area about issues such as the age of children. We have always said that 16 is our age for treating people as children. That was five, six or seven years before anybody else.

We acknowledge that vulnerability is not a static issue and must be handled contextually. There are a lot of issues to do with the professionalism of how you do research, which need to be separated from how the press use research when they have taken receipt of their commissioned and paid-for survey.

Baroness Fall: Given that, as you say, polling is a relatively small but relatively high-profile part of the sector, especially in a general election, and given that a lot of the people who commission polling have the most interest in seeing it on their front page, which makes a poll a slightly more complicated and more sensitive survey, do you think that polling needs more careful monitoring than normal surveys?

Jane Frost: I hope that all surveys would be careful. Although they are not visible, they have some very clear outcomes. The work that is done for government on issues such as how to handle obesity and smoking has really important outcomes, but I acknowledge that the sound bubble around it is not loud.

I have always said to the CEOs of the major polling companies, who are always having discussions with us in this environment to try to ensure that they are identifying issues, that, in this area, in which reporting can be very sensitive, they need to be doubly sure about the way in which they design the questionnaire and ensure that every element of the design of the survey is double and triple checked. We write to all the political parties at this time to advise them of what good looks like.

Yes, I think that the issue has to be handled properly. Having two organisations for this one area may not be optimal, but the fact that 95% of the area is covered by our wider regulations means that a lot of pollsters have been under regulation and training for lots of issues for a lot of time. Therefore, they are very experienced and well aware of what the rules are.

Q160 Lord Howarth of Newport: Do you have a distinctive approach to regulation of research commissioned by corporate interests into controversial and politically sensitive areas, such as sugar, alcohol and tobacco, or by pressure groups that are looking at sensitive issues, such as hunting and drugs, with an intention to influence public opinion and, therefore, with political resonance?

Jane Frost: We have a very clear regulation within the code—No. 33, as it happens; it is burned into my memory—on leading questions. As we regulate questionnaire design, this is very important. Regulation 33 states that members must be very careful that they are not leading the participant in the research to give an answer that is required by the commissioner of the research. To be fair, most of the research that is commissioned is needed for taking decisions, so people have a vested interest in getting an honest reply, but we have to be very careful that leading questions are not asked.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Will you talk to us about the extent of abuse? To what extent are such leading questions used? There may be other methodological problems you have concerns about, such as whether samples are truly representative. When trying to get an answer that suits their corporate or political purpose, aggressive interests will cut corners; indeed, they may quite deliberately abuse good practice. How extensive is that problem? How capable are you of addressing it?

Jane Frost: We do not think that it is extensive, partly because this regulation has been developed by research over a very long time—over 60 years. There may well be temptations. There are a number of things, besides the leading question element, to address that within the code. They include an emphasis on the importance of informed consent from the participant, and clarity and transparency about how and where research will be used and to what use it will be put.

We find that one of the benefits of having such a deep and long relationship with the profession is that the supply side will ring us up to ask us about pressure that commissioners may be putting on it. Last year there was an instance involving a government department, where the researchers were saying, “We don’t think that this request is appropriate. We have told the commissioner that. Could you please re-emphasise formally for us that this is not appropriate?” We were able to do so. That influenced the way in which the commissioner was thinking.

When I worked in government, I was able to say to Ministers, “This is not an appropriate use of research. It would not be approved by the MRS, so please do not use it”. That ensured it was not used in that fashion.

Lord Howarth of Newport: What was that government department?

Jane Frost: At the time, it was Revenue and Customs.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Can you give us other instances where you, as an agency responsible for regulation, have had to step in to admonish or, indeed, to penalise interests—public or private sector organisations—that, in your opinion, have acted improperly and have put such pressure on the people carrying out the research that they have succumbed to it and not used the methods that are appropriate?

Jane Frost: We take quite a proactive stance on investigating things that come to our attention. Last year, for example, I wrote to the CEO of a large commercial organisation that was using research to gather material for sale. The organisation was not a member of ours. It turned out that the people doing the research were not researchers, which is obviously an issue. The CEO pulled the research immediately and transferred the responsibility for further research to the research department.

As I mentioned earlier, we took the Conservative Party to task for issuing surveys to generate data. In the end, we referred it to the ICO, because we felt that it was an ICO decision. The ICO admonished the party.

Lord Howarth of Newport: There are also issues with the reporting of such defective research. We have heard about how the British Polling Council seeks to establish proper principles and procedures for the reporting of opinion polls. Will you talk to us about how you seek to influence how the media, particularly the newspapers, report market research, such that it does not end up misleading the public?

Jane Frost: We work with the Royal Statistical Society and other interested bodies to provide guidance to the media, particularly on the use of statistics in research and on how opinion polls should be interpreted and used. We seek to engage with people in charge of policy to ensure that they are well aware of that guidance and offer them additional support—workshops and other training—if they think that that is necessary. We offer them that guidance.

We also take issue with reports that we see in the paper, where we do not think that research has been reported with sufficient clarity. We will take that up both with the paper, where appropriate, and with the supplier of the research, to ascertain whether any undue influence has been applied to it or whether there is anything we need to be made aware of and to take further. It is not just a reactive process. It is about identifying where we know that there will be pinch-points and ensuring that we have done everything we can to improve those.

Lord Howarth of Newport: Where you have been concerned about unsatisfactory reporting and have taken it up with the newspaper or media outlet concerned, have you been satisfied that they have accepted what you had to say and have mended their ways?

Jane Frost: The reporting in the last election was a lot better than the reporting in the previous set of polls. There was a noticeable difference in the quality of editorial around reporting polls the last time around.

Lord Howarth of Newport: I am talking not so much about polls as about market research, where there is a suspicion that editorial standards are not as high.

Jane Frost: We looked into the rather notorious *Sun* poll on Muslims, which was entirely inappropriate. We initiated disciplinary action against the member of MRS that was involved. During the inquiry, that member not only left the business but left the sector entirely. The issue was raised and dealt with in other matters.

In general, we get very good traction if we raise the handling and the reputation of research. We need to be vigilant and to ensure that editors and policymakers know that we are putting consistent attention on them. If we went away, it is very likely that matters would not come to a head.

My personal bugbear is advertising that is based on 47% of 74 people saying that something happened. That is the equivalent in the commercial arena of what happens in the political arena. We raise that issue with the Advertising Standards Authority on a regular basis. I have not had much success with it.

Baroness Couttie (The Chairman): Thank you. We will go to Robert and then George.

Q161 **Lord Hayward:** May I pursue two questions associated with those that both Lord Howarth and Lord Foulkes have asked? First, is there not an advantage in individual companies taking a soft line on questions, because they will get the business? I am talking here about social issues, not political ones.

Associated with that is another question. Will you clarify for us the guidance that you give in two particular instances? One is where people are told, "This is legal in X"—in Oregon or Belgium, for example—and then asked, "Do you think it should be legal in this country?" A similar question involves asking, "There have been five prosecutions in the last 10 years for Y. Should the law be toughened up?" Questions in that range are regularly put on social issues.

Jane Frost: We have no evidence of reputable research companies—that is to say, the ones that we regulate—being soft on answers. Generally speaking, the answers that they are seeking are not for soft decisions.

I can speak to a very personal example. When I was working for what is now the Ministry of Justice, we were looking at how to improve outcomes for abused women. The Home Office's view was that criminalisation was the right approach, but clearly it was not getting the results. The research, which was deeply harrowing, said, "No. Funnily enough, criminalisation is the wrong thing to do. What you need to do is to put money behind getting women"—and it is mostly women—"out of the relationship as fast as possible. Criminalisation may deter them from doing that".

That report was very clear. It was not what the Home Office wanted to hear, but it was the right result, was reported as such and influenced the Ministers, who also witnessed the research. I can give you many more instances of that than of anything else.

As regards the development of questions, it is very clear that you may need to give context, particularly on really difficult issues of which members of the public will be expected to have no prior knowledge. But

that must be done in such a way that it does not lead the participant to give a particular answer. They must also have due ability to say, “I don’t know”, or, “I can’t say”. That is the really important get-out. If you force an either/or, you will get a greater tendency for pressure to result in something.

Lord Hayward: Would the two examples that I have cited be considered to be leading?

Jane Frost: I would have to see the entire thing before I could comment on that. I would not think that it was very good research, but it would be one in a suite of questions. You also have to consider the order in which the suite of questions is delivered. Whether you are going to get pressure or undue influence depends on more than just that one question.

Q162 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** We heard some pretty dramatic evidence about the almost exponential increase in the influence of social media. Are you involved with that in any way? Are you looking at the increase in the influence of social media, or any aspect of that?

Jane Frost: We are not looking at their influence, but we are looking at the issue of mobile telephony, in particular, and data protection implications. We will provide guidance on that. In fact, we have just issued guidance on mobile telephony, in line with DCMS and other requirements.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Are Google, Facebook and the other companies that are involved in providing platforms, or in any other way, members of the Market Research Society?

Jane Frost: Not corporately. Twitter has a significant number of individual members. That is encouraged by Twitter, because it is serious. We have an issue as a sector with the approach that can be taken, mostly in America, to the handling of personal data possessed by social media. We are very vocal about the requirement to ring-fence and to ensure that privacy is protected and personal data is treated as precisely that—personal, and not owned by the media companies.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Do you get the feeling that it is difficult to keep up with it?

Jane Frost: It is a very fast-moving feast. It means that we have a number of engagements worldwide, particularly with the Americans, to ensure that we are transferring best practice and seeing what we can do to influence as we go forward.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You have not given any thought to whether there needs to be some regulation of social media.

Jane Frost: If you were to ask me personally whether I think that social media adopt the responsibility that they ought to adopt, as publishers, I would have to say that they have a long way to go. There is more risk with social media. For example, we have seen Facebook manipulate media feeds in the name of research that, in our view, is not research. We have taken issue with Facebook on that. It has pulled back from such issues as a result of the amount of pressure that it has faced. Obviously, I am not

referring just to the flag-waving by ourselves; a lot of people put a lot of pressure on Facebook about that. We will respond in those circumstances.

Baroness Couttie (The Chairman): Alan, I think that I may have truncated you prematurely. We have time for one more question.

Lord Howarth of Newport: The conversation moved on.

Baroness Couttie (The Chairman): We have gone through all our questions. Thank you very much for your time here this morning. We very much appreciate it. You will get a chance to look at the transcript and will have an opportunity to correct anything in it where you feel that you have spoken in a way that may have misled us accidentally.

Jane Frost: Thank you very much for your time.

The Market Research Society – Written evidence (PPD0010)

Submission on behalf of the Market Research Society (MRS)

Submission to House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media: Call for Evidence

31st August 2017

Background: About the Market Research Society (MRS) and the research market

1. The Market Research Society (MRS) is the world's oldest and largest research association for those with professional equity in market, social and opinion research and in business intelligence, market analysis, customer insight and consultancy. MRS has 5,000 members in over 50 countries and has a diverse membership of individual researchers within agencies, independent consultancies, client-side organisations, the public sector and the academic community. MRS also represents over 500 research service suppliers including large businesses and SMEs plus a range of research teams within large brands such as Tesco, BT, ITV, Telefonica and Unilever which are accredited as MRS Company Partners.
2. MRS promotes, develops, supports and regulates standards and innovation across market, opinion and social research and data analytics. MRS regulates research ethics and standards via its Code of Conduct. All individual members and Company Partners agree to regulatory compliance via the MRS Code of Conduct and its associated disciplinary and complaint mechanisms .
3. The UK is the second largest research market in the world, second to the US, and in terms of research spend per head of population is the largest sector with £61 per capita in 2015 (with the US at £39, Germany £24 and France £23) . The UK research supply industry is a £4bn market and has grown steadily over the previous five years by an average of 6% per year .
4. In 2016, MRS with PWC undertook an updated assessment of the size and impact of the UK research and evidence market, The Business of Evidence 2016 . One of the main findings from this report is the size of the UK 'business of evidence' market, which employs up to 73,000 people and generates £4.8 billion in annual gross value added (GVA). Data analytics exhibits the highest growth rate at over 350% growth since 2012. Political opinion polling, although highly visible, represents only a small sub-set of the wider research sector accounting for about 1% of work undertaken outside of a general election.
5. The UK research sector is recognised as leading the way in the development of creative and innovative research approaches including maximising the opportunities afforded by the development of new digital technologies. The methodological issues are explored and debated in the MRS' academic journal, the International Journal of Market Research. Excellence in research is recognised via the MRS awards.

Overview of Submission

6. MRS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Call for Evidence by the Select Committee looking at the effects of political polling and digital media on politics in the United Kingdom. We particularly welcome the consideration by the inquiry of the impact of the use of digital media in political polling as this is an underexplored area which warrants further detailed expert analysis.

7. Our response focuses on the efficacy of the current regulatory framework for the sector highlighting the benefits and robustness of the current framework for accredited professional researchers and research organisations. We also stress that pre-election polls, properly conducted and imbued with legitimacy, serve an important democratic accountability function and highlight the additional challenges (outside of methodological issues) that impact on the accuracy of polls and media coverage of polling. In particular this does not only hinge on the design of political opinion polls but also in ensuring that those interpreting the findings of polls, and reporting on them, sufficiently understand the research design and any key limitations.

Polling methods and accuracy/Influence of Polls/International

8. Market research, which includes social and opinion research (including political polling), is the systematic gathering and interpretation of information about individuals or organisations using the statistical and analytical methods and techniques of the applied social sciences to gain insight or support decision making. Research itself does not seek to change or influence opinions or behaviour however it is acknowledged as an important vehicle that gives people a voice. Social and opinion research is widely used by central and local government and public bodies, apart from opinion polling, to understand citizens' preferences and behaviours, gauge responses to proposals, measure impact and assist in developing appropriate policies used, for example, in improving educational, healthcare and police services. Political opinion polling i.e. surveys of political public opinion may be conducted for public media publication or for private use.

9. The accuracy of political opinion polling, has been under the spotlight, in the last two UK general elections of 2015 and 2017. It is clear that the methodology employed is one of the critical factors to ensuring accuracy in polling. Moreover determining turnout has become increasingly challenging. Examination of the factors leading to disappointing accuracy in the 2015 General Election were examined in the Joint British Polling Council/Market Research Society inquiry. Several organisations directly involved in political polling also undertook their own studies and enquiries in this area leading to changes in methodological approaches and processes (partially implemented during the 2017 elections).

10. Against this background of self-examination, reflection and introduction of new approaches by the sector, it is also critical to recognise that additional challenges (outside of methodological issues) will also impact on the accuracy of polls. These include:-

- i. Limited financial resources. Commissioning clients will generally “get what they pay for” but dwindling resources and budgetary allocations mean that costs of opinion polling are continually being driven downwards. Larger representative sample sizes for opinion polls can reduce the margin of error but also result in an increase in the base price. Commissioning clients, particularly news and media organisations which use opinion polls to generate journalist content, make decisions on political polling design which prioritises speed of delivery at low cost.
- ii. Increasing complexity of the UK political landscape and fragmentation of UK politics impacts on modelling of results. It means that the approach to polling is more difficult and require that the results are reported with significant and suitable caveats.

11. Political polling is a feature of British elections. Pre-election polls, properly conducted and imbued with legitimacy, serve an important democratic accountability function. Within this context political polling gives people a voice and provides the opportunity for voters’ concerns to be heard. Recent evidence also indicates there is no evidence that political polls influenced voting .

12. Investigation of political polling must also acknowledge that polling is conducted by a range of stakeholders and differences exist between private and public polling. Although political parties and financial institutions often commission private polls which impact on the decision-making process these are generally not made publically available. Consideration of any alternative mechanisms for control of political polling whilst unlikely to stop the use of private polls will conversely lead to tiered knowledge to the detriment of voters and UK citizens. These type of restrictions may also have an impact on markets and represent a clear danger of a possible democratic deficit from what would effectively be an uneven and unequal regulatory system.

13. International experience range from time embargoes prior to elections to restrictions for conducting and publishing exit polls. However it is debatable whether an embargo or ban on the publication of opinion polls can be successful particularly in light of the difficulty of enforcing borders in global media reporting and the use of online environment for political discourse. Maintenance of the freedom to conduct and publish opinion surveys should continue to remain as the core consideration.

Regulation

14. The benefits of a well-functioning self-regulatory framework include greater efficiencies and costs benefits reducing the need for overly burdensome legal and regulatory restrictions. Compliance costs of the self-regulation framework are likely to be lower than the implementation costs of domestic legislation for a statutory regulatory framework. Self -regulation also provides a more flexible and nimble approach that keeps pace with innovation and technological developments. These anticipated benefits are reflected in the current self-regulatory framework that effectively regulates the wider research sector (and includes regulation of accredited organisations and researchers involved in political opinion polling). Demonstrated benefits include maintenance of quality and standards of research studies and accessibility of individuals to

avenues for redress.

15. Indeed the system has generally been accepted as robust and fit for purpose as reflected in recent parliamentary debate. Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Lord Bridges of Headley) in stressing that Parliament did not intend to regulate the polling industry highlighted:

“...Government have indeed no plans to regulate opinion polls...Many of your Lordships would agree that statutory regulation is not the answer to the issue that we are concerned about: accurate opinion polling. There is widespread agreement that opinion polls lubricate political debate. They help to get that debate moving and to air views, and regulation of any form of opinion polling would put us on a slippery slope towards an unwanted intervention in free debate, benefiting only those with deep pockets who could afford their own polls, as my noble friend Lord McColl so rightly said...A statutory regulator would be too slow and unwieldy to respond to the innovation and change brought about by big data, cognitive psychology and the digital revolution. Indeed, it would be an analogue solution in a digital age. Crucially, such regulation could—and in my view definitely would—stifle the very debate that opinion polls seek to inform. That is why government regulation is the wrong answer to the right question—a question about conduct and methodology...”

16. This effectiveness is based on the long history of MRS regulation of the research sector. The MRS Code of Conduct was adopted in 1954 with the latest fully revised version of the MRS Code of Conduct coming into effect on 1 September 2014. The Code supports those engaged in market, opinion and social research in maintaining professional standards and reassures the general public that research is carried out in a professional and ethical manner. Regulation extends to both accredited individual members and organisations who must comply with the MRS Code. The MRS Code applies, whether they are engaged in consumer, business to business, social, opinion or any other type of research project. Accredited organisations are also required to have internal complaint systems and we encourage internal ethics reviews and oversight of projects. The commitment to uphold the MRS Code of Conduct is supported by the MRS Codeline service and a range of specialist guidelines.

17. The MRS Code of Conduct and associated binding regulations are at the centre of a network of regulatory instruments within the self-regulation framework. Accredited members must also comply with legal rules under the Data Protection Act 1998 (and from May 2018 the EU General Data Protection Regulation) together with, for those appropriately certified, ISO quality management standards on market, opinion and social research and/or data security, panels as well as quality trust marks such as Fair Data which MRS has developed and successfully exported to a number of overseas markets.

18. Resolution of complaints is influenced by the complexity of the case and the timeliness of responses from complainants and accredited members. Most complaints are resolved within 3 to 6 months and cases mediated by the Standards Department are resolved within a shorter time frame. The process and time frames are set out in Figure 1 .

Figure 1: MRS Disciplinary Process and Time Frames

19. Disciplinary complaints to MRS have reduced over the past three years, largely reflecting improved internal complaint practices by organisations, addressing concerns at early stages resulting in fewer complaints. This is set out in Table 1 below. Complaint topics over the past three years include data protection, research design, panels and incentives.

Table 1: Accredited Member and Company Partner Disciplinary Cases 2014 - 2017

Year	Cases Upheld by MRSB	Cases Not Upheld by MRSB	Total Number Cases	Complaints resolved by Standards Department
2016-2017	1	0	20	21
2015-2016	2	0	51	53
2014-2015	2	2	60	64

20. Disciplinary processes are subject to ongoing review and monitoring. We have recently streamlined MRS' processes to ensure that our disciplinary responsibilities continue to be carried out cost effectively and in line with regulatory best practice. Revised Disciplinary Regulations 2017 have been issued together with Indicative Guidance on Sanctions. The current Code is also being revised to ensure best practice ethical approach to data protection and recognition of evolving research techniques.

21. The British Polling Council also regulates polling organisations that publish polls to ensure standards of disclosure that provide consumers of opinion polling results that enter the public domain with an adequate basis for judging the reliability and validity of the results. This approach is complementary to the broader market regulation undertaken by MRS.

Media Coverage of Polling

22. Accuracy in media coverage of polling does not only hinge on the design of political opinion polls but also in ensuring that those interpreting the findings of polls, and reporting on them, sufficiently understand the research design and any key limitations. In this environment MRS continues to play a role in educating all stakeholders by providing guidance: Advice for non-researchers on how to interpret opinion polls; Guidelines for Questionnaire Design; CIPR MRS RSS Guidelines for using statistics in communications. Accessible training courses are also available.

23. Against this background, reporting on opinion polls by media institutions also appears to have improved. Greater emphasis is placed on balanced and contextual reporting of polls. Organisations such as the BBC have published clear guidance on reporting which include advice/requirements to ensure that stories are not led by polls; that data should be interpreted as 'suggesting' rather than 'proving' something.

Digital and social media

The Market Research Society – Written evidence (PPD0010)

24. The MRS Business of Evidence report revealed the accelerated growth of the digital market. The growth of digital media channels represents a challenge for researchers and the regulatory framework as there is greater proliferation of non-accredited individuals without a professional and/or ethical approach to research. Activities of accredited researchers are regulated by MRS, regardless of the platform or methodology used. The broader social media landscape is outside the purview of MRS regulation and the usage of these platforms for political activity raises broader pertinent issues for determination. Additionally the absence of any restrictions on the use of terms such as “survey” or “poll” means that “rogue” operators are able to utilise tools without the underlying requisite ethical framework or professional expertise.

25. MRS would be pleased to contribute to a wider discussion on approaches to regulation and digital media channels.

26. This submission is made on behalf of The Market Research Society

The Market Research Society is a company limited by guarantee, registered in England No. 518685. For further information or clarification on this submission please contact:-

- Jane Frost CBE, Chief Executive Officer
- Debrah Harding, Managing Director
- Michelle Goddard, Director of Policy and Standards

31 August 2017

Dr Jonathan Mellon and Dr Christopher Prosser – Written evidence (PPD0008)

Evidence submitted to the House of Lords Select Committee On Polling and Digital Media 31/8/2017

Christopher Prosser & Jonathan Mellon, British Election Study, University of Manchester

1. This submission addresses two questions before the Committee, namely '1. What are the most significant challenges for conducting political opinion polling and achieving accurate results? What measures could be taken which might improve the accuracy of political opinion polling?' and '14. Can social media and other new forms of data successfully predict election outcomes? What are the challenges associated with using new forms of data to predict elections?' It summarizes research published in two peer-reviewed academic journal articles: Missing Nonvoters and Misweighted Samples: Explaining the 2015 Great British Polling Miss (Mellon & Prosser 2017a) and Twitter and Facebook are not representative of the general population: Political attitudes and demographics of British social media users (Mellon & Prosser 2017b). Both of these articles make use of the 2015 British Election Study (BES) Face-to-Face survey (Fieldhouse et al. 2015a) and the 2014-15 BES Internet Panel survey (Fieldhouse et al. 2015b).

Why did the polls go wrong in 2015?

2. A number of theories were put forward about why the polls went wrong at the 2015 election, when they understated the Conservative lead over Labour in the run up to the election. In Mellon & Prosser 2017a we assess the evidence for and against five potential explanations:

i. Late swing. The late swing hypothesis is that the polls accurately reflected support at the time they were conducted but between the final polls and the election a substantial number of people changed their minds about who they were going to vote for.

ii. Differential turnout. The differential turnout hypothesis is that polls accurately reflected public opinion at the time but that on election day, those who said they were going to vote Conservative were more likely to actually turn out to vote than those who said they were going to vote Labour.

iii. Differential don't knows. The differential don't knows hypothesis is that those who said they didn't know who they were going to vote for in polls – either because they were genuinely undecided or because they did not want to reveal their vote intention to pollsters – overwhelmingly voted in favour of the Conservatives on election day.

iv. Vote intention misreporting. The vote intention misreporting hypothesis – commonly known as the 'Shy Tories' problem – is that

people said one thing to pollsters about the way they were going to vote but then actually did another thing on election day.

v. Non-representative samples. The non-representative samples hypothesis is that either through sampling methods, weighting, or both, the samples used in polls were biased in some way that inflated the Labour share of the vote.

3. After examining the evidence for and against each potential explanation we conclude that there is only evidence to support one: non-representative samples. We summarise the evidence against the first four hypotheses before examining non-representative samples in more detail.

4. Late swing. The BES Internet Panel surveyed the same respondents during the 2015 election campaign and after the election had been held. This allows us to compare vote intentions at different points during the campaign with how the same people reported voting after the election. Examining this data shows no significant differences in party support between the survey conducted during the campaign and that conducted after, suggesting that there was very little swing from the campaign to the election.

5. Differential turnout. Similarly, using the BES Internet Panel we can examine whether people who said they were going to vote for a particular party were more likely to actually turn out on election day than supporters of other parties. Additionally we use 'validated vote' information (where the respondents are matched to the marked electoral register so we can be sure whether they actually voted or not). In both cases we find no significant differences in the likelihood of turning out to vote for supporters of different parties.

6. Differential don't knows. Examining the reported votes of those who said they didn't know who they would vote for in the campaign wave of the BES Internet Panel shows no significant difference in support for the Conservatives and Labour.

7. Vote intention misreporting. Vote intention misreporting is difficult to detect directly – if people were lying to pollsters about the way they were going to vote then they would be unlikely to admit to doing so and may continue to misreport their vote after the election as well. In order to assess vote intention misreporting we examine three pieces of indirect evidence.

8. First, we make use of a question ordering experiment embedded in the BES Internet Panel. It is possible that responses to vote intention questions will differ when asked 'cold' at the start of a survey to when respondents have been 'warmed up' with other questions. The logic here is that whilst some respondents might be unwilling to reveal their vote

intentions to pollsters (or themselves) when asked how they are going to vote without prior context, after they have answered dozens of questions about their political attitudes, including how they feel about each party and their leaders, they might be more willing to admit their true intention. In earlier waves of the BES Internet panel we randomly asked half our respondents their vote intention at the beginning of the survey and the other half towards the end. We found no significant differences in vote intentions between respondents asked at the beginning or end of the survey.

9. Second, we compare the correlation between reported votes in the BES surveys and previous levels of party support (at the 2010 election) in respondents' constituencies. If people misreported how they voted, specifically hiding the fact they were going to vote Conservative, we might expect them to do so in places where the social pressure against voting Conservative was highest, namely where there were few Conservatives, or where the race is closely fought between the Conservatives and Labour. In fact we find the opposite, in the BES Internet Panel we are 'missing' Conservatives in the safest Conservative seats. In the BES Face-to-Face survey we do not see the same pattern (indeed it is slightly in the opposite direction) which suggests that this does not reflect some sort of 'shyest where you would least expect it' phenomenon but rather reflects sampling differences.

10. Third, we use a statistical model to predict the vote choices of those respondents who refused to reveal their vote choice in the BES Face-to-Face survey. The results suggest respondents who refused to reveal their vote choice are similar to other respondents in terms of party support and if anything, the model suggests that Conservative voters were the least shy respondents.

11. On their own, none of these pieces of evidence are decisive, but in the absence of any positive evidence of vote intention misreporting, together with the absence of a late swing or differential don't knows ('shy' voters could also result in these patterns), we are confident that vote intention misreporting did not play a substantial role in the 2015 polling miss.

12. Non-representative samples. The first indication that the problem with the 2015 polls was to do with non-representative samples is the fact that the post-election wave of the BES Internet panel has the same levels of party support as the pre-election polls (that is, an erroneously close Conservative-Labour race) but the BES Face-to-Face Survey gets very close to the actual result.

13. The BES Internet Panel is fielded by YouGov, and with the exception of its large sample size (each wave has around 30,000 respondents), is

conducted using sampling and weighting methods similar to standard YouGov political polls. In contrast, the BES Face-to-Face Survey is conducted using what is considered to be the 'gold standard' survey sampling methodology – namely an address based random sample in which addresses are chosen at random from the Post Office address file, letters sent to those addresses to inform the resident that they have been selected to take part in the survey, followed by visits from trained interviewers to conduct the survey at the respondents home (a process that takes several months to complete).

14. After extensive comparisons of demographic, attitudinal, and behavioural information from the two surveys we reached the conclusion that the BES Internet Panel, and by implication, the polls, were inaccurate in 2015 is because samples were too politically engaged and turned out to vote in much greater proportions than the population as a whole. It may seem counter-intuitive that the absence of people who do not actually vote can inflate the apparent levels of support for one party (particularly when we know that there was no differential turnout). That this is the case is due to an interaction between survey weighting and 'non-response bias'.

15. Survey weighting is a standard technique for correcting differences between a survey sample and the population as a whole. If for example you were supposed to have 500 men and 500 women in a 1000 person sample, but you actually end up with 550 men and 450 women, you could count each man as 0.91 of a full respondent and each woman as 1.1 of a full respondent, giving the correct proportions of each. When the imbalances between the unweighted sample and the population are unrelated to the outcomes of interest in a survey, weighting reduces error in survey estimates.

16. Non-response bias occurs when the people who take part in a survey are systematically different from those who do not in some way that is related to the outcome of interest in a survey. In the BES Internet Panel a particularly important form of response bias is electoral turnout – whereas 66.4% of the electorate turned out to vote in 2015, 91% of the Internet Panel report having done so, and similarly high levels of turnout are often implied in political polls. Non-voters are considerably less likely to take part in political polls than voters.

17. The inflated Labour share of the vote in the 2015 polls arose from an interaction between this non-response bias and the weighting schemes used to correct demographic imbalances in polling samples. The reason this occurred is because a) three important things were correlated – propensity to take part in a poll, propensity to vote and propensity to vote Labour when they did vote, and b) polling samples were weighting to look

demographically representative of the population as a whole, rather than just the part of the population that turned out to vote.

18. In order to better understand how non-response bias affects vote shares in polls, take the following simplified example. In this example there is only one demographic characteristic, whether people are 'young' or 'old', and half the population is young and half is old, and there are only two parties, the Conservatives and Labour. Politically there are two important differences between the young and old – old people are much more likely to turn out to vote than young people, and much more likely to vote Conservative when they do. If there were an election in this example, half the young people would not vote (25% of the total population), 40% would vote Labour (20% of the population) and the remaining 10% would vote Conservative (5% of the population). Conversely, only 20% of the old people would not vote (10% of the population), 20% of them would vote Labour (10% of the population), and the remaining 60% would vote Conservative (30% of the population). In total 30% of the population would vote Labour, 35% would vote Conservative, and 35% would not vote. The result of this election would be that the Conservatives win the election with 54% of the vote and turnout would be 65%.

19. Imagine now that we do a poll and face an extreme form of non-response bias whereby non-voters do not answer polls at all and voters always answer polls (and for the sake of clarity, there are no other sources of error). Because young people are less likely to vote they are also less likely to answer the poll, and we will end up with 62% old people and 38% young people in our sample. Imagine that we do not know beforehand who is going to vote or that we have a non-response bias problem, only that we do not have enough young people in the sample relative to the number of old people. We can weight our sample to the population and so this problem is apparently easily solved and we will end up with the correct ratio of half young people and half old people. In other words, the sample will look representative in terms of demographics. However there is a serious problem underneath the surface.

20. Remember that we are missing the half of young people who do not vote, and so to get the correct proportion of young people we need to count them twice. However because we have not taken into account that the missing young non-voters, when we weight the remaining young people we will erroneously be counting each young voter twice. Weighting our sample to the 'correct' ratio of half young and half old will give us a poll of 52.5% Labour and 47.5% Conservative – a considerable error given that the Conservatives would win the election with 54% of the vote. To reiterate the error occurred because three things were correlated: a) young people were less likely to vote, more likely to vote Labour when they did so, and non-voters did not answer the poll, and b) we weighted

the sample to be representative of the population. The large error in our example arose purely as a result of non-voters didn't answer the poll.

21. The real world is obviously more complicated than this example but we can demonstrate a similar effect with BES data. If we deliberately exclude non-voters from the BES Face-to-Face survey (which has accurate levels of 2015 party support) and reweight the remaining voters-only sample to population targets we replicate the problem of the 2015 polls and drastically reduce the Conservative-Labour lead in our sample. Conversely if we reweight the post-election wave of the BES Internet Panel and include a weighting target for the correct level of turnout at the 2015 election we substantially reduce the level of error in the reported levels of party support.

22. Although we now have a firm grasp of what caused the 2015 polling miss, there is no easy solution to the problem of non-response bias. Here we outline three potential ways in which polling methodology might deal with non-response bias from non-voters and the challenges associate with each approach:

i. Include more non-voters in samples. The obvious solution to the problem of missing non-voters is to include more of them in samples. This is easier said than done – the problem is not that pollsters are less likely to invite non-voters to take part in surveys, but that when non-voters are invited to take part in surveys they are more likely to decline to do so. This problem is unlikely to be solved completely but the number of non-voters in samples could be improved by greater efforts and incentives to convert reluctant respondents to take part in surveys and contact hard to reach respondents.

ii. Weight to the electorate not the population. An alternative solution would be to exclude non-voters from samples entirely and weight voter samples so they are representative of the electorate (the population that actually turn out to vote) and not of the population as a whole. This approach faces two large problems however: a) unlike the population, where there are highly reliable data sources like the census to use as weighting targets, there is no official demographic data about who votes and who does not. And, b) the electorate is a moving target – who does and does not vote changes between elections, and trying to work out what the electorate will look like beforehand with the necessary accuracy would be very difficult.

iii. Include turnout as a weighting factor. As we discuss above, including the level of turnout as a weighting factor in post-election surveys substantially reduces the level of error. This approach might be adapted to use in pre-election surveys by combining estimated turnout probabilities with the expected level of turnout. Again the main challenge is that turnout changes between elections, but the probabilistic nature of this method makes this less of a problem than it is for weighting to the electorate. We are currently developing and testing this method ourselves

(Mellon & Prosser 2016) and a similar method was used with some success by Kantar at the 2017 election.

23. The problem of non-response bias has no easy solution but a combination of trying to increase the number of non-voters in polling samples and including some form of turnout weighting is likely to considerably reduce the error that occurs as a result.

24. On a final note on the problem of non-response bias it is important to recognise that this is not unique to political surveys. Non-response bias is something that potentially affects any type of survey. The main difference between political surveys and other types of survey such as market research is that political surveys face a regular objective benchmark in the form of elections and so we can know how accurate they are and can work to improve them. The same cannot be said as easily for other types of survey.

Is social media representative of the population?

25. Turning to the second question we address in this submission, in Mellon & Prosser 2017b we use the 2015 BES Face-to-Face survey to examine demographic and attitudinal differences between Facebook and Twitter users and non-users. The short answer to the question of whether social media users are representative of the population in terms of their political attitudes is no, social media users are on average younger and better educated than non-users, and they are more liberal and pay more attention to politics. Despite paying more attention to politics, social media users are less likely to vote than non-users, but they are more likely vote Labour party when they do. However, we show that these differences in political attitudes and behaviour arise due to the demographic composition of social media users. After controlling for age, gender, and education, no statistically significant differences arise between social media users and non-users on political attention, values, or political behaviour.

26. These findings have two important implications for the question of whether social media can be used to predict election outcomes:

- i. Simply taking levels of political support amongst social media users at face value is likely to be misleading and skewed towards parties favoured by younger and more educated voters.
- ii. Given that these differences arise due to the demographic composition of social media, with appropriate demographic adjustments, it might be possible to use social media users to gauge levels of political support.

27. It is important to note that we are addressing attitudinal and demographic differences of social media users in general. A further question remains about the representativeness of people who use social

media to talk about politics. The likely answer to this question is that they are even less representative of the population than social media users in general.

28. It is clear that social media should not be used in a simplistic fashion to measure levels of political support. It is possible however that more sophisticated techniques can be developed that are able to adjust for the compositional differences of social media users and could be used to predict election outcomes. Whether they are able to do so accurately will be a question for future empirical research.

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31 August 2017

Carl Miller and Professor Susan Banducci – Oral evidence (QQ 23–31)

**Carl Miller and Professor Susan Banducci – Oral evidence
(QQ 23–31)**

[Transcript to be found under Professor Susan Banducci](#)

Nick Moon and Professor Will Jennings – Oral evidence (QQ 1–13)

**Nick Moon and Professor Will Jennings – Oral evidence
(QQ 1–13)**

[Transcript to be found under Professor Will Jennings](#)

Opinium, BMG Research, ComRes, Ipsos MORI, LucidTalk, ORB International, Panelbase and Survation – Written evidence (PPD0014)

Opinium, BMG Research, ComRes, Ipsos MORI, LucidTalk, ORB International, Panelbase and Survation – Written evidence (PPD0014)

[Submission to be found under ComRes](#)

ORB International, BMG Research, ComRes, Ipsos MORI, LucidTalk, Opinium, Panelbase and Survation – Written evidence (PPD0014)

ORB International, BMG Research, ComRes, Ipsos MORI, LucidTalk, Opinium, Panelbase and Survation – Written evidence (PPD0014)

[Submission to be found under ComRes](#)

ORB International, Ipsos MORI and Survation – Oral evidence (QQ 148–154)

ORB International, Ipsos MORI and Survation – Oral evidence (QQ 148–154)

[Transcript to be found under Ipsos MORI](#)

Panelbase, BMG Research, ComRes, Ipsos MORI, LucidTalk, Opinium, ORB International and Survation – Written evidence (PPD0014)

**Panelbase, BMG Research, ComRes, Ipsos MORI,
LucidTalk, Opinium, ORB International and Survation –
Written evidence (PPD0014)**

[Submission to be found under ComRes](#)

Charles Pattie, Todd Hartman, Ron Johnston, Kelvyn Jones, David Manley and David Rossiter – Written evidence (PPD0017)

Charles Pattie, Todd Hartman, Ron Johnston, Kelvyn Jones, David Manley and David Rossiter – Written evidence (PPD0017)

[Submission to be found under Ron Johnston](#)

Political Betting and Ladbrokes — Oral evidence (QQ 56–63)

Political Betting and Ladbrokes — Oral evidence (QQ 56–63)

[Transcript to be found under Ladbrokes](#)

Dr Christopher Prosser and Dr Jonathan Mellon – Written evidence
(PPD0008)

**Dr Christopher Prosser and Dr Jonathan Mellon – Written
evidence (PPD0008)**

[Submission to be found under Dr Jonathan Mellon](#)

David Rossiter, Todd Hartman, Ron Johnston, Kelvyn Jones, David Manley and Charles Pattie – Written evidence (PPD0017)

David Rossiter, Todd Hartman, Ron Johnston, Kelvyn Jones, David Manley and Charles Pattie – Written evidence (PPD0017)

[Submission to be found under Ron Johnston](#)

The Royal Statistical Society – Written evidence (PPD0022)

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) is a professional body for statisticians and data analysts, with almost 8000 members across the world. We have been promoting the importance of statistics and data since our foundation in 1834, and we continue to engage with professionals and with government regarding the use of data and statistics.

Two of the RSS's key strategic goals are, first, for statistics to be used effectively in the public interest and, secondly, for education to improve statistical literacy across all sectors of society. We believe all journalists should be statistically and numerically competent so they can report effectively on the statistics which affect people's day to day lives. Pre-election polls are regularly reported in the media and are one of those areas that we believe should be covered carefully so that readers, viewers and listeners can critically assess their findings.

Summary

- On the methodology of polls, we support the recommendations made by the British Polling Council and Market Research Society's inquiry into the 2015 British general election opinion polls, so will not be commenting on this area in detail⁴⁸. This submission therefore largely focuses on the media's communication of polls.
- We believe political opinion polls should be reported by the media with particular care. All journalists can refer to free sources of guidance and training such as the BBC's editorial guidelines, the British Polling Council's guidance for journalists, and RSS resources on how to report accurately and effectively on numbers and statistics.
- This should be accompanied by more comprehensive in-house training and support for journalists so they are better able to treat polls with an appropriate level of caution whilst meeting tight editorial deadlines. Journalists need to be schooled in key statistical concepts such as uncertainty so they can accurately report on polls.
- There are many times, however, that even carefully-reported polls prove to be very wide of the election result, and this can affect trust in reporting. Even after the 2016 inquiry into British general election opinion polls, more remains to be done to improve the methodologies of polls and their suitability for predicting election results, nationally and locally.
- We are cautious toward arguments that there should be fewer public polls. There is clearly a demand for public opinion and, if polls were absent, other sources of predictions might form the replacement.

⁴⁸ Sturgis, P. Baker, N. Callegaro, M. Fisher, S. Green, J. Jennings, W. Kuha, J. Lauderdale, B. and Smith, P. (2016) Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British general election opinion polls, London: Market Research Society and British Polling Council. Available from: http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/3789/1/Report_final_revised.pdf

- Some prominent failures in polling do not paint the whole picture as there have been several recent changes and successes in the industry. Polling companies are seeking to innovate, and there have been some impressive results using sophisticated statistical procedures such as the adoption of MRP (multi-level regression and post-stratification).
- It is crucial that pollsters and independent parties conduct critical inquiries in public so that the causes of uncertainty can be better understood. This House of Lords inquiry, alongside leadership by the British Polling Council on the technical aspects of polling, will provide much food for thought as pollsters consider the lessons from recent elections.

Polling methods and accuracy

1.1. Following the outcome of the 2015 General Election, in which the Conservatives unexpectedly won an outright majority, there was considerable backlash from the media and the public regarding the polls which had largely predicted a hung Parliament. Many said polls should no longer be such a focus for reporting in election periods, with some newspapers saying they would stop using them altogether. An inquiry into what went wrong was commissioned by the British Polling Council (BPC) and the Market Research Society (MRS). It was chaired by Professor Patrick Sturgis and the final report was launched at the RSS in March 2016. This report made twelve recommendations for BPC members which, it was hoped would rectify the issues associated with previous polls⁴⁹. With a further UK general election having taken place since then, as well as a referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union, there remains much debate about the usefulness of polls.

1.2. Despite the failings of some polls, which have been widely noted, there have been some more successful aspects to recent polling. The apparent success of the MRP (multi-level regression and post-stratification) statistical procedure in the US 2016 and UK 2017 general elections has pointed to the potential advantages of using complex statistical techniques⁵⁰. Caution is required, however, and it must not be assumed that new methods can correct a poorly understood sample.

1.3. As RSS Honorary Fellow, Professor John Curtice and others have noted, the exit poll for the UK's 2017 General Election defied many previous predictions but it was nonetheless accepted as a basis for initial on-air discussion of the outcome, and was relatively trusted for this purpose given the performance of its methodology in recent years⁵¹. It has been argued that exit poll methodology,

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Douglas Rivers (2017) How the YouGov model for the 2017 General Election works, YouGov, 31 May 2017. Available from:

<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2017/05/31/how-yougov-model-2017-general-election-works>

⁵¹ John Curtice, Stephen Fisher, Jouni Kuha and Jonathan Mellon (2017) *Surprise, surprise! (again) The 2017 British general election exit poll*, Significance, 2 August 2017. Available from: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1740-9713.2017.01054.x/full>

using longitudinal tracker surveys, could be adapted for pre-election polls and this is something we believe should be explored for future elections⁵².

1.4. We believe there is a need for caution toward arguments for fewer public polls or indeed a complete ban on polls in the run-up to elections, as proposed by Labour peer, Lord Foulkes⁵³. Deterrence of reporting could mean that important developments are not advanced in public and it is crucial that guidance does not exacerbate this issue. There is also the separate issue of private polls being commissioned by interested parties. Such private polls are unhelpful as the public do not get to benefit from the knowledge of their findings. There is clearly a demand for public opinion and, if polls were absent, other sources of predictions - such as betting odds - might form the replacement.

Media coverage of polling

2.1. The media tends to extensively cover opinion polls throughout election periods and outlets often commission their own polling. Some have argued that journalists have become over-reliant on polling and should look to other data sources. We believe polls can still be a helpful tool but more must be done on improving the methodologies of the polls themselves and journalists should be given the right training so they can accurately and effectively report on them.

2.2. It is crucial that journalists can interpret political polls, and translate their findings and complex methodologies in a way that is easily understandable for the public whilst being aware of, and capable of conveying, each poll's assumptions and uncertainties. The BPC has some useful guidelines for journalists on what to look for when they receive a poll⁵⁴. The RSS also provides guidance for journalists on how to report accurately and effectively on statistics⁵⁵.

2.3. We have seen some improvements in the reporting of polls since the inquiry into the 2015 General Election which issued recommendations for the polling industry. In terms of media reporting of polls, some outlets have been particularly good in using scatter plots to show the range of predictions produced across a wide range of polls, rather than just the central trend.

2.4. This can be seen in conjunction with the rise of data journalism over the last few years. However, whilst some outlets' reporting has become more sophisticated, others still fail to do simple things like show the margin of error, or use visuals such as bar charts which can be misleading.

⁵² David Spiegelhalter, Was anyone right about the pre-election polls?, Significance, 18 May 2015. Available from: <https://www.statslife.org.uk/politics/2256-was-anyone-right-about-the-pre-election-polls>

⁵³ Patrick Wintour Polling industry must be more tightly regulated, say Labour peers, The Guardian, 10 June 2015. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/jun/10/polling-industry-general-election-labour->

⁵⁴ Peter Kellner A Journalist's Guide to Opinion Polls. Available from: <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/a-journalists-guide-to-opinion-polls/>

⁵⁵ RSS *A dozen rules of thumb for journalists* (PDF). Available from: <https://www.statslife.org.uk/images/pdf/rss-number-hygiene-list-2014.pdf>

2.5. The BBC has helpful editorial guidelines on reporting on opinion polls; they detail what language should be used, the context, and what needs to be included, e.g. on the sample size and margin of error⁵⁶. Following a review into the organisation's overall reporting of statistics, these guidelines were followed earlier this year with fresh guidance on the reporting on statistics, which benefitted from expert RSS input⁵⁷. Both sets of guidelines are useful for journalists of any media outlet who are reporting on polls: however, this should be accompanied by more comprehensive in-house training so journalists are confident reporting on polls whilst under tight editorial deadlines.

2.6. The BBC's guidelines on polls state that the results of a poll should never be a headline or lead a news bulletin. It has been argued that journalists need to do more themselves to portray the whole range of public opinion, rather than allowing polls to be the sole focus of news bulletins and must display the range of results across different polls. Journalists also need to consider how the story may change if you, for example, add or subtract the margin of error.

2.7. The BBC's guidelines state 'we should not normally rely on the interpretation given to a poll's results by the organisation or publication which carried it out or commissioned it'.⁵⁸ This, however, relies on the journalist having the skills and time to make their own interpretation. Statisticians have a role to play in helping journalists identify the nuances of polls, rather than just reporting on results without the necessary context. The RSS, along with organisations like the Science Media Centre, acts as a key contact point for journalists looking for help on reporting statistics. Increasing such links with the statistics community would be beneficial for journalists reporting on political opinion polls.

2.8. We believe political opinion polls remain an important part of the media's coverage of election campaigns. However, journalists must not rely on them for easy headlines but, rather, be able to interpret the findings for themselves, whilst bearing in mind that polls are just one way in which public opinion can be captured. If journalists had access to more comprehensive training, as well as better links with the statistics community, significant improvements could be made in their reporting of poll findings.

14 September 2017

⁵⁶ BBC *Editorial Guidelines: Section 10: Politics, Public Policy and Polls*. Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines/politics/opinion-polls>

⁵⁷ BBC *Editorial Guidelines: Reporting Statistics*, March 2017. Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidance/reporting-statistics>

⁵⁸ BBC (2017) *Editorial Guidelines: Section 10: Politics, Public Policy and Polls*. Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines/politics/opinion-polls>

Professor Nicolas Sauger, Professor of Political Science, Sciences Po– Oral evidence (QQ 101–110)

Evidence Session No. 14

Heard in Public

Questions 101 - 110

Tuesday 21 November 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Baroness Fall; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Baroness Janke; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve.

Witness

I: Professor Nicolas Sauger, Professor of Political Science, Sciences Po

Examination of witness

Nicolas Sauger.

Q101 **The Chairman:** Bonjour. Nous vous remercions pour votre gentillesse. Mon français n'est pas parfait, so we will conduct the remainder of the session in English. Is that all right with you, Mr Sauger?

Nicolas Sauger: Yes. That is perfect.

The Chairman: May I say one or two formal things? You have a list of our interests in front of you. The meeting is being broadcast live via the parliamentary website. To that extent, you should be careful what you say, but in English law you cannot be sued, however rude you are about anybody, because we have the protection of parliamentary privilege.

It might be a relief for you to hear that you will get a transcript of the meeting as soon as it is ready. When you get it, you will be able to correct anything that is not quite clear or that you wish you had put differently. Does that suit you?

Nicolas Sauger: Yes.

The Chairman: Very good. I am sorry that you have ended up being on your own. We have heard a lot of things about France from people, most of whom know nothing about how the French system works, so we are very grateful to you for appearing before us to fill in the gaps in our knowledge. I will start by asking Lord Foulkes to ask you about the French ban on polling in the run-up to elections.

Q102 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** Good morning, Professor Sauger. Thank you very much for giving evidence to us.

As our Chairman said, one of the issues we have been looking at is the possibility of recommending a ban on the publication of political polls for a period in the run-up to an election, as happens in a number of European countries, including France. That is on the basis that the publication of incorrect polls has influenced people's thinking and that we tend to focus on a horserace—who is ahead of whom—rather than the issues.

We have had evidence from pollsters that if we were to recommend a ban and it was to be instituted, as in France and elsewhere, rogue or black-market polls would be published—polls would be conducted and published privately by vested interests, for their own purposes—and that the whole suggestion of not allowing the publication of polls is undemocratic. Have you had those arguments in France? How have you dealt with them?

Nicolas Sauger: We have had a number of discussions about polls. The most important point is that it is not only polls that are banned on the last day of the campaign but the campaign itself. As you know, we vote on Sundays. Nobody can campaign on Saturdays in France. The assumption is that people have to think about the election, without any interference from anyone. The ban on polls is a very limited piece of the more general procedure. If you have a ban on campaigning, it is very important that you have a ban on polls as well. It would be unfair to have the publication of polls without giving the politicians a chance to respond and to propose some frames for those polls. In this perspective, it is important to think not only about polls but about the general dynamic of the campaign.

On the other hand, of course, you are totally right. Even if you ban polls or the publication of polls, you will have some kind of black market of poll results. The internet makes that particularly easy. We know that a number of French people have access to polls in Belgium and Switzerland, and that all the information is available on social media—on Twitter and Facebook—to anyone who is more or less remotely interested. Sometimes information gets even to those who are not interested, against their will. We cannot do much about that.

We have had debates in France about whether to ban not only the actual publication of polls but prediction of the polls in the last days of the campaign. That would be the means of not having an actual ban on this kind of thing. I think that even that idea is too late, to some extent. We now have a number of instruments to monitor the web—for example, Google Trends and tools for monitoring tweets, Facebook accounts and so on—to get an idea of what the political dynamics are. Companies will say that they can predict the final result, based on that new type of evidence.

Maybe it is good to ban polls, but we cannot do it any longer. Making it effective would simply be undemocratic, because it would mean banning a number of things that people are expected to use. On the one hand, it has to be related to the campaign dynamics in more general terms. On the other, I am afraid that it is no longer possible for it to be effective.

I would make a third argument. To some extent, it is good to have polls until the end. Of course, it is completely true to say that polls divert attention a bit from the actual issues to the horserace. But at the same time, people are interested in the horserace—more than the issues in

some instances. For elections with high stakes, such as the presidential election in France, it does not have much of an impact, but for elections of lower importance, such as European or local elections, having polls until the last day might make a small contribution to increasing turnout. In France, people are not really mobilised for some local elections because the media do not give them much importance. The real campaign starts a few days before the election. If you brutally stop that dynamic in the last days, the campaign is very short and people do not really get accustomed to the fact that they have to go to the polls the following Sunday. I think that that can have a small impact on turnout. We know that turnout in such elections is very low in a number of countries. Any means of trying to push people to vote could make a contribution to democracy.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You state, as we would expect, that the arguments are exactly the same in France as they are here. You say that you are looking at some new methods of polling or assessing public opinion that could better predict the outcome. Am I right in my understanding? Will you describe it a bit further?

Nicolas Sauger: As regards research methodology, we now have a number of tools that try to monitor public opinion, not only by asking people targeted questions in surveys but by monitoring what they do on the internet—especially their key search words and their types of exchanges. We know that a lot of big data is available now. By calibrating surveys we can see how the changes in those dynamics are an indication of the dynamics of likely behaviour in the elections. We can try to forecast the last day's dynamics, based on observation of the dynamic of the campaign and of what happens on the web on the last day of the campaign. It is still early, in terms of how we do that, but progress in how we treat all this data is so quick that, in the next few years, it will be quite comparable to surveys. I agree that it is still not so established, but the more you ban other tools the more this kind of tool will be available to see the dynamics of opinion.

Secondly, even without big data, we have a number of ways of trying to get information about public opinion dynamics, such as betting. Betting on electoral outcomes has been seen as a means of predicting, or knowing, the dynamics of public opinion. Therefore, there are alternative means, besides surveys, of inquiring and getting information about what people think. I think that the ban on surveys assumes a bit too much that surveys have a monopoly on knowledge of public opinion. That is less and less the case today.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Am I right in saying that the other methods that you describe are not subject to the same ban to which traditional polls are subject?

Nicolas Sauger: They are not banned—in France, at least—because they are not part of the legislation as envisaged in the first place. It is exactly the same as with all the games and betting on the internet. With these tools, evolution to adapt to new legislation is now very quick. If you were to vote through a law to ban any information about predictions of election results, you would have to do so in the last two weeks, as otherwise you would leave people too much time to adapt and provide this kind of

information in a way that was not specifically banned. It is impossible to ban the provision of any information, because you cannot just forbid newspapers and TV news from providing any information about the elections.

Q103 **Lord Hayward:** Professor Sauger, thank you very much for your explanation of the position in France and for putting that in the general context. I note that you are a professor of European studies. Are you aware of similar discussions taking place in other European countries where similar bans, in one form or another, apply? What consideration have they given to this? Are the debates broadly the same, because of social media and the changing social world across Europe?

Nicolas Sauger: I am not aware of that in many countries. That is probably because of my lack of knowledge—which is a problem, of course—rather than because there are no actual discussions. We are having discussions now, and I have a number of colleagues in the UK who are part of those discussions—you know that better than I do. I have heard of some things in other countries, but nothing precise enough to share knowledge about it with you.

Q104 **Baroness Janke:** Good morning, Professor Sauger. I want to ask a little about the newspapers and the polling commission in France. You have strict rules on what polls have to disclose before they are made public. What restraints are there—particularly on the printed press, but also on the broadcasting press—on campaigning on the Saturday before the election and on the publishing of polls? What are the penalties for contravention of the regulations of the polling authority by the media?

Nicolas Sauger: As you may know, we have two regulations—for the campaign in general, and for polls more specifically. For the campaign in general, it depends on the elections, but basically we have a principle of fairness. That is applied not to newspapers but to general broadcast media, particularly TV, on which all candidates have to be treated fairly. Time must be divided among all candidates, but that does not apply to the press. In fact, the press has total freedom in how it allocates attention to speakers. Basically, it depends on which medium you are speaking about.

Polls are not so regulated. We have a commission on polls, especially political polls, to which polling houses have to explain and publish a number of results. Once that has been done, the media are quite free in the way in which they publish the results. They should publish at least the sample size and the mode of interview. That is the most basic information that we can have: the sample size—up to 2,000 persons—whether those questioned were registered voters, and whether the poll was done using a web panel or face-to-face interviews. However, we do not have much more information about it. There is usually a link to the survey firm’s website, which has a more detailed technical report.

A number of firms provide intervals of confidence in that report, but those are not available to the public press, to a large extent. Even the idea of a margin of confidence is discussed in France—or should be discussed, at least. As you may know, we have different ways of drawing samples in France, using quotas, and the margin of confidence cannot be computed in the same way as with probability samples. The idea is that we have an

ex ante control. Once that control has been made, we have almost complete freedom, except that you cannot publish anything on the last day of the campaign.

Q105 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** Good morning, Professor Sauger. Following my colleague Lord Foulkes's question, I want to ask you about accuracy. I think it is right to say that, in the first round of the presidential election, the polls in France were very accurate. Interestingly, you have devised some new methods to assess the demographic differences in polls and turnout, which have been very instrumental in our recent referendum and general election polls. Perhaps you would be kind enough to explain those to us.

I believe that the lesser accuracy of the final poll in the second round of the presidential election has been attributed to the fact that opinion changed very much at the very last minute, partly as a result of a particular television broadcast by the candidates. If that is so, and given your new methods, do you think that you would have been more accurate if you had been enabled to conduct and to publish polling in the previous period? Will you describe a little more the way in which you balance the demographic interests and the turnout possibilities?

Nicolas Sauger: I will start one step back by explaining in general how we do samples in France, although that does not mean that academic people like me do samples in exactly the same way as private firms do them for private surveys. Usually, it is based on the principle of what we call the quota method. That means that we do not have an actual probability sample. Instead of having a pure probability sample, we allow interviewers to replace people so as to get at least some representativeness on key criteria—mainly sex, age and profession. In that way, we can be sure that the sample that we have is more or less in line with what we know of the population of interest—that is, voters—as regards those three criteria.

In France, the assumption that has been made since the 1950s is that, with small samples—1,000 or 2,000 people—the method is more accurate, because the lower probability that applies to probability samples with small populations does not apply fully. It is a way of being most effective in terms of both precision and cost. As you know, surveys are an industry, and different techniques entail different types of costs. Quota sampling is far cheaper.

The advantage of quota sampling is that it makes it possible to have a good representation of sociodemographics—as you stated—with more or less confidence. It depends a bit on how it is applied. Some firms have really broad definitions of age categories. For instance, they have only three age categories—under-35s or over-65s—so the survey sample is representative of those categories but not of more precise age categories. That is a problem, of course, as usually we do not cross-tabulate between categories. That means that we can be representative of age, gender and profession, but quite at odds with the number of women within a particular kind of profession. That is a problem.

The third problem is that we know that there is a bias in the propensity of different types of people to answer surveys. With the quota sampling

procedure, we disregard that as a problem by saying that anyone with a particular kind of demographic characteristic will be close enough to other people with the same demographic characteristics. That might have been true in the 1950s, but it is less and less true. That is why surveys include weighting in their methods. We use weighting a lot in France. Not only do we have a quota for specific sociodemographic points, but we use how people declare their voting intentions and their recollection of how they voted in past elections, so that they are more representative of what we know of the population in question.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: So you weight on the probability of voting—therefore on turnout—as well as on demographics.

Nicolas Sauger: That is the third problem. For presidential elections, it is not a major issue, because we still have high turnout. We now know more or less that people who are not going to turn out do not answer surveys, in any case. We can adjust a bit for that, but it is not a major problem. It is a major problem for legislative elections. That is exactly what happened in the run-up to the legislative elections in France, for which we predicted a certain amount of turnout. It was lower, which changed the result quite a bit.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: May I ask you one opinion question? On the basis of the relative accuracy of your polls, do you think that the population in France have confidence in the polling industry?

Nicolas Sauger: There is a trend for the French population in general to say that they are not confident in polls, but to rely on them anyway. That may mean that they distrust polls but still regard them as important pieces of information on which to base the choices that will be made. For instance, in the presidential elections, it is quite clear that the first dynamic in favour of Macron was registered through polls. That explains why Macron made it in the end. Without that kind of information, it is quite likely that the results would have been quite different.

We always have two or three types of debate in France. In sociology, we have what we call the Bourdieu school of sociology, which has complete distrust of polls and surveys, and says that they are social constructs. That is true, of course, to some extent. It does not mean that the polls are wrong, but they are social constructs. People believe in them and base their behaviours and choices on this kind of information, yet they still distrust the original tool.

That has an impact in two respects. First, people answer surveys less and less. Response rates are decreasing over time in a really serious manner. That means that polls are less and less reliable, because of their coverage of the population. In turn, that means that the format of surveys has changed. Until the 1980s, we used to do face-to-face surveys. In France, we have turned now mostly to web surveys, which are based on panels of the population that have access to the internet and are paid—only a little amount, but still paid—to answer questions. That means that there is a clear shift in the target population of the surveys.

We know from experience and from research that, to some extent, that has increased the quality of surveys. We used to be less representative of the right in France, because we know that—for whatever reason—people

from the left tend to respond more to surveys with face-to-face techniques. With web surveys, right-wing people tend to answer more. We have now shifted to a bias towards the right. The Front National used to be really misrepresented in French surveys, but they are now quite accurate in their results and outcomes.

The Chairman: You have described the technical difficulties of polling in France, which are clearly echoed in the technical difficulties of polling in Britain. I was astonished to see that, in the first round, poll results were reported to 1/10th of a percentage point. That is way beyond the accuracy that could be expected, even on statistical grounds—let alone all the other difficulties. Why do they do that?

Nicolas Sauger: I am not sure exactly what you are referring to.

The Chairman: Instead of saying, “Macron 23%”, they said, “Macron 23.7%”. It is the 0.7% that seems statistically bizarre.

Nicolas Sauger: It is completely bizarre. We used to have not polls but estimations of the result based on the first results of the elections on election day. That made it quite easy to have that kind of accuracy, because it was based on actual results. We know how to do that easily. In most opinion polls, we do not provide an extra digit in the estimation, because that is not possible. The error that we have is closer to two points than to 0.1, which is rather too accurate.

From an academic perspective, this is the issue that we have with the French polls and their accuracy. To some extent, you are right. They are more accurate than we could expect. In fact, we do not know what we should expect, because the technique is completely out of line with the theory of survey-making in France. We should not do quota sampling, so we do not know how to compute margins of error, yet survey firms act as if they were doing probability samples and sometimes provide such margins. That means that, in most cases, they are closer to the actual results.

I argue that that is because they have some kind of expertise. We have to take into account the fact that these are professional people who poll the population on a daily basis. Even if the tools themselves are imperfect, they still provide a lot of information and expertise about the dynamics of public opinion. When you ask not for a precise survey estimate but for the general impression of directors of a firm in this sector, sometimes it is as accurate—or even more accurate—than the survey will deliver.

Part of the job of a pollster is to interpret the result. To some extent, French firms have managed to be shy enough about the techniques, to be free enough to add a natural interpretation of the dynamics that they are observing, and to be free enough with the results to have a more accurate perspective on what is going to happen in the next few days. It is not scientific in any sense, but it is still quite professional. The fact that you have some kind of expertise explains why the surveys do so well in France, despite the fact that they should not.

Q106 **Baroness Fall:** Your system does not merely involve banning polling just before the election, does it? You have a Commission des sondages, which oversees a standard of practice. I want to focus on that in my question. In

our country, we do not have anything nearly so formal. The Committee has explored whether we should look at something that is more like a gold standard. That would probably not be a regulated gold standard, but it would exist as best practice and might be a helpful guideline for newspapers on how much attention they should give to a poll. Will you tell us a bit more about how that aspect of your system works? Do you think that it is a little too rigid and hampers the creativity around methodology that keeps polling on its feet?

Nicolas Sauger: The Commission des sondages has existed for quite a long time. You must be aware that it is a very specific commission. There is no survey specialist within the commission itself. In fact, most members of the commission are either professors of law or members of the highest court of justice in France, the Conseil d'État. They are not specialists in surveys. They are specialists in two major things. One is conflict of interest, so that regulations about how to commission a survey are clear enough. For instance, we cannot use surveys commissioned by private persons from a party as public results, if that was not the intention in the first place. The second is political appraisal of whether it is good or bad to have this kind of practice. The commission then gets experts—mostly from the public statistics institute, the INSEE—to provide reports on any cases that are seen as potentially problematic.

That means that you do not have any systematic expertise in all surveys, because you have to identify the problem before you get systematic survey expertise. This year—2017—we have not had any major discussion come through decisions of the commission about surveys. It has been quite consensual, and no major result has been discussed. We had discussions in 2012 about one of the aspects we spoke about previously—turnout. In 2012, a firm tried to change the turnout question to predict how likely it was that people would participate in the election. That was discussed by the commission, but it was rather on the fringe. There was a similar issue with asking about support for the Front National, instead of simple voting intention. To predict voting intention, some firms added questions about whether people liked the Front National. That was seen as a non-ethical route.

My personal take is that the commission is not very rigid. My main problem is that it is not that clear what the gold standard of surveying in France should be. We have very few methodological discussions about what is a good sample, how to draw a sample and whether quota sampling is a problem. That should be part of the discussion. We have no discussion about margins of confidence and whether they should be made public. Should they be used to give the public a more precise idea of whether a half-point difference between two candidates is naturally meaningful, or to show them that a change of one point over two weeks does not mean anything? All those things are really important.

The third thing that should be important is transparency around how firms compute their estimates. We have no transparency to the general public on those procedures, because they are commercially protected. The commission itself can have access to part of the story, but not to all aspects of it. My take on this is that there is a risk because the

commission is not rigid and is less effective than we might wish in monitoring surveys in France.

Q107 **Baroness Couttie:** I would like to ask a question that moves us on to a slightly different topic. One of the things the Committee has been concerned about is the abuse of social media during campaigns. We saw a lot of press coverage come out of the Trump election in America, in which various states or malign interest groups tried deliberately to manipulate public opinion using social media. From your experience in France—and given your background of looking at the whole of Europe—are you aware of any such activity in France or other European countries? Have there been any studies into that? I would be interested to hear how much people feel it is happening more broadly across Europe.

Nicolas Sauger: The question that you ask is quite difficult to answer. My view is that, to some extent, the problem is not a problem of nature, but a problem of the intensity of the practice. Of course there is lobbying from different types of groups during electoral campaigns, up to a point at which it can be seen as problematic. But the point at which it becomes problematic rather than non-problematic is not so clear.

Baroness Couttie: I am not sure that I was clear. I was not talking about interest groups that were lobbying as you would expect them to do. In America, for example, there has been a lot of coverage about Russia, which was trying to influence the American election in an underhand way, by not being clear that it was Russia. Platforms were taking money from foreign states to try to influence elections, and it was not entirely clear where various forms of activity on social media were coming from. It is about more than just paid-for advertising, which may be labelled as a promotion; it also goes to some other press “articles”, which have come from non-correct sources that are trying deliberately to mislead and to influence elections.

Nicolas Sauger: We have had this debate in a number of European countries—although not on the same scale as in the US, of course. In France, we have had one specific instance—I do not remember exactly what it was—of suspicion of interference by foreign countries. It has also happened once in Italy, as I remember. It is not one of the major problems that we have right now. The problems of social media and interference by foreign countries are still distinct. We have had a number of problems with third-country interference in elections in recent days, but those have been more about funding of campaigns. As you know, a number of people accused Libya of financing Sarkozy’s campaign in 2007. That has been seen as a major possible problem, but I do not see any specific examples involving social media.

In 2017, Mélenchon was very active and had a team that put out a lot of propaganda on social media. There were some complaints about strategies to spam different activists because of their disagreement with that campaign. We have a number of different practices that could be seen as unethical, unfair or as trying to manipulate electoral results, but I am not aware of major manipulation by Russia.

In fact, to change the context, it is international crises or terrorist attacks rather than any kind of propaganda on social media that have changed

electoral results in the past few years—not only in France, but in a number of other countries.

Baroness Couttie: I have a linked question about misinformation on social media. One thing we have been concerned about is that some of the discussion on social media is based on false information, whatever the source. Are you trying to deal with that issue in France? If so, what approaches are you taking?

Nicolas Sauger: This is not a major debate in France, although there is a regular debate about rumours and false information. False information is difficult to define. For instance, surveys can sometimes be false information, because they are more or less manipulated in some ways. It goes back to the debate about pollsters' expertise. I think that they should use that, but you do not know exactly whether it is pure expertise or whether it includes some bias. It is a difficult issue and one to be aware of.

Misinformation is of course used in a number of instances. There are a number of politicians who deliberately use misinformation. A number of websites and people on YouTube are trying to decipher what is right and wrong. The major newspapers in France now have a benchmark that lets you know whether the journalist sees something as right or wrong information. Social media are providing a way of spreading this kind of misinformation to the public, but a number of new tools for comparing programmes and information—based on scientific grounds—have been spread by the same social media. It is difficult for the general public to know who is right and who is wrong, but there is plenty of information available—and not only false information. You now have more tools to make up your mind, based on your assessment of the sources.

Q108 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** I will resist the temptation to pick up the issue of Russian influence, which is an interesting one. I want to go back to the Commission des sondages. Banning polls on the last day of the campaign is only one aspect. The commission has a very important role “for studying and proposing rules designed to ensure the objectivity and quality of surveys”. Basically, that is what I suggested in the Private Member’s Bill that I put before the House of Lords last year. You have had that rule since 19 July 1977. I know that you are probably too young to remember it, but you will know why it was made. What was the inspiration for that law? What was the motivation for it and for setting up the commission?

Nicolas Sauger: The commission was put in place because of a debate on the use of polls by the Government. In 1986 and 1988 specifically, Charles Pasqua, the Minister of the Interior, had used survey polls explicitly to manipulate voting intentions through declarations in newspapers in favour of the Government. That was seen as a major problem. The answer was to pass legislation to try to limit the power of the Government as regards manipulation, or possible manipulation, of polls.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: So the newspapers were using polls to manipulate opinion in favour of the Government. That is a very interesting statement.

Nicolas Sauger: I am not sure exactly what you said, as the connection is not very good. Will you repeat it, please?

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You said that one of the motivations was that newspapers were using the polls to manipulate opinion in favour of the Government. Is that right?

Nicolas Sauger: Yes. There was a strong suspicion that one Minister in the Government had tried to provide false information on voting intentions by two different means—either by direct manipulation or by changing the usual questions, which we know has some impact on the type of declaration that people make. As that was publicly known and debated, we had a number of debates and proposals to try to circumvent or to limit what can be done to publicise different polls and to set out the standards for publishing polls.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: How do the polling organisations react? What is their view of the commission?

Nicolas Sauger: Do you mean the members of the commission themselves or the pollsters?

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: The polling organisations, such as Gallup and MORI. How do they view the commission?

Nicolas Sauger: I have not discussed this issue often with the pollsters, so I am not sure how to give their view correctly. When I have spoken to them about it, they have indicated that there is no major issue. They say that it is good, to some extent, to have a commission that provides some quality assessment of their job. In the past few years, pollsters have had to acquire all sorts of certification, including ISO certification. The polling commission is far less demanding than ISO certification when it comes to how they run their firms.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Yours is a statutory body. On 18 April this year, the structure was changed a bit, but you have members nominated by the Senate, the National Assembly, the President and other bodies. Is that right?

Nicolas Sauger: Yes. A number of members are nominated by the Court of Justice of the Republic, especially the Conseil d'État and the Conseil Constitutionnel. The President of the Senate and the President of the National Assembly also nominate people. Usually one or two of them are professors of public law, and one or two may be from different backgrounds. Then you have appointed experts who are specialists in surveys. They are not members of the commission—they have no right to vote—but they are appointed by the commission and write the reports on which its opinions are based.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: What about your funds? Where does your money to run the commission come from?

Nicolas Sauger: From the Government. I am not sure exactly which line in the budget it comes from, but the commission is run on governmental funds.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: It is from the Government of France.

Nicolas Sauger: It is not expensive. The most important expenses are a small secretariat and paying the experts for their opinions on surveys. I have no idea what the actual amount of money is, but all the members are civil servants. It therefore has no direct cost, because they are detached from their own administration to the commission. It does not sit as a permanent commission.

The Chairman: There is quite a serious confusion here. I do not think that Mr Sauger is from the commission or works for the commission—or have I misunderstood that?

Nicolas Sauger: No, I do not work for the commission at all.

The Chairman: That could have caused a misunderstanding. You are giving your view of the commission. I just want to clarify that.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: My apologies. It is even better, because you are an independent person. As a result, your comments are even more valuable.

The Chairman: Exactly. I will take questions from Baroness O'Neill and Lord Hayward. Then we will have to finish.

Q109 **Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** I would like to ask some questions about the legislation that bears on the publication of poll results. You have, very admirably, a legal definition of a poll. Do other surveys that do not qualify as polls get published a great deal in the newspapers? Are they marked as, "This was not a poll; it was merely a survey"?

Nicolas Sauger: It is an excellent question. We have not debated it in France. We do not have this distinction between polls and surveys. We expect newspapers to publish polls and nothing else. Is that always the case? I am not sure, but it is not debated. Newspapers do not try to bypass the legislation banning publication. To some extent, there is a consensus in the media. Although the media may discuss the idea, to a large extent they try to comply with this rule.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: You also require the first publication of any poll to be accompanied by certain information. First, I have a simple question. Does that apply only to the first publication or will a republication include the information that I will ask about in a moment?

Nicolas Sauger: That is a good point. I am not sure that I am a specialist on this specific point, but I would guess that it is not mandatory for republication. I am more a survey methodologist than a lawyer, so I am not sure exactly how this point is handled.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: You also have a requirement that the name of the polling organisation, the name of the sponsor and—what interests me most of all—the name of the buyer, where that is different, be published. Presumably, having this information ensures that where a poll is being paid for by a foreign intelligence agency or a company with commercial interests, for example, that will be in the public domain. Am I right about that?

Nicolas Sauger: Exactly. We have to get some information about who commissioned the poll. I refer not only to intelligence services—in fact, the main issue was polls commissioned by candidates themselves. If a

candidate is commissioning a survey, it has to be clearly stated on publication of that survey, because of the suspicion that a candidate will be willing to publish a survey that is favourable to him or her but not an unfavourable survey; we have a bias there. The legislation has prevented that kind of decision through publication of what we call the commissioner of the survey. Sometimes it is not the buyer itself—it is the one who gave the order to commission the survey.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: Is the net result that you can trace where the money is coming from? Can the public see that?

Nicolas Sauger: We do not know exactly where the money is coming from in all cases. That should be available to the Commission des sondages, but the general public have no access to information about all the possible funds on which a survey is built. The information should include either the major sponsor or any people who have a conflict of interest with the poll's publication.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: So it will be known to the Commission des sondages, but it will not be published. When the poll is published, it will not say, "This was paid for by such-and-such an organisation"—or will it?

Nicolas Sauger: We do not have to publish all buyers of a survey. We are not—

The Chairman: Unfortunately, you are breaking up. Is there anything that can be done to restore the link?

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: Can you hear us all right? No, it is frozen.

The Chairman: Shall we stop there? Is it working again now? Can you hear us?

Nicolas Sauger: Yes.

The Chairman: We missed the last 30 seconds of what you were saying. Will you repeat it?

Nicolas Sauger: I was talking about the problem of who pays for surveys. A survey can be bought by several different persons or firms. The idea is not to have mandatory publication of the names of all organisations and people involved in the commission of a survey, but to publish only the names of the major people who initiated the survey, so as to prevent any conflict of interest. General publication is not mandatory.

Q110 **Lord Hayward:** You referred to changes in betting, for example, which could be reported and would therefore get around the ban on polling. You may have reports of a favourable surge in interest for a particular candidate on social media. Does the commission have any role in relation to that sort of reporting or is that outside the reporting that applies to polls?

Nicolas Sauger: It is limited to the polls themselves—to surveys that involve sampling.

The Chairman: Mr Sauger, thank you very much for sparing the time to be with us. It has been a most informative session that has helped us to

Professor Nicolas Sauger, Professor of Political Science, Sciences Po– Oral evidence (QQ 101–110)

recognise the common problems that both countries and the pollsters within them have, and that has given us an insight into a country that runs a much more interventionist system than we currently have. We will have to decide as a Committee whether we want to move more towards your model and away from the relative laissez-faire that we have had in this country. On behalf of the whole Committee, I thank you a thousand times for the very good session that you have given us.

Nicolas Sauger: Thank you. It has been a pleasure.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Au revoir.

Dr Mark Shepard – Written evidence (PPD0004)

I would like to address the following points:

4. Does the public have confidence in the accuracy of political opinion polls? How, if at all, has public confidence in the accuracy of opinion polls changed?

13. What impact is the increased use of digital media channels having on the way in which the public engages with political opinion polling? How is political opinion polling shared across social media platforms and what impact does social media have on the accuracy and reliability of political opinion polling?

1. Following ESRC/AQMeN funded research* on the content of Twitter and BBC Have Your Say discussion threads in the run-up to the Scottish Independence Referendum (2014) I identified 5 'F's' to avoid doing online (foul; false; foggy; flannel; and flaming) as well as 5 'F's' to think about before engaging (followers; facts; fashion; filtering; and fallout). The full document is available [here](#), but below are core points in brief that are of salience to your points 4 and 13. (1)

Belief in the accuracy of polls has been knocked in recent years following a series of close elections and results (e.g. 2014 and 2016 referendums; and the 2015 and 2017 General Election results), many within the realms of sampling error. Compounding public disbelief is what voters experience on social media. In particular, having researched the content of many social media posts during the Scottish independence campaign, I identify 3 F's to consider that make critical thinking about likely outcomes less likely, so contributing to a lack of confidence and rising distrust in polls: (2)

- 1) **Fashion** – The first 'F' to consider is fashion. **Just because there is more of one view out there does not mean that this is necessarily 'right', 'true', or 'fact', or indeed, the view of the majority.** Our aggregate data of Twitter and Facebook for the Yes and No campaigns illustrated a sharp rise in support for Yes in the closing weeks of the campaign. If you were to conclude that Twitter and Facebook were representative of public opinion, you might have predicted a 'Yes' victory. This is not to say that fashion is not important as it might be useful in detecting movement in polls for example, before it actually takes place as our data seemed to be quite good at doing (support for yes went up online and then in the polls on average). The other aspect to 'fashion' is that sometimes **when one side becomes very fashionable, the other side(s) may stop questioning this 'fashion' and either go underground and/or become silent ('spiral of silence')**. This is not because they have been won over, it is more because they feel they have been run over to the point where contributing is pointless given the anticipated counter-barrage. (3)
- 2) **Followers** – The second 'F' to consider is followers/audience. Before you post something online, it is worth thinking about who the potential audience or 'followers' are likely to be. One of the online data sources I studied was the BBC's *Have Your Say* comments sections at the end of online news

stories. Assuming proportionate online news consumption (supported by BBC data on consumption patterns by nation) online contributions from those living in Scotland are likely to be outnumbered by comments from those living in England by approximately 10 to one because the population of Scotland is 5.3 million whereas the population of England is 53 million. This population asymmetry can mean that those in the minority (Scotland) can feel that they are not being given the same degree of opportunity to air their opinions as those in the majority (England), when in fact data can reveal that proportionate to population, the minority (Scotland) might actually have a bigger say on average than those in the majority (England). Indeed, we might even expect this given the nature of the news story on Scottish independence. (4)

This perception of bias becomes even more acute when talking about political parties that only stand in Scotland (for example, the SNP) and for whom the 10 to one ratio becomes even smaller due to levels of support versus non-support within the 5.3 million Scottish population. Assuming 50 per cent SNP support in Scotland and 0 per cent SNP support in England⁵⁹ (based on the 2015 General Election result), the 10 to one ratio might become more like a 20 to one ratio of comments against versus for the SNP. This can then look biased even if it is representative of the English and Scottish publics. The point here is that the media may appear biased because of the online public commentary reflecting the hugely divergent population asymmetries in the UK, and not the views of the media outlet *per se* (although that is not to say that the media may or may not be biased as well). (5)

At the disproportionate and unrepresentative end of the spectrum, **you might be contributing to an online group pre-disposed towards one view over another (for example: *Yes Scotland*; and *#yes*; or *Better Together*; and *#no*). This can lead to dissonance between what happens in a vote and what you thought was going to happen based upon your choice of information sources that you choose to interact and side with.** This lack of cross-checking of information can then lead you to more easily slip into the 5 Fs to avoid (foul; false; foggy; flannel; flaming). (6)

- 3) **'Facts'** – The third 'F' to consider is the often illusive belief in and demand for 'facts'. Critiquing the opposition for not having facts is common online (e.g. 'Salmond might as well have started his white paper with 'dear Santa' for all the facts that were in it. *#indyref*'), as is the capacity to believe that your side has all the facts (e.g. '...I have just ordered my *#indyref* white paper, so I know the facts!'). If you are a partisan, the "once people know 'the facts' they will vote for our side" becomes a lazy mantra. However, **in searching for 'facts' you have to be aware of self-selection bias, for example, picking the polls (and possibly polling companies) and**

⁵⁹ Of course, we know from the TV debates that a number of voters in England liked the performance of Nicola Sturgeon and liked many of the party's policies and so the 20 to one ratio is likely to be an overestimate. The underlying point of perceived bias and under-representation is still likely to hold true though.

news stories that suit your argument. Of course, there is nothing wrong with taking a side *per se*, but it is important to cross-check your information across the sides before you do so. (7)

This is not to claim that 'facts' do not exist. We can find out what the current price of oil is and we might know what the current interest rate is, for example. However, it becomes much harder to predict what 'facts' may be in the future as oil prices and interest rates might change. What we think we can achieve today may be even more possible in the future (or indeed less so) and for this we will often require a certain amount of best-case and worse-case scenario predictive modelling based upon what we know about how things work, or how things might work if we change them (drawing upon comparative research for example). Albeit mildly guilty of the foul, this tweet shows an appreciation of just how difficult it is to get facts about the future: 'Don't you just love the daft tweeters seeking post #indyref facts?'. Also, the economy and economic 'facts' are not the whole story. (8)

Policy proposals/action recommended:

Proposal 1 – Education Scotland already use my [TEDx talk](#) as a component in classroom teaching. Use my Policy Brief (available [here](#)) that illustrates and extends the number of Fs of the TEDx talk to provide more points for discussion in the classroom.

Proposal 2 - Given the heated online discussions over issues such as Scottish independence and Brexit, it also makes sense for this [Policy Brief](#) to be disseminated and used by teachers in secondary schools in England (and indeed Wales and Northern Ireland) as part of citizenship education (for example, the citizenship component of the National Curriculum, the National Citizenship Service, and Politics A and AS...).

*Points discussed here are taken from a University of Strathclyde International Public Policy Institute policy brief derived from a wider social media project on Scottish independence funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in conjunction with the Applied Quantitative Methods Network (AQMeN) as part of the 'Future of the UK and Scotland' research programme (www.esrc.ac.uk/major-investments/future-of-uk-and-scotland).

21 August 2017

Dr Mark Shepard and Dr Narisong Huhe – Written evidence (PPD0003)

We would like to address point 14:

14. Can social media and other new forms of data successfully predict election outcomes? What are the challenges associated with using new forms of data to predict elections?

Introduction/Overview

1. Our research findings are derived from ESRC/AQMeN funded research* on the yes and no online campaigns in the run-up to the Scottish Independence Referendum (2014).

2. Time is often ignored as a variable when analysing social media data and yet individuals have varied levels of political interest and so we might expect online participation to vary by time with those most interested engaging early on in a campaign and those least interested engaging much later (if at all). Relying on polling data and a unique time-series Facebook dataset collected over the year running up to the Scottish independence referendum, we find that there are likely two main tribes who use social media: 1) activists who engage online early; and 2) regular voters who are mobilized to use social media later on in the main campaign period. Our findings are important as they raise serious issues about the time period we extract social media from for electoral prediction. If we select data too early, we might be capturing an even more unrepresentative sample of voters online (the activists), than if we select data later on in the campaign. This finding is important for those interested in using social media as a guide to mobilization and/or as a predictor of behaviour and political outcomes.

3. Context:

- Polls can be representative of the public (typically plus or minus 3% sample error accuracy) at any time.
- Social media is very different as it is a) rarely representative; and b) changes over time as different types of groups mobilise online at varied times.
- There is a 'tsunami' of side-taking during the last few weeks of the campaign
- Consequently, if you take your social media data too soon, you might be overly capturing the views of activists, compounding any online biases that we know exist (like many others we find men are more likely to participate online)
- To examine the public's social media participation during the referendum, we focused on the Facebook campaigns of the two official protagonists in the independence referendum debate, the "Yes Scotland" (YS) and the "Better Together" (BT) campaigns. While the YS campaigned for a "yes" vote and in favour of Scottish independence, BT argued for a "no" vote. We monitored the number of likes each campaign's Facebook page received (i.e., "like") and the number of

people talking about each campaign's page (i.e., "talk"), and we compiled a unique set of data that captures over fourteen-month activities of the two campaigns from August 2013 up until the referendum in September 2014.

4. Results/why time is important:

(a) Raw data (Facebook and Twitter) (b) Our analysis of YS 'Like' (Facebook)

(c) Analysis of how DK ('Don't Know') declines over time (YouGov in red and TNS BMRB in blue) with net movements over time away from DK and No towards Yes

- There are polling company effects on levels of polling support.
- Declines in don't knows in polls at the same time as the tsunami effect takes hold online (suggesting as people come off the fence they start to declare online). This suggests that as don't knows start decreasing, then the time should be ripe to take social media more seriously as sides are taken.
- Ultimately, social media data are unrepresentative (and those claiming prediction often cherry-pick the data to fit the story), but movements online can be useful in detecting likely movements in public opinion and polls.

5. Challenges to be aware of:

Challenge 1 – When analysing social media data, time period is critical to analysis. Polls can be representative of the public (typically plus or minus 3% sampling error), but social media is typically unrepresentative of opinion at ANY time.

Challenge 2 – While social media is typically unrepresentative of opinion at ANY time, it is likely to become more representative the closer we get to an election.

21 August 2017

Sky News – Written evidence (PPD0005)

Political Polling Coverage: The View from Sky News
Evidence presented to the House of Lords Select Committee
on Political Polling and Digital Media
Jonathan Levy, Director of News-Gathering & Operations, Sky News*

This report was compiled with the assistance of Professor Michael Thrasher, Elections Analyst and the Sky News election team.

Summary

1. Sky News modified its policy towards the reporting of political opinion polling during the 2017 general election following the experiences of both the 2015 election and the 2016 EU referendum. Previously, Sky News had evolved its coverage to take account of the significant increase in the number of polls being conducted by an expanding polling industry. The revised policy means removing on-screen polling information from our broadcasts and giving less coverage and prominence to survey findings across our various platforms.
2. Although other factors are at work in shaping the dominant narrative at each election, both the increasing flow of opinion polling data and also press coverage of headline national vote share figures, ensure that survey evidence becomes a key driver of campaign coverage. Critically, in 2015 the polls overwhelmingly pointed towards a close finish and the prospect of another hung parliament and in 2016 the likelihood of a referendum victory for remaining in the EU. Naturally, in such circumstances, public faith in polling accuracy, and by implication public confidence in press and broadcast coverage, is compromised.
3. The polling industry is reviewing and revising methodological practices to address shortcomings noted by the Sturgis inquiry. But other problems that affect campaign coverage are likely to persist beyond any improvements that are made in that respect. Chief among these is the difficulty in properly managing expectations about our ability to extrapolate specific election outcomes from polling figures. In future if polling data continues to be presented without important caveats about its likely accuracy being emphasised then public confidence might fall still further.
Sky News: Evidence to the Lords Committee on Political Polling & Digital Media
4. Sky News welcomes the inquiry by the House of Lords' newly-established Committee on Polling. The problems affecting the polling industry that became evident at the 2015 general election have not been totally resolved when the recent evidence provided by the 2017 election is examined.
5. There is a growing scepticism relating to polling accuracy that affects not only the industry itself but also broadcasters like Sky News that are committed to providing comprehensive coverage of political and election campaigning.
6. It is right, therefore, that the Lords' inquiry should address aspects of modern political polling and how polls are commissioned and reported.

7. Although Sky News notes the Select Committee's broad remit this report addresses only some of the themes identified in the call for evidence. Most of our attention focuses on media coverage of polling with some additional references being made to polling methods and accuracy and possible changes to the future presentation of these data.

I. General problems

8. Before going into the detail of how Sky News' coverage of political polling has evolved it is worth noting some general problems that affect the reporting of polls in the United Kingdom.

9. First, a large majority of polls are commissioned by media organisations, largely newspapers, whose principal interest during election/referendum campaigns is to gain first access to the polling figures.

10. This leads to a bias towards reporting headline polling figures that emphasise changes in likely voting intention (parties that are flat-lining don't make headlines). Such changes in party support that do take place often fall within the margins of error. The headline figures are reported as percentage point increases/decreases compared to an earlier poll with essential commentary on sampling errors etc. relegated either to a footnote or not mentioned at all.

11. A related problem of some reporting of UK polling is that there is a tendency to focus on the gap between the two main parties since the appearance of change is potentially far greater. If one party's support rises by one percentage point and its rival's falls by the same amount there is a two-point movement in the gap. When the swing is between the two main parties (or Remain/Leave, for example) the gap thereby widens/narrows in broader increments – two, four, six etc., suggesting considerable volatility. In fact, a six-point change in gap can still be accounted for within standard margins of error.

12. A third general problem associated less with the polling industry and more with media coverage is that political opinion polls produce headline figures featuring national vote share. However, in the case of general elections, our 'first past the post' voting system does not readily translate national vote into share of parliamentary seats. The election outcome is determined by what happens in 650 separate constituencies and only indirectly by each party's share of the national vote. The media has not always been fully appreciative of this additional layer of complexity affecting the likely distribution of parliamentary seats at a general election.

13. Consequently, this principal focus on reporting national vote share may not capture the likely implications for the election outcome. Should the next general election be fought on the current parliamentary boundaries, the Conservatives require just a three-point lead over Labour to secure an overall majority of two seats while Labour's task for the same outcome is to open up a seven-point gap over the Conservatives. This asymmetry in the required lead in national vote share that each party needs will likely be overlooked, as much of

Sky News – Written evidence (PPD0005)

the media focus centres on which party is leading the race to finish ahead in the national vote.

14. The operation of the voting system matters because when, as sometimes happens, the election outcome appears at odds with the national share projections based on survey data, it is the pollsters that are mistakenly accused when some part of the post-election explanation lies with the precise nature of how votes were translated into seats.

II. Sky News' reporting of polls

15. Since it began broadcasting in 1989 Sky News' reporting of opinion polls, especially those conducted during campaigns, reflects their growing importance in framing news coverage of parliamentary elections, national referendums and other political events.

16. In the early 1990s, Sky largely reported headline figures but then introduced clearer guidelines for production and editorial staff. These stated that ideally on-screen graphics should include details about the polling company/sponsor, fieldwork dates and margin of error. Presenters and reporters were encouraged to draw attention to such details. Generally, only survey data from companies registered with the British Polling Council (BPC) were covered.

17. Reflecting the growth in the number of polls being produced by an expanding polling industry Sky News introduced a 'poll bug' during the 2001 general election campaign. This was an animating on-screen box cycling through the headline figures from the latest polls. Although the bug identified the organisation, ICM, Mori, for example, it did not reference fieldwork details, sample size etc. Full-frame graphics for polls did reference those details, as did our online platforms.

18. Beginning in 2008 our developing online coverage included an application where users could scroll through polling results (national vote shares) set against a timeline. This 'poll tracker' was up-dated daily and was referenced extensively during the 2010 campaign.

19. We also developed a second web-based application that allowed users to calculate the likely distribution of parliamentary seats either from polling figures or other data that projected national vote shares. Sky News' view was that since polls were becoming ubiquitous in modern campaigning it was integral to our role as a broadcasting and online organisation that we should increase public understanding of how national vote share might translate into parliamentary seats using assumptions of uniform swing.

20. As part of the commitment to providing comprehensive election coverage Sky News also at this point formed a broadcasters' consortium with the BBC and ITV News and commissioned the 2010 general election exit poll whose fieldwork was undertaken by the polling companies, Gfk and Ipsos/MORI. The same consortium undertook the 2015 and 2017 exit polls.

Sky News – Written evidence (PPD0005)

21. In 2014 Sky News began to undertake its own online polling, 'Sky Data'. Although the BPC's current terms and conditions mean that Sky is ineligible for membership, our reporting of these polls observe BPC guidance on good practice. Coverage of these data across our various platforms does not reference any likely future general election voting intentions, however. Instead our principal focus lies with identifying key aspects of contemporary attitudes among the UK population and how those are changing over time.

III. The growth in polling and its impact on reporting

22. In common with many other broadcast and print organisations Sky News regularly reports the ebb and flow of electoral opinion, leadership popularity and the salience of policy issues as mediated by opinion polls. It has been impossible to ignore the growing number of polls produced by an expanding pool of polling organisations when developing the substance and tone of our news coverage.

23. During the 1992 election campaign, for example, a total of 50 voting intention polls were published. The 2010 campaign saw 75 campaign polls, a 50% increase.

24. The advent of online polling accelerated this growth. The BPC/Market Research Society-appointed committee under Patrick Sturgis estimates there were approximately 3,500 GB-wide polls over the 65-year period 1945-2010. By contrast, in the five-year period from 2010 there were nearly 2,000 published polls with 91 during the 2015 campaign itself.

25. The increasing number of polls, particularly during election campaigns, has seen greater coverage being given to both the headline figures and also the reactions of party figures most involved with those campaigns. When the polls are subsequently shown to lie within the expected bounds of accuracy this coverage simply reflects the evolution of modern election campaigning.

26. The post-2015 general election experience, however, marked a step change in how polling figures are evaluated. During that campaign the volume of political polling and the narrative driven by the reported figures inevitably framed campaign coverage. In turn, this affected public expectations of the likely distribution of votes and the election outcome itself. When the result differed so markedly from what had been anticipated that affected the manner in which Sky News would cover political polling in the future.

IV. Polling and election coverage

27. The tenor of the 2015 general election coverage was framed in the context of another hung parliament. While other factors were shaping this narrative, for example, party campaign messages regarding the prospects or not of another coalition government, the state of betting markets etc., the evidence emerging from opinion polling was a critical element.

28. A majority of polls published in the three-week period to polling day indicated the national vote would be either a tie (17 polls indicated this result) or

a single percentage point gap between Conservative and Labour. Among those showing a modest gap were 42 polls suggesting a Labour lead with 33 polls indicating a slender lead for the Conservatives. The actual result was a seven-point lead for the Conservatives.

29. Among the seven final polls to declare, the Conservative vote share was under-estimated by between 1.7 to 6.7 percentage points. Only two companies' estimates fell within the margin of error of +/- 3%.

30. Labour's vote was over-estimated by six of the polls but only in two cases beyond the three-point margin. In the case of the other parties, Liberal Democrats, UKIP and 'Others' the estimates were close to the outcome.

31. The failure of the polls, principally in respect of Conservative support, is compounded in 2015 by the media coverage given to the gap between the two major parties. Instead of the anticipated close finish the Conservatives held a commanding lead over Labour.

32. The 2015 election also saw a significant increase in constituency-level polling, mainly though not exclusively undertaken for Lord Ashcroft. Again, these polls and their findings attracted detailed media attention and impacted on coverage of the broader election. Subsequent analysis of the constituency polling evidence indicates greater unreliability than national sampling.

33. The cumulative narrative provided by the national and constituency polling in 2015 was such that when the broadcasters' exit poll figures pointing towards a 71 seat difference between Conservative and Labour were announced on May 7 there was widespread scepticism towards this evidence among commentators, politicians and probably among the general public also. Of course, we now know that the political polling figures were at fault and that prompted an inquiry.

34. The first real test of methodological changes suggested by the Sturgis Report came with the June 2016 EU referendum. Although most polls correctly indicated the likelihood of a close finish there was nevertheless a clear tendency among the survey data. All seven of the 'final' polls over-estimated the percentage for 'Remain' by between one and seven points.

35. As we had done with Scotland's independence referendum, Sky News reported latest polling figures during the final few weeks of the campaign using our on-screen box and in our news coverage generally.

36. However, for both referendums, although polling evidence was widely reported by Sky News, it probably impacted less on our campaign coverage. This is because referendums produce a Yes/No, Remain/Leave division where almost regardless of the polling evidence it is incumbent upon broadcast organisations (not so newspapers, of course) to allocate equal time to the two sides contesting the outcome.

37. But it is the cumulative experience of the 2015 general election and the 2016 EU referendum that has prompted changes to Sky News' coverage of political polling.

V. Revising coverage

38. Against the backdrop of both the 2015 general election and the 2016 referendum, when the 2017 election was announced Sky News reviewed and subsequently altered its editorial policy towards the reporting of political polls.

39. The long-standing campaign poll bug was removed from both television and mobile platforms. Hourly television sequences reviewing the latest polling activity were stopped. Output editors were asked to deliberate before leading news coverage with a polling story while steps were taken to ensure that coverage of particular polls was consistent across television and mobile output. Particular attention should be paid to reporting the margin of error of any poll findings and also care given to putting the poll evidence in the broader context of the overall campaign and our own journalism.

VI. The future?

40. Given the context of the two most recent general elections the polling industry faces a number of challenges if confidence is to be restored. Following the Sturgis Report polling companies all addressed the problem of obtaining representative samples of electors and did so in different ways. After the 2017 general election, the BPC itself has asked its members to report on the steps being taken to review procedures and the measures taken to improve them. The impact of these measures should become apparent in time.

41. Meanwhile, in our opinion, there are some simple steps the polling companies might consider that would foster more realistic expectations, both in the media and more generally, about how polling data should be interpreted and reported. These measures, we believe, would not compromise client confidentiality.

- Provide more detailed information in press releases referencing poll findings regarding the procedures being used to weight the original sample.
- Changes to this procedure and other important aspects of methodology, for example, drawing representative samples, which sometimes occur during the election campaign itself, should be clearly reported.
- Consider and address the effects on confidence intervals/margins of error when using sub-samples of data. For example, when headline national vote shares are based solely on respondents stating that they are 'certain to vote' overall sample size is reduced significantly but currently little or no mention is made of the effects of this.

42. The media, of course, should take some responsibility for the ways in which poll findings are being communicated. It is not good practice when single polls are reported out of context and are relied upon to suggest major changes are taking place within the electorate. The current tendency is to exaggerate the accuracy of survey data, thereby raising expectations that this method of measuring political opinion has particular advantages over alternatives that are emerging as digital media expands.

22 August 2017

Sky News – Oral evidence (QQ 83–88)

Evidence Session No. 11

Heard in Public

Questions 83 - 88

Tuesday 31 October 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Baroness Fall; Baroness Ford; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve; Lord Rennard; Lord Smith of Hindhead.

Witnesses

I: Jonathan Levy, Director of News Gathering and Operations, Sky News; Professor Michael Thrasher, Co-Director of the Elections Centre and adviser to Sky.

Examination of witnesses

Jonathan Levy and Professor Michael Thrasher.

Q83 The Chairman: Good morning, Mr Levy and Professor Thrasher. Welcome to this meeting of the Committee. You should have in front of you a list of the interests of members of the Committee, such as they are. You are being broadcast live via the parliamentary website. I hope that that will not inhibit you too much. There will be a transcript of the meeting afterwards. If you have misspoken at all or want to correct the emphasis, please feel free to do so. You are protected by parliamentary privilege so, however rude you are about us or anybody else, you cannot be sued.

I have asked Lord Rennard to lead the questioning in this session, because I spoke too much in the first session. Chris, would you like to start us off?

Lord Rennard: First, I thank you both for Sky News's written submission. I would like to begin by asking you to expand a bit on your future recommendations. Towards the tail-end of your paper, you seem to suggest that, if there is a problem with the accuracy of the reporting of opinion polls, that may be the fault of the opinion pollsters for not giving you enough information about sample sizes, fieldwork, et cetera. Do you think that it is really fair to say that? Given that things like margins of error should be well known to people involved in polling, should more emphasis not be given to the margin of error that there might be when you report polls on Sky News? When you headline a party at 41%, for example, should you not say more often, "It could be 38% or 44%, given the margin of error"? Could you expand on that part of your submission?

Professor Michael Thrasher: We have been covering general elections at Sky since 1992, when I joined Sky. I have covered seven general elections for Sky News as its elections analyst. Over that period, we have

noticed a gradual and, sometimes, stepwise evolution of the way in which the polls are examined and reported. Of course, you will not need me to remind you of what happened in 1992. As a consequence of that, both the polling industry and the media organisations took a step back and tried to evaluate what had gone wrong. It was reasonable, fair and proper that that happened when a failure on that level had taken place.

If you look at the history of polling since then, you find that periodically there have been occasions when the polling industry has slipped up—most recently, in 2015 and 2017. After 2015, the committee under Patrick Sturgis examined the consequences of that. Again, steps were taken by the polling industry. After 2017, the British Polling Council has asked its members to review, principally, the way in which they weight the data on turnout.

With that background, it is important that we reflect on where we go from this point onwards. As you have pointed out, in the conclusions to the paper, we report on what we would like to see as regards the adoption of best practice for the future. Principally, when an opinion pollster changes its method of weighting data, it should report openly and fully on the difference in the weights. You have received written evidence on an experiment by the *New York Times* that demonstrates that, although different experts may use exactly the same data, the way in which they weight those data gives you different outcomes. Therefore, as we saw in 2017, the weighting of the data is critical. Our first point is, “Please tell us more about the weighting of your data”.

The second point is a particular bugbear of mine. We all talk about the plus or minus 3% margin of error. In fact, that is a reflection on the confidence intervals and the margin of error for a random probability sample. As far as I know, no one is doing random probability samples. Plus or minus 3% is a sort of convention that we use. In the written evidence that Will Jennings submitted, there is a very good explanation of how we should treat that. What confuses and, sometimes, concerns me is that that, when, from a sample of 1,500 people, for example, they knock out all the people who are not going to vote, that reduces the sample to below 1,000—well below 1,000, in some cases—but there is no clear adjustment for the confidence interval with that. If you are talking about a subsample of the main sample—Patrick Sturgis can correct this—the confidence interval is bound to reflect that.

Jonathan Levy: As regards the editorial responsibility for how we report polls, there are a couple of things that we are doing already and will continue to do. First, in the guidance that we put out to staff ahead of the 2017 election, we asked them to be very clear when a poll fell within the margin of error—and to be clear about that to our viewers or readers. Secondly, we have on hand Michael, or someone else with a great deal of expertise about polls, their methodology and the way in which they work. When we are reporting polls, we look to draw on that expertise. We either have Michael in the studio, on set, talking about polls, or we bring his expertise and the expertise of others into our reporting. It is very much our intention and our editorial practice to bring those caveats into our reporting of polls.

The Chairman: I have a follow-up question. What you have said is very reassuring, in the sense that Michael has a proper technical grasp of all the issues involved and that is being fed in. However, is it reflected in the coverage that you give? Would you say that, as a result of having this technical knowledge, Sky did not bang on about the hung Parliament that was about to come in 2015, or the fact that May was going to have a huge majority and Corbyn was going to be finished in 2017? Did you still get carried away by the general mood that was generated by the polls as to what the election was about?

Jonathan Levy: I believe that there is a difference between our approach in 2015 and our approach in 2017, as outlined in our submission. In 2017, there was a marked difference in the way in which we approached opinion polls. After every election, we take some time to reflect on what went well and what did not go so well in our coverage. Following the 2015 election, part of the discussion was about whether the prominence that we gave to opinion polls, in different ways, was right and should be repeated. We adjusted our approach in 2017 and gave less prominence to the polls—both visually, in the way in which they were presented on TV and on our digital platforms on Sky News, and within our journalism overall. There is some validity in the suggestion that in 2015 we, along with many others, gave too much prominence to the opinion polls. I do not think that we necessarily did so in 2017.

The Chairman: I have four questions from members to my left, so we may as well do them in order.

Q84 **Lord Smith of Hindhead:** To some extent, you have asked the question that I was about to ask, Lord Chairman. That is often the way. Let me readjust it slightly. Professor Thrasher, you set out very eloquently your concerns as to why the opinion polls were not correct in the 2015 and 2017 elections. If that is the case, how do you intend to report on the next election, bearing in mind that you do not have much confidence in the polls? I do not think that the public have much confidence in the polls now, either. How do you intend to report the polls at the next election? Do you agree with the 16 or so other nations in the western democratic world that ban reporting on political polling in the week leading up to an election, and sometimes for longer?

Professor Michael Thrasher: The first part of the question was about how we will continue to report them. If the past is anything to go by, what will happen is that the polling industry will address the problems itself. It is in its commercial interests to address them properly and thoroughly. The focus of political polling is general elections, so the problem that the industry has is that, in some senses, you are fixing the problem of the last election. It will re-examine the weighting procedures that it used, which may well solve that particular problem, but a new problem may arise for the next general election. That is not to say that the industry will stop trying; it is in its interests to do so. With that in mind, I fully expect that there will be some re-evaluation of the way in which the press releases are written and the way in which pollsters will encourage the newspapers that commission their polls.

Let me say this. The relationship between the newspaper that commissions the poll and the polling company is often a very close one. The journalists who are responsible for writing about polls for newspapers—many of whom I know—are often properly trained and experienced in the way in which polling works. The way in which they write up the polls is informed. The polling industry will re-evaluate where it is coming from. With the YouGov experience in 2017, I get a sense that more polling organisations will move towards providing point estimates for House of Commons projections, with parameters of plus or minus so many seats. That is the information that they will want newspapers to write about and broadcasters to talk about—as we did, in one of the few examples from 2017. On the day on which YouGov launched this method, I did an interview on Sky television.

There will be a lot more information that I call fuzzy. They will not say that it is 326 seats—they will say that it is 306 seats or 346 seats. That will take some getting used to, because people want to know what the number is—who is going to win and who is going to lose. However, it is in the interests of the polling industry to get this right and act responsibly. When polling companies have this conversation with their newspapers, they will encourage the newspapers to start talking in that sort of language. Our submission talks about the expectations on the polling industry being too high. The expectation is that, with days to go before polling takes place, it is capable of telling you, “This is going to be the result”. We need to step back from that situation and to say, “Forecasting percentage point share in a UK general election is a very difficult operation”. It is even harder to translate that vote share into the distribution of seats in the House of Commons. As some people around this table well know, that can be rather strange at times. I think that there will be a kind of re-evaluation. Sky will simply reflect on that and take certain decisions in the light of it.

I do not have a strong view on the second part of your question. However, I do not think that it is part of our democracy, our culture and the openness of our society, or that anything would be gained from banning legitimate political polls during a general election campaign and preventing media organisations such as Sky News from reporting on them.

Lord Howarth of Newport: In paragraph 32 of your written evidence, you mention that the “2015 election ... saw a significant increase in constituency-level polling”. One can see many reasons why that might be so. It has been suggested to us that we are likely to see more and more of it, the reasons being fragmentation of our class system, the volatility of the electorate or the point Professor Thrasher has just reminded us of—that the national share of the vote does not give you an accurate indication of what may happen in a constituency-based election, which has to be won in 650 or so constituencies. Of course, there are going to be boundary changes, so there may be greater interest in how opinion is breaking in the new constituencies, many of which will yoke together some fairly disparate chunks of the electorate.

However, you say, “Subsequent analysis of the constituency polling evidence indicates greater unreliability” in constituency-level sampling

than in national-level sampling. I wonder what that was. It seems particularly important because, as you also say, increased attention on constituency-level polling “impacted on coverage of the broader election”. Therefore, there was a significant impact on coverage of the broader election by data that proved not to be very accurate. Can you tell us more about what that impact was and why the polling was not as reliable as it should have been?

Professor Michael Thrasher: I refer the Committee’s attention to a piece of written evidence that Ron Johnston and his colleagues from Bristol have submitted. In it, they evaluate the accuracy and success, in precisely these terms—of the YouGov polls, the Ashcroft polls and the estimates provided by Chris Hanretty. That is a very helpful and useful piece of analysis. If I am right, and the polling industry moves towards the notion of probabilities—in other words, giving you the plus or minus range, rather than an estimate for the House of Commons—it will move at the same time towards examination of a seat-by-seat calculation of the probability that party X or party Y will win a constituency. Ron Johnston’s paper demonstrates that, although these models have a pretty good success rate, they also have some failures. Some seats where the probability of a win for party X was forecast as very high were in fact won by party Y.

In my role at Sky, that disturbs me, in a way. It is rather like the weather forecast for the people I play golf with. As we were playing golf in the rain, they said, “It was forecast to be sunny today”. In fact, the weather forecast gave a 30% probability of rain. When I tell them that, they are not at all impressed by probabilities—they just know that they are getting wet. There is a very real problem to do with how we present the analysis of the way in which polls drill down to the constituency level and how we handle those probabilities. I guess that we will point out, “Although there is a 70% probability that, according to this poll, this seat will be won by this party, experience from the past tells us that these probabilities are wrong, just as the weather forecast is wrong”.

The Chairman: May I take this opportunity to interject? You referred to Ron Johnston’s excellent evidence. On behalf of the Committee, I wish him a very full and speedy recovery from the major heart surgery that he has just undergone. We cannot do without him. I hope that he will be back in full form very soon. He has done well so far.

Q85 **Baroness Couttie:** My question is about what may happen going forward. Reporting a range, which we talked about slightly earlier, may be a solution to what I am about to ask. As it stands—correct me if I am wrong—there is a tension between the headline of an article, be that in the written press or in the broadcast media, and the content, because the headline needs to drag people in and you can be more accurate in the content. However, unless they are really interested in the subject, viewers or readers tend to remember the headline and to take that away with them. How does that work with your current guidance and the way in which Sky currently works? For example, if an article says, “May surges two points ahead”, and then explains much further down that that is well within the margin of error, how does that work with your guidelines?

Jonathan Levy: Overhanging all this are two separate things. There are the polls themselves—the methodologies, changes, fallibilities and caveats around the polls—and the way in which we make those clear, with Michael’s guidance. We give guidance to our staff around the reporting of polls, the probabilities around them, and so on.

That is one aspect of it. The other aspect is the way in which we present polls in our coverage—the place that they take in our coverage. We have given a lot of thought to the prominence of polling in our coverage vis-à-vis other aspects of our journalism—our own journalism and what else is going on in the campaign. That speaks to your point. During the 2017 election, we asked our output editors to be more considerate about leading on polls than perhaps they had been in past, when we would begin bulletins or start articles with a poll headline. In 2017, we were a lot more circumspect about that. As you say, if a poll finding leads your bulletin or is the headline of a piece, that has its own effect, regardless of whether you point out the potential fallibility of the poll within that.

Baroness Couttie: It sounds like you are referring to something that the BBC does—never leading with a polling piece. I am not quite saying that. Even if it is second or third, I still believe that people remember the headline and do not necessarily remember the detail. That is what they take away—particularly because most news broadcasters trail at the bottom what is going to happen over the next half-hour and have three or four stories, with just the bullet headlines. The headline, at least, of any of those stories will probably be remembered, whether it is first, second or third.

Jonathan Levy: It is not just about the position in the bulletin. It is also about whether you put a poll finding in your opener—in a television bulletin, the equivalent of your headlines at the top of an hour. We are much less inclined to do that now than we used to be. It is not just about whether it is the top item, the second item or the third item—it is about whether you put a poll finding in flashing lights at all. We are less inclined to do that now than we were in the past.

Baroness Couttie: Would your story nevertheless lead with “May surges two points ahead”, potentially, to draw people into it—even though that is within the margin of error—or would you try to steer away from the more sensational-sounding headline, with a view to giving your viewers a greater sense of the accurate position?

Jonathan Levy: The guidance in 2017, in particular, was to lead much more on our own journalism, our own findings and other things that were going on, rather than to run stories about the polls. When we did cover them, the guidance was to do so in a very specific way. In 2017, it was much less likely that on Sky News you would see a written headline or a script headline on TV that made reference to a particular poll. The attempt was to be much more holistic in our coverage and put it all into a much wider context—successfully, I believe.

Q86 **Baroness Fall:** We have just had questioning with IPSO. There is a difference, of course, between regulated broadcasting and voluntary regulation of the written press. With that in mind, do you think that there should be tougher regulation of broadcasters’ use of polls? For example,

given that we now see so many polls that are of a smaller size and are often used to help newspaper sales, should we ask broadcasters to use polls only of a certain size, especially in a general election? In a way, that would encourage newspapers and polling companies to come together once or twice during a campaign to do a bigger, more accurate poll, which the broadcasters would be allowed to use. There would then be a differentiation. Of course, the newspaper poll would be out there on the blogs and so on, but the broadcasts—those big evening news bulletins—are powerful and still have an enormous audience. What is your view on that?

Jonathan Levy: The Ofcom regulations put an obligation on us to be duly impartial and accurate. There is extra regulation on us at election time; we take all of that extremely seriously. All our election reporting and reporting of polls conform with those regulations. The fact that we scrutinise all aspects of our coverage—in this instance, our political coverage—and make changes between different elections shows that we take our responsibilities seriously. That is something that we do all the time, not just between 2015 and 2017, although it was perhaps more marked in that instance. I do not think that there is a need for further regulation. The fact that between 2015 and 2017 we looked back, identified areas where, perhaps, we did not get it quite right in 2015—as did other broadcasters—and made changes in 2017 suggests that the current level of regulation is the right one.

The Chairman: Can I follow up on the other point that Kate was making? Let me put it this way. The exit polls have been a tremendous success since the three or four main broadcasting organisations have co-operated, giving them a much bigger budget and enabling a much more sophisticated methodology. Could you not do the same at least once during the election campaign, so that we had a benchmark—preferably, one based on random sampling—done by the broadcasters, which would deserve rather more prominence than some of the polls that you have to report?

Jonathan Levy: Michael can talk in more detail about the complexity and methodologies involved in the exit poll. It is a vast exercise that is worked on over a long period of time and involves a considerable investment by the broadcasters. In my view, we are better off collaborating and getting together on that exercise than on a voting intention poll or a voting sentiment poll earlier in the campaign. That is a more valid area of co-operation.

Professor Michael Thrasher: I am Sky News's representative on the exit poll team. I have been working within that team, so I have first-hand experience not only of what happens on the day, to get the projection, but of the planning of it. For 2015, we probably spent two years planning and implementing the plan for the exit poll. In 2017, we did not have two years to do it. We were fortunate in so far as a lot of what worked in 2015 was already in place, but there was a great deal of scrambling around to implement the 2017 poll. It was only with the efforts of certain people—Roger Mortimore of Ipsos MORI and others—that we were able to get there in 2017.

There are two important points. First, you are dealing with people after they have voted. The question is no longer, “How might you vote?” but, “How did you vote?” Secondly, the planning of it takes a great deal of time. The broadcasters must see a shared purpose in it, which is about saying, “If it does go wrong, we have all gone wrong”. Of course, that is also the American model. The broadcasters have embraced that relaxation of competitive advantage. I am not sure how that would work practically in the newspaper industry and when would be the most—

The Chairman: I am talking not about newspapers, but about television—broadcasters.

Professor Michael Thrasher: A pre-election poll.

The Chairman: A pre-election poll with sophisticated methodology, commissioned by all the broadcasters.

Professor Michael Thrasher: That involves costs, does it not?

Jonathan Levy: The broadcasters will co-operate when it is necessary to do so, but we operate in a competitive environment. There are many imperatives that mean that we have to co-operate on the exit poll—not least, access to researchers and the very large cost. I talk for Sky News, but I imagine that my broadcast colleagues in other organisations would take a similar view. I do not think that any of us would see great merit in coming together for a voting intention poll.

Q87 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** I am sorry to cut in, but my question was going to be about exit polls. The Chairman has largely taken it, but I will add to what has been said. You have a competitive market, which we all understand. However, I understand from both of you—from both the academic polling point of view and from the news-producing point of view—that you have slightly diminished the role of polls in your coverage. They have become less relevant, less interesting and less engaging to your audience. In a sense, would it not be a good suppression of the competitive media market to try to get something that was very important and accurate?

Jonathan Levy: If it were accurate. Michael can talk more to this. My psephological understanding is that the accuracy of the exit poll is based on the fact that you are asking people what they have done.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: That is one of the issues. However, we understand from the polling people we have talked to that, in a funny sort of way, there is a retrospective view that the more old-fashioned way of doing it—which was expensive, but was much more dependent on face-to-face encounters, et cetera—was more accurate. I cannot give a cut-off date for when that ceased to happen, but that is the evidence that we have been given. I do not know enough about the systems that are used, apart from the fact that the people in an exit poll have obviously voted. Would it not be very satisfactory to the broadcasters to have something really significant?

Jonathan Levy: It might be. However, the fact that we tend to focus our journalistic endeavours on different journalistic aspects of the campaign coverage suggests that we would not think that that was worth the kind of

investment that we put into the exit poll—which is considerable, both in time and in money.

Professor Michael Thrasher: The problem would be when you would take this snapshot of opinion. The evidence from the British Election Study shows that there is a lot more volatility out there among the electorate and that people are making the decision about whether and how to vote much later. With people being less tied to political parties, there is a very real chance that, if you take it three weeks out, what you will find—and what will then be pinned to the poll—

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I hear what you are saying. I would echo Lord Smith’s earlier question. The next question is, what is the point of the polls?

Baroness Fall: My original question was the flip-side of this. You could just say that broadcasters are not allowed to use a poll that is inaccurate or too small in a campaign. Then you would have a market where it might be in the interests of the polling companies or the newspapers to come together to come up with a bigger poll. You yourselves took off the little bug that you had. What was it called?

Professor Michael Thrasher: The poll bug.

Baroness Fall: Exactly. I would like to hear more about why you did that. It must have been because you felt that it was a bit misleading. Is there not a case, especially in an election, for encouraging a few times a larger sample that is slightly more expensive and that the broadcasters are more comfortable about using?

Jonathan Levy: We took the poll bug off because we wanted to approach the 2017 election in a different way and put a different emphasis on our journalism, with more emphasis on our own reporting and original journalism and less on polls that, in the end, are commissioned by other people—on the whole, by newspapers. That was part of the decision.

At the moment, we as a broadcaster make a judgment on the veracity and validity of a certain poll. In doing so, we take expert advice from the likes of Michael on whether or not to publish it. From Michael, we will hear whether he has faith—or the degree to which he has faith—in that poll, depending on the size of the sample and other factors. We take that into consideration when we decide whether to talk about it or publish it. I do not think that a stipulation that we can report some polls and not others would be particularly useful.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: The exit poll is at the finish line, is it not? It is completely different from the other polls. You are not comparing apples with apples. The exit poll is done once everyone has voted. It is not like any poll up to then, however accurate or inaccurate it may be—and we know that recently they have been very inaccurate. My concern, which is shared by a lot of people, is that polls can influence voting and public opinion. If they are not correct and they are done too early—whether you do them collaboratively or whether they are just in a newspaper report—they can have an effect on the way in which people vote. They are looking at the polls, not at what the parties are actually saying. For me, that is a massive concern. I would have a real concern about there being some

massive poll before an election, because I would not want that to influence the way in which people voted.

Professor Michael Thrasher: That goes back to my earlier point about the level of expectation that we place on the ability of the polls to do a general election forecast by asking people how they are going to vote in three weeks, two weeks or one week. It is about properly calibrating expectations. Of course, political polling also has rather valuable information about how people perceive the election and the party leaders. That matters in a democracy.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: But it matters only if it is accurate—and it has not been accurate.

Professor Michael Thrasher: It has not been accurate in so far as you are highlighting point-estimate problems to do with Labour's share of the vote in 2017 or point-estimate inaccuracies in the Conservative vote in 2015. However, in other regards, I do not see that the polls have been particularly inaccurate in telling me what voters are talking about and what issues will determine the way in which they will vote. They have not been inaccurate in their broad estimates of whether voters like certain party leaders. To label the polls as completely inaccurate is a little unfair, because they contain a great deal more. Notwithstanding the problem of headlines, there is a great deal of value in polling. In a democracy, I may be thinking of voting in a particular way, but I want to know what everyone else is thinking. That brings us together—it is a general election.

The Chairman: We have had a very good discussion of pre-election polls and the possibility of coming together to do a more substantive poll. I find it rather disappointing that both you and other broadcasting organisations have been so negative about that. I am not saying that we should or should not do it. However, given the strength of the argument on both sides, I think that somebody should look at it properly. Of course, the Committee will be able to deliberate about whether it wishes to recommend in its report that a proper examination of this is done before we decide one way or another. If the arguments put today had been taken seriously, we would never have had an exit poll in the first place.

Q88 **Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** Sky deserves some commendation for altering the way in which it covers polls in the light of 2015, because we all love numbers and are preoccupied with predictions. However, are you not being just a little naive in saying that moving polls down the headlines is enough? I watch Sky quite a lot. There is a lot of coverage of newspapers. You get three people in to say what is in the newspapers. They look at the headlines—which, during elections, are about the polls. Adam Boulton or Niall Paterson has people in for a debate, and they are all talking about the polls. In 2015, they were talking about things being neck and neck and there being a hung Parliament. In 2017, even on Sky, you were still saying, "The polls are telling us that Theresa May is going to increase her majority. This is the great thing". It is not just the news—it is all the newspaper coverage, the debates, the discussions, and so on. Those were all just as controversial on Sky in 2017 as they were in 2015, were they not?

Jonathan Levy: You are absolutely right. There are parts of our coverage each day that focus on newspaper coverage. There are press previews at

10.30 and 11.30 at night and in other parts of the day. However, they are just parts of our coverage. It is the responsibility of the person presenting those segments, whether it be Adam or Niall, to absorb the guidance that they have been given and to use their own thoughts on and understanding of the fallibility and limitations of the polls to point that out. Adam, in particular, is a long-time sceptic about opinion polls, as it happens. He is always quite diligent in pointing out their limitations and not giving them too much prominence. I trust Adam, in particular, and our other presenters to do their job properly in relation to those segments where we are covering the newspapers. You are right; it may be that three newspapers have a poll on the front page, and it will be covered as part of a press review. That is valid.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: It is important to look at all your coverage, not just the news bulletins, is it not?

Jonathan Levy: We do look at all our coverage. We are particularly mindful of that and are keen that, in all aspects of our coverage, we absorb this different thinking around polling.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You also said—quite rightly—that you were sceptical about using the polls to predict the number of seats in the House of Commons, for a number of reasons. The BBC does that; Jeremy Vine has taken over from Peter Snow. Did you not do some of that as well?

Jonathan Levy: It goes back to the exit poll. The exit poll is a seat prediction. The point about the exit poll is that it has an editorial function across the many hours of an election night programme. That is the way in which it should be understood. It comes up with a seat prediction, rather than a voting number. That is how the exit poll works. Yes, we did that overnight.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You did it with the exit poll. Did you not do it with some of the opinion polls in the course of the election as well?

Jonathan Levy: Only on the basis that I have described and with the caveats that I have described. We certainly did it a lot less than in 2015. In previous elections, the sequences that we have run have run through the opinion polls done by the various pollsters. We also had an application on TV and on our digital platforms that allowed you to plug in those numbers and told you how they converted. In 2017, we had a considerable move away from that, for all the reasons that we have outlined. We are less sure of the reliability of it.

Professor Michael Thrasher: You are correct. For example, on the Friday after the May local elections, which were held a month before the general election, I did a House of Commons projection, from an estimate of the national vote share based on the voting in those local elections. I projected a House of Commons majority for Theresa May of 48, which was somewhat lower than the polls were saying at that time. I do not know whether that gave them cause for concern. However, you are right to say that we do that.

Jonathan Levy: But that was not based on opinion polls.

Professor Michael Thrasher: It was based on the evidence from local elections data, rather than any opinion polls.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Do you not also get worried that the debate in 2017, as well as in 2015, was based on polls, rather than policies? If our manifesto had not been leaked, there might have been no debate at all about policies. That was the one thing that activated policy debate.

Jonathan Levy: We took a concerted decision in 2017—and around other elections as well—to give much greater focus to that. We commissioned a series of 12-minute films that looked at particular areas of the election campaign. We had our health correspondent do a long film about the NHS. We had our business correspondent look at the economy and the business environment. We had another correspondent look at issues around social mobility and other issues. We very much had our focus on policy, implications and other areas away from the horserace and the headline numbers. You are right. It is concerning if all the talk is about the horserace—who is where, and so on. It crowds out the very important discussions I have referred to and coverage of policy and other issues.

The Chairman: I think that we are at the end of questions. We are going to do a bit of work on the question of how you translate vote shares, such as polls yield, into seats. Patrick Sturgis, our expert adviser, is doing that. Michael, this is very much up your street. If you have any thoughts on the matter, we will be very grateful for anything that you can tell us about it. We would like to know whether swing works anymore or whether we need something more sophisticated.

Thank you very much for giving evidence today. I hope that you did not mind being pressed on one or two things. I would like to say on behalf of the Committee that we thought that your memorandum of evidence was quite excellent. We are delighted by the direction in which Sky has gone, to prevent some of the excesses that characterised some of the earlier coverage. You are in a much better position today. We as a Committee appreciate that.

Jonathan Levy: Thank you very much.

Professor Michael Thrasher: Thank you.

Society of Editors – Oral evidence (QQ 96–100)

Evidence Session No. 13

Heard in Public

Questions 96 - 100

Tuesday 14 November 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Baroness Fall; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Janke; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve; Lord Rennard; Lord Smith of Hindhead.

Witness

I: Ian Murray, Executive Director, Society of Editors.

Examination of witness

Ian Murray.

Q96 **The Chairman:** We should first commiserate with you on your fate in speaking for the entire national press all on your own, without anybody else. You have been in office for only a relatively short period of time, too, so it is very good of you to come before us. We will be as gentle as a Committee can be. Of course, we have heard from other representatives of your industry more broadly, including from IPSO and individual journalists. We have more evidence to take. In the totality of the Committee's proceedings, you will not be all on your own.

I will make one or two technical points. You are being broadcast.

Ian Murray: I appreciate that.

The Chairman: We cannot do anything about that. The only thing is that you will not get sued, whatever you say about anybody, because you are protected by parliamentary privilege. You have in front of you a list of the interests of all the members of the Committee, so you know about that. A transcript will be prepared, so you will have a chance to alter anything if you feel that you misspoke or it did not come out clearly. You have those protections. Pippa will start the questioning.

Q97 **Baroness Coultie:** Good morning. I would like to start by focusing on the regional media. There is quite a broad cross-section of different types of regional publications, and with that, I suggest, different standards. What concerns me is that regional media can have quite a large impact at constituency level. I would be very interested to hear your views on how responsibly the regional media report polls. When they conduct their own polls, which are probably best described as straw polls, as opposed to professional polls, are they reported with the appropriate caveats, given that they are likely to be straw polls of a self-selecting group of the publication's own readers? Where do you think that more could be done to

try to bring some of the less conscientious regional press—I was going to say “reputable”, but that is probably the wrong word—up to a more professional standard on polling?

Ian Murray: That is a very good question. If you have seen my short biography, you will know that most of my professional career has been in the regional press. That is where a lot of my experience comes from. If you had asked me that question 10 or 15 years ago, I would have had far more concerns, in some senses. As an industry, we were prone to saying, “There is an election or a big issue coming up. Let’s go out and do a straw poll. We will stand on a street corner and, very unscientifically, ask the first 100 people who go by, ‘Do you like mayonnaise or marmalade?’”. When we got the result, we would present it to the readers as, “Southampton will vote no to mayonnaise”, or something like that. I would like to think that we would always say, “Our straw poll was taken here”, et cetera.

That has changed a great deal, as the regional press—as well as the national press, of course—has become more sophisticated. My experience is that it has changed. There is more of an understanding that you will be held to account by readers. I certainly experience that readers expect more, and will hold you to account on that. In a moment, I will come to the situation with regard to ownership of the regional press, of which you are probably aware.

It is about drilling down from the top—from the best practice that is there. As you can see, I have just come hot-footed—hot in face—from the annual conference of the Society of Editors, which was held in Cambridge yesterday. I raised with a number of editors from the regional press the fact that I would be speaking here today. I said to them, “This is my experience. Can I check what your experience is?”. To a man and woman, they appreciate that, given the state of trust in the polls, they must now be ultra-careful when they are presenting a poll, both in the way they present it and in explaining where it has come from. None of them said that they would feel comfortable about sending their staff out to do a poll on a street corner about an election. They might do something to garner public opinion on whether the emergency unit at the local hospital should be closed down, but not for an election, whether it be local or national, or a referendum.

Of course, the regional press has been going through some tough times. Stories of its demise are somewhat inflated—it is still very healthy—but it is going through structural changes. Without doubt, there are fewer journalists in regional newsrooms. I suspect that is also the case for some, if not all, of the national newspapers, magazines and broadcasters. What has happened is that there has been a coalescing of the newspaper companies. There is a big four or five, and a small number of independents. Certainly in the bigger companies, there is training and access to good information. Although there tends not to be direct interference from the top, with editors telling people what to do, there will be good practice coming down. Certainly, that was my experience in my previous company, Newsquest, which I left in March. That good practice relates particularly to information, such as polls, that is being made available online.

Baroness Couttie: I accept that the larger regional newspaper organisations probably have guidelines—it would be interesting to get a feel for the details of them, to see whether they are similar to those of the BBC, which we have just heard about, or much lighter-touch—but I am not sure that is true of some of the smaller regional newspapers. Depending on where in the country you are, some of the smaller ones have an influence on the local electorate, at constituency level.

I am also not sure, even if there are guidelines, that there is understanding by the editors writing about polls of things such as margin of error. We are in danger of headlines, which people might remember more than the rest of the editorial, giving a misleading impression of what a poll says and what you can take from it. If it is put into context, it might be fairly low down in the article. Although the poll has at least been put into context, to my mind, that is still irresponsible. It could mislead a reader, unless they really understand what is going on in polling, which most people do not.

Ian Murray: You are quite right. We start from the understanding that, according to every bit of research that I have ever read, local printed media are more trusted than other media. The reason is quite simple. As I always explained when I was working on and editing regional newspapers, when you are an editor, a news editor or a correspondent, you meet the people you are writing about. If you get it wrong or upset them, you know that you will face the mayor or the headmaster of the local school. The editor of a national newspaper is unlikely to have to do that, apart from some politicians. It has a sobering effect on you.

National broadcasters have a duty to be impartial, but national publishers can be partisan—provided that they are open about the way they do it—because they have a large national audience. When you are editing a small regional or local newspaper, you reflect your audience. I edited a paper in the Black Country, in the West Midlands. The readership there was different from the one that I had when I edited the *Daily Echo* in Bournemouth, of course, but you still have to be as many things as possible to as many people as possible. You must definitely not take sides politically. An editor would be very wary about saying that one party or one candidate was doing far better than someone else, because they know that they will get a backlash from the other side of the readership.

Baroness Couttie: We heard from some of the other people who have given evidence that the level of complaints about the reporting of polling is actually very low. That is partly because not many people understand it, particularly when it comes to issues such as margin of error. I am not sure that journalists, particularly in the regional press, have had access to the training that would help them to understand it, because it is not as straightforward as people might think. You may get headlines that are not accurate reflections of reality, both because the editors have not really understood how the polling process works and because the population reading them do not know enough to criticise.

Ian Murray: I will not be so crass as to say, “Oh no, all local journalists—even national journalists—are wonderfully trained in absolutely everything, including statistics”.

Baroness Couttie: I am not saying that they are.

Ian Murray: I would be putting my head in the noose if I said that. The society stands not only for a free press and freedom of expression, but for a responsible press. I personally, and, I believe, the society, as well as every editor I speak to, would say, “We do not set out to deceive the public. We wish to inform the public”. I can see where you are coming from: at a really local level, is there a situation?

The most optimistic thing is this—I am trying to choose my words carefully. I am not saying that there have been problems in the past, but I recognise what you say about a busy newsroom with a small number of people. On a weekly newspaper, which may have only one or two reporters—one or both of whom may be trainees, supervised by an editor who may be in another office—the headline might go on, because they might not be that experienced. However, the hammering that the polls have taken in the last few elections and referendums has woken people up.

There is so much mistrust among the public. There is an element of people saying, “We are going to shoot the messenger. We read that poll in the *Daily Blurb*”. Going forward, editors will be very daft if they do not realise that they need to think very carefully about these things. Nationally as well as regionally, I imagine, they will want to explain to the reader where a poll has come from; in other words, “Don’t blame us. If it turns out to be completely wrong after polling day, blame whoever pulled the poll together”.

If you are asking me whether I think that there should be more training at local level in particular, and whether more thought should be given to it, obviously the answer is yes.

Baroness Couttie: Should there be better guidelines for journalists, so that they understand the framework in which they employ polls? Some large organisations have guidelines—they are members of organisations that themselves have guidelines, et cetera—but some of the smaller ones do not.

Ian Murray: I see absolutely nothing wrong in that. I have served as an editor for half of my career. Editors are wonderful people with no ego whatsoever, of course. They do not like to be seen to be told how to run their newsroom, but it is a daft editor who does not take advice—if anything, because you can then fall back on the guidelines and say, “This is how we presented it, and it was within the guidelines”. I see absolutely nothing wrong on a personal level, and from the society’s point of view, with having guidelines. Of course, it is not the role of the society to dictate. We would say that that comes close to removing the freedom of an editor or a newspaper to make their own judgments on things. Accuracy comes into play, and there are guidelines and rules and regulations for that.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: I want to go on to slightly different terrain that I think is very relevant to the regional press. It is a demographic question, basically. A lot of younger people are not getting their news from local newspapers; they are getting it online. Has that led to any changes in the way regional papers think about their presentation

of information? The Society of Editors speaks of “the public’s right to know”. Where does that right come from? Is there a duty to know? What do you try to do about that?

Ian Murray: There are several questions there.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: There are.

Ian Murray: I will start with what the regional press are doing to attract or to reach younger readers. The gratifying observation from the regional press has been that they are reaching an awful lot of younger readers. They are already producing information—news, entertainment and sport, in particular—that attracts younger readers to their websites, which are very successful. In most cases, they compete very successfully locally, sometimes doing better than the local BBC stations. It turns out that young people are interested in what is going on in their community, particularly things at their local school, college or university, as well as sport and things like that. Contrary to the belief of some—not in this Room—local newspapers are not stuffed full of negative news about young people. There is an awful lot of very positive information in them.

The good news for the regional press is that they are doing an awful lot of stuff that connects them with young people. However, there is a constant wish to do more and to reach out more. There are constant discussions going on about how news can be presented so that it is not clickbait. We can all put up lots of pictures of the cat that looks like Hitler and get a lot of clicks, but you will soon lose your credibility as a local newspaper or local news website if that is all you do. Basically, you have to come up with other ways of doing things.

This is nothing new. The national press and, in particular, the regional press have been doing it for years. When I started out almost four decades ago, you would cover a local council meeting. It was, “Councillor Bloggs said this”, “Councillor Jones replied”, and, “Councillor Evans responded”. A modern readership will not follow that any more. They want to know, “Why does this affect me? Why should I care at all? How will it affect me? How can I empathise or sympathise with the people involved in this or with these decisions?”. The local press are going through a variation or evolution of that. They have a challenge.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: Is it a challenge that has changed due to the fact that so many people rely on social media to get their information, or misinformation, as the case may be?

Ian Murray: Yes. The way regional newspapers have tackled it, on the whole, is by having very strong, large social media sites. A local daily newspaper—even a local weekly newspaper—will have a very active Facebook site. Of course, you cannot place advertising on Facebook. The idea is that, because it is such a strong social medium, it will attract people. If they see something there, they can click on to the website to follow the story through. It is seen as building up the brand. Editors used to hate to use the word “brand”.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: You have now shifted from the vocabulary of responsible presentation and editing of news to the vocabulary of advertising—building up a brand, and so on. Is the

temptation of going digital that you find yourself participating in this quite different way of looking at what it is all for?

Ian Murray: That is a very fair question, and it is asked in newsrooms the length and breadth of the land. We discussed it at our conference, during the breaks. It has always been there. There have always been conversations—I will not call them battles—between editors and management. Of course, the editor does not run the newspaper; that is done by a managing director or publisher. Forty years ago, editors—even in the regional press—lived in ivory towers. Nowadays, you will not survive at all as an editor if you cannot see that unless the paper or the website is commercially successful, you will not be there to fight the good fight and give a voice to the little man or woman in the street.

Are we losing our way? That is the question. I had a very interesting conversation with a publisher about that after the conference yesterday. He said, “We need more editors to stand up to us and say, ‘You will get lots of clicks on this, but we should be doing that for the social good of our community’”. If we are going to say as editors, as we do, that we are part of the glue that sticks the community together, we have to fight our corner and not say, “Yes, but we get more clicks on this or that”. That is one of the roles of the editor.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: Do you let your readers know who commissioned advertisements?

Ian Murray: Yes. That is absolutely essential.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: Do you or do you not know whose money lies behind that commissioning?

Ian Murray: It is part of the editors’ code that advertising or paid-for editorial or advertorial—whatever you want to call it—is clearly marked and clearly distinguished. On news websites, you see paid-for information. It should clearly say, “Paid-for announcement” or “Sponsored article”. I always look for that. I can usually spot it quite easily, because I have been around so long.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: Let me put it very directly. Would you know if the Kremlin had paid for an item in your newspaper?

Ian Murray: I no longer run a newspaper. It all depends. If it said, “Sponsored by V. Putin”, that might ring alarm bells.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: You would be in good company if you did not know, I am sorry to say.

Ian Murray: I do not think we would know. I heard fake news mentioned earlier. That is a completely different conversation. Someone might want covertly to put an article into the paper by sending it through to a busy newsroom. You get material that comes through that is obviously created from something. Basically, a PR department or company will send through a poll it has done that says, “There are more people in Southampton who prefer mayonnaise”, et cetera, “in a poll conducted by so-and-so’s mayonnaise company”. You get to that bit further down.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: The question of the transparency of conflict of interest, and the way it is made apparent to readers and viewers, is terribly important.

Ian Murray: You are absolutely right. We discussed it at the conference; we had a session on fake news and threats to press freedom from elsewhere in the world. To go back to what I said earlier, editors at national and regional level know that readers will be very sceptical about any polls. It will be a silly editor who does not say, "We have to make sure that we say very clearly where this has come from and explain that there is a possible 3% error"—I was going to say "error of judgment"—"one way or the other".

The question of fake news is now very important. There are lots of discussions in the industry about how we can get the message across, and maintain and claw back the trust of readers, viewers and visitors to websites in the established media—the mainstream media—to persuade them that they can trust us. We now have to go out of our way to say, "Trust this news, not just because you have always gone to such-and-such a paper, such-and-such a website or such-and-such a broadcaster, so you know you can trust us, but because we have checked it". One editor of a national newspaper said during the conference yesterday that he needs two independent sources before he will run a story. It is that simple. You are looking very sceptical.

The editor of the *Manchester Evening News* explained the judgments that were made in his newsroom about pictures and lines of inquiry in the terrible moments and days after the bomb went off at the arena. Some of them turned out to be valid and true, and to give a genuine picture, but he would rather not go with them unless he could get qualification, because he knew that his local readers would turn on the paper if it pushed up something without that. That is a hard lesson that has been learned in both the regional and the national press.

Q98 **Baroness Fall:** Given that newspapers are self-regulated, that the whole system is based on complaints and that, from what we have learned, most people do not complain about polls very often, do you think there is a case for establishing, in addition to what is already there, a gold standard for polls that identifies within a region the right sort of sample size and best practice for weighting and questions, which newspapers could use when deciding whether or not to publish a poll?

Ian Murray: On a personal level, and speaking as the executive director of the society, I think that is a very good idea. Because of the public's mistrust, and the tendency to shoot the messenger with regard to political polls, it would be good for the industry to be able to fall back and say, "We are following this gold standard". I would wish it to be voluntary, but to have a gold standard there. Newspapers, whether they be national or regional companies, would want to be seen to be looking at that seriously and adding it to their training. The society would be very interested in getting involved in promoting that. There is the NCTJ, of course, and the world of academia, where young journalists are trained. It is something that could be discussed.

The whole matter of trust in the mainstream media—the established media—is at the heart of our concerns in our industry at the moment, so anything that we can do to say, “Look, you can trust us. Here is a set of values we adhere to. We adhere to them voluntarily, but we adhere to them”, is helpful. Of course, representations can also be made to the Editors’ Code of Practice Committee, on which I used to sit, about adding something along those lines.

I cannot say that it would necessarily happen, because I cannot speak for the code committee, but I think the industry would consider seriously and welcome anything that helped to underpin trust with readers and viewers: “Come to the mainstream media, because we have this kitemark and are following these values. Stories are checked and tested in different ways. Our journalists are trained in this and have regular training from the beginning of the profession all the way through—with apprenticeships, increasingly, as well as by going to university”. As I keep saying, polls have emerged as an issue the public are raising their eyebrows about, and one where things get blurred. People say, “It was you in the media who printed these polls”. Yes, but we printed them because that was what the polls were saying.

The Chairman: Can I clarify one point? When IPSO appeared before us, Matt Tee was very resistant to any changes in the code, although he did not rule out entirely some form of accompanying guidance. Are you saying, wearing your hat, that you would like IPSO to produce that sort of accompanying guidance to newspapers on what they should say about polls and on training for journalists, or are you happy with the present situation?

Ian Murray: On a personal level, and from the society’s point of view, I would say that the issue of whether there should be accompanying guidance should be discussed. Changing the code is for the code committee to consider. Personally, I cannot see anything wrong with discussing adding something like that to the guidance. As you kindly pointed out, I am here representing the whole of the industry, but of course I do not represent the whole of the industry, due to its very nature. I cannot see any particular reason why that would not be of benefit to the industry.

The Chairman: That is very helpful.

Q99 **Lord Hayward:** As regards the extent to which you represent the industry, you say that you have 400 members. I would like clarification—not necessarily in answer now—of how many of those are national, and which ones they are.

I have two specific questions. One relates to an answer you gave earlier. You said that you would not expect journalists now to stand on a corner and ask people, “What do you think about this?”. You cited the example of mayonnaise, but you could just as easily ask about one political party or another. That is exactly what happens with what are referred to colloquially as vox pops, is it not? Therefore, you are saying that the print media would not do something that is common practice on television and, to a lesser extent, on radio. Would you say that they should not do that?

Ian Murray: No. I am sure that your note of what I said is better than my memory—

Lord Hayward: Not necessarily.

Ian Murray: I think I said that my personal feeling was that, in an election, not even local newspapers would send a couple of reporters, or even trainees, to stand on a street corner to ask the first 100 people who they were going to vote for, and then—even if they told you—say, “Southampton is going to vote Green this time”, or whatever it happens to be.

Lord Hayward: Because you were right outside the university.

Ian Murray: You could be standing outside a Green Party meeting, or something like that. Mayonnaise was a very flippant example. I am talking about questions such as, “Do you think that the local accident and emergency unit should close?”. A lot of newspapers now have an online poll on things such as whether the local football manager should stay or go, or whether a particular player should stay.

You are absolutely right about vox pops. Vox pops are very interesting; trainee reporters cut their teeth on them. In my experience, you send out a raw trainee reporter on a vox pop to ask a very innocuous question such as, “What is your favourite television programme?” or, “Do you like the new John Lewis Christmas ad?”. When they come back, you say, “That is fine. Go out and find 10 people. Get them to have their photograph taken, tell you their age and answer the question”. When they come in, you say, “I would like you to go back out and ask 10 people who are not the same age and do not have the same demographic background as yourself. I would like you go back out and talk to people who come from different communities—people who may be disabled, for example”. In that way, you get them to break through the barriers of talking only to people they feel comfortable talking to. Newspapers love doing vox pops, because there are local faces. It is about putting in local faces.

Lord Hayward: I understand that. You have taken it away from politics, but it is precisely that—a mock poll. We see and hear vox pops on a nightly basis on news bulletins. The media have stood somewhere and said, “How are you going to vote? Why are you going to vote?”. In effect, they are presenting a poll/survey.

Ian Murray: They are. It is gratifying that whoever I tend to talk to—whichever side of the political spectrum they are on—thinks that the BBC, for instance, is obviously going a particular way, because it got people to answer only a particular question. Usually, and gratifyingly, it all evens itself out.

Lord Hayward: Surprisingly enough.

Ian Murray: Yes. Of course, broadcasters have a duty to be impartial, so when they carry out vox pops, the balance is there—sometimes laughably so. I am not talking particularly about politics. The majority of the population think a certain way about a question they have asked, but instead there are three who say this and three who say that. The broadcasters are desperately going out of their way to prove their impartiality and to provide balance.

The Chairman: Could I ask a slightly more pointed question? You have rightly defended a free press and have explained your mission to keep your readers informed. However, we have now had two successive general elections in which the national press, at least, has propagated complete misinformation as to where the electorate stood—in 2015, that the two parties were neck and neck, leading to a whole narrative about a Government controlled by Scottish nationalists, and in 2017, that Theresa May was a shoo-in and was winning by miles, even if the gap was closing slightly. Does it not worry you that you are propagating this information?

Ian Murray: I hear what you are saying—that that was the message that came out before those two elections—but it was based on the polls that were being taken. It is rather like shooting the messenger. At the end of the day, the industry reports what the polls are saying. If the polls are wrong, you need to go back and look at how the polls are being done. The pollster industry has a lot of soul-searching to do.

The Chairman: But newspapers commission the polls, so they have to take a degree of responsibility for what they report from them. Obviously, having commissioned a poll, you will not go around saying, “This may well be rubbish”. That seems to me to be leading to a considerable problem for the working of our democracy.

Ian Murray: Newspapers have commissioned polls for some time. I do not want to be too flippant about it, but only in the last two general elections—

The Chairman: What about 1992?

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Or 1970?

Ian Murray: I stand—or sit—corrected. I apologise for that. It has come more to the fore. Are you asking me whether no one should be allowed to commission polls? I go back to the point I made earlier. Newspapers and others who have commissioned polls, or carried information from polls, and who have found, coming out of the election, that their credibility has been harmed because of that, will be very wary of polls in future. I imagine that in the next general election—or referendum, heaven forbid—they will say, “If we are going to commission a poll from you, what changes have you made? How are we going forward on this?”. They will be very wary indeed.

The Chairman: In 2015, the polls got it totally wrong—there is an excellent report on the subject by our specialist adviser—yet more polls were commissioned in 2017 than in 2015. I think that is right. The fact of having totally misread the readership once did not seem to make much impact on editors; they thought they would get a good story out of it.

Ian Murray: I do not have the stats and figures in front of me. I recall that on both occasions—probably on previous ones—one or two polls got much closer to the actual results that came through. In general, the mass of polls were more or less together. I am not an expert on the subject, but there was a failure in the polling industry to understand where the electorate were going. I can see what you are saying. Again, I have no empirical proof of this, but I think newspapers said, “At the last election, we were caught out. We did X number of polls, so let’s do more and

broaden it". But they were still all going in the same direction. It goes back to the polling industry and what happened to get it wrong. Experts have looked at that.

The Chairman: You mentioned banning polls. That is clearly a matter for Parliament, if I can put it in that grand way. There is a much lesser thing, which is explaining the methodological difficulties of polls so as not to exaggerate their likely effectiveness. Many of us, having read the editors' code, do not think it is strong enough or goes far enough. You yourself showed sympathy for having some extension of the editors' code, in the form of guidance that would help us to get there. All I am asking you to recognise is that this is a problem for the credibility of the newspaper industry. To many of us, it does not seem to be taking it seriously enough.

Ian Murray: I agree with you on the first point. It is a problem for the newspaper industry. It is also a problem for broadcasters. It is about credibility. A lot of readers and viewers will say, "I saw or read that on such-and-such. They got it wrong", but will not make the link that it was the polls that got it wrong. When you talk to them, a lot of them say, "The polls do not know what they are talking about, do they? The pollsters do not know what it is".

You suggested that the industry was not taking it seriously. It most certainly is. In the last election more polls were taken out, likely for the reasons I explained. It was a case of saying, "We did not do enough there to see a trend. Let us do more". I assure you that in conversation people say, "Fingers were burned. We got that all wrong. It has happened twice. Next time, the public will read about these polls and say, 'Why should we believe them?'". Editors, publications and broadcasters will have to give the reasons why they should believe them: "This is the leeway for error. This is where it has come from. They have asked all of this". I do not say that editors will stop running polls, but they will be very wary about ensuring that they have the gold standard—the kitemark that says, "We have done everything that we can to ensure that this poll is as accurate as it can be".

The Chairman: The trouble is that polls are a bit like racing tipsters. You know you will lose money if you follow their tips, but any newspaper that does not include racing tips finds itself in sales difficulties with at least some of its audience.

Ian Murray: That is absolutely true. It would be a brave publication that said, "We are not going to pay any attention whatsoever to the polls", when other newspapers were all reporting what the polls were doing.

Q100 **Lord Hayward:** Can I follow a tack that I followed with the previous witnesses? My question is not so much about political polls, where it is quite clear what they are doing—whether that is right or not—but about surveys. Large parts of the media carry stories that state, "One-third of teachers say the following", "50% of pub landlords say this", or, "90% of train drivers say that". In fact, in the vast majority of circumstances, those surveys are voluntary. They are completed by people who want to participate and are, therefore, self-selecting. Should there be any guidance in relation to those sorts of surveys and how they are carried in the media?

Ian Murray: Again, I see nothing wrong with that at all, although I would resist regulation that said, "You must do this kind of thing". It comes back to what we talked about in relation to political polls. There is absolutely nothing wrong in giving guidance to editors and the industry that says, "You will have more credibility with your readers and viewers if you can underpin these polls by saying, 'When we say that 50% of teachers think this, this is what it is based on'".

Lord Hayward: But the guidance would say only, "You will have more credibility". It would not say, "We would discourage this sort of approach if it involved a small proportion of a particular group", whatever it might happen to be.

Ian Murray: I would not like to go into that. As with all these things, there would be a discussion about what the wording should be.

The Chairman: I think we are done. I did not need to sympathise with you at the beginning for being on your own, because you have handled yourself with great skill. The Committee might take comfort from considering you a potential ally in our efforts, which I think will figure in our eventual deliberations, to get the press to take a higher level of responsibility for the kind of reporting of polls that it carries out. Thank you very much for coming before us. It has been very helpful.

Michael Spagat, Professor Chris Hanretty and Oliver Heath – Written evidence (PPD0011)

Michael Spagat, Professor Chris Hanretty and Oliver Heath – Written evidence (PPD0011)

[Submission to be found under Chris Hanretty](#)

Survation, Ipsos Mori and ORB International – Oral evidence (QQ 148–154)

Survation, Ipsos Mori and ORB International – Oral evidence (QQ 148–154)

[Transcript to be found under Ipsos MORI](#)

Survation, BMG Research, ComRes, Ipsos MORI, LucidTalk, Opinium, ORB International and Panelbase – Written evidence (PPD0014)

Survation, BMG Research, ComRes, Ipsos MORI, LucidTalk, Opinium, ORB International and Panelbase – Written evidence (PPD0014)

[Submission to be found under ComRes](#)

Professor Richard Tait CBE and Sue English – Oral evidence (QQ 71–76)

Professor Richard Tait CBE and Sue English – Oral evidence (QQ 71–76)

[Transcript to be found under Sue English](#)

Professor Richard Tait CBE – Written evidence (PPD0013)

Richard Tait, Professor of Journalism, Cardiff University

Polling methods and accuracy

1. As the committee chairman has rightly observed, the greater frequency of polls in recent UK elections has not been matched by greater accuracy. The same criticism could apply to the 2016 EU Referendum. There appear to be two fundamental problems – the failure of the polling companies' currently constituted samples accurately to represent the electorate in an era of rapid and unpredictable political change; and the polling companies' equally unsuccessful attempts to turn their raw data into accurate predictions of the outcome by estimating the likelihood of specific groups (such as young people) actually voting (Singh, 2017).

2. In the 2015 and 2017 general elections the polls pointed to a different result from the eventual outcome, forecasting a hung parliament in 2015 and a Conservative majority in 2017. In the 2016 referendum they showed the two sides neck and neck, but in the last week of the campaign the majority of polls suggested a narrow Remain victory (Curtice, 2017a). The British electoral system means that, in a tight contest (and all three were) a quite small change in the actual vote can and will make an enormous difference to the outcome. The referendum was a binary choice; first past the post means a small variation in actual voting patterns in a general election can either bring or deny a party overall control of the House of Commons.

3. However, compared with other forms of opinion surveys, political opinion polling in the UK has a number of strengths – the polling companies are politically impartial, have high standards and are working hard to resolve their problems. The public would not be well served by relying on partial or partisan alternatives such as polling on behalf of advocacy groups, surveys of readers or website users, commercially commissioned polls or political parties' canvas returns. Opinion polls are an important part of the democratic process and although they may have lost some public confidence they are still infinitely preferable to partisan and/or unscientific alternatives. Citizens, politicians and the media all have come to rely on polls as a reasonably accurate guide to public and political opinion and the committee is right to focus on the need to improve their accuracy.

4. Organisations which commission polls can influence the selection of questions and are free to stress the results which most support their views but I have never seen any evidence of reputable polling organisations adjusting their findings to suit the views of their commissioners.

Influence of Polls

5. The questions in this section and the section on media coverage of polling go to the heart of the current concerns about the polls. They are linked - the

impact of the polls on voters, politicians and political parties is often due to the way the media report and interpret the polls for the public and the way politicians behave in their campaigning.

6. In this context, the comparative inaccuracy of the polls is exacerbating other problems with the way the mainstream print and broadcast media cover British politics. In 2015, the polls in the main suggested a dead heat between Labour and Conservative or Labour narrowly ahead. The Conservatives won an overall majority. Much of the campaign, however, given the state of the polls, focussed not on the implications of a Conservative outright victory (bringing, for example, a promised Referendum on UK membership of the EU), but the possibility of a Labour/SNP coalition or a minority Labour government with SNP support. With the benefit of hindsight, the amount of time spent in the media on discussing this possible outcome, which it is now clear was very unlikely to happen, seems unjustified. The public were inadvertently misled.

7. The 2017 election campaign was not much better. Early polls suggested a Conservative landslide and appear to have encouraged a misjudged Conservative campaign. The polls consistently underestimated support for Labour. As a result, much of the coverage focussed on what use Theresa May would make of her expected comfortable victory and what would happen to Jeremy Corbyn and/or the Labour party after a crushing defeat. Again, with the benefit of hindsight, much of this coverage was pointless and misleading (Cowling, 2017).

8. Recent content analysis of the media coverage of the 2017 election by Loughborough and Cardiff universities underlines how far the 'conventional wisdom' about the likely outcome distorted the campaign. The mainstream media are often criticised for focussing too much on the 'horse race' aspect of the election and neglecting analysis of policy issues. Partly because the polls were suggesting there was no race – the result was foregone conclusion – there was less coverage of the conduct of the campaign and more coverage of policy than usual. This was also a reflection of events - the horrific terrorist attacks and the Conservatives' mistakes over social care - which meant there was more discussion of policy issues (Deacon et al., 2017)

9. The influence of the polls can also be seen as extending into the 'vox-pops' which the broadcasters used to try to reflect public opinion. In the main, these did not illuminate (or spot) the changes in public opinion which Labour was apparently able to exploit – among young people, for example, or resentment of austerity. Instead, they repeated the misleading 'conventional wisdom' established at the start of the campaign, at least partly created by the polling figures which underestimated Jeremy Corbyn's appeal. The same criticism could be applied to 'two-ways' – interviews with political correspondents, which reinforced the conventional wisdom that the Conservatives were winning comfortably (Cushion, Lewis, 2017).

10. The polls are, of course, only one factor in this challenging period for British political journalism – amusingly summed up by Jon Snow's opening words on Channel 4 News on the day after the 2017 election – 'I know nothing. We, the media, the pundits and experts know nothing'. It may be that the current generation of political journalists, despite the recent problems of the polling

industry, continue to rely too much on the polls in framing their editorial judgements, on the basis that the polls are still the most objective surveys of political sentiment available. No one would suggest that political journalism should ignore the evidence of polls, but there may be a case for a greater scepticism, or at the very least, a greater reluctance to make sweeping editorial judgements on the basis of poll evidence alone.

11. London based editors and correspondents are also very reliant on the polls and on their political contacts (who may themselves be influenced by what the polls are telling them) because they do not get out of the 'Westminster bubble' very much and there are no longer enough front line reporters in the nations and regions to pick up significant changes in regional and local politics. The 'hollowing out' of the regional press, in particular, is creating a democratic deficit in the lack of accurate first hand reporting of the political process in the nations and regions of the UK (Gilson, 2017).

12. Political journalists may also need to pay more attention to other political data – in particular social media, which although partial and partisan can indicate trends and changes in public opinion. They may need to do more to add the digital skills of data journalism to the traditional techniques of the lobby correspondent. There are also worries that journalism as a profession has lost contact with the concerns and lives many of the communities and groups it seeks to report, as Jon Snow pointed out in his recent MacTaggart lecture.

Media coverage of polling

13. Media coverage of polling is primarily an issue of editorial judgement. All media should report polls accurately and although they may want to highlight some aspects of a poll they should make all the poll's findings available, at the very least on their websites. The broadcasters have clear rules about the reporting and presentation of polls. The BBC, for example, has a formal guideline not to lead a bulletin on an opinion poll as well as rules about their presentation and what information should be given to the viewer. Most news organisations put details of poll samples and other findings on their websites even if all the information is not broadcast or in print. They should be as transparent as possible. I think the media as a whole would resist externally imposed rules on the reporting of polls, but there is certainly a case for voluntary codes extending best practice throughout the mainstream print and broadcast media.

14. However, the media may also have a direct role in trying to deal with the problems of accuracy. Many election polls are commissioned by newspapers. It would seem a reasonable question to ask whether the number of polls, or their sample sizes, or the speed of the fieldwork are in any way factors in the accuracy problems which have provoked this inquiry.

15. Certainly the 1,000 (or, at most, 2,000) sample has been the norm for many years. British politics has changed radically over the last four decades with the emergence of nationalist parties and third and fourth parties and is clearly harder to assess and predict. In addition, there is now the problem of trying to predict what proportion of respondents will actually vote in a very volatile political environment.

16. The polling organisations tend to quote a 3% margin of error for a 1,000 sample and a 2% margin of error for a 2,000 sample. Would fewer, larger, more expensive, polls narrow that margin of error further? Given the financial challenges facing national newspapers, the prospect of paying more for less, or pooling resources with competitors to commission joint polls, is probably not immediately appealing, but the example of the changes in the broadcasters' approach to exit polls may be worth considering before rejecting the idea.

17. The main broadcast news organisations (BBC, ITN, Sky) used to commission competing exit polls on election night, with variable results and on occasion some reputational damage when the actual result emerged. However in recent years they have pooled their resources to commission a single poll to which they all have equal access and adopted a new methodology specifically designed to forecast accurately the result on the night. They spend a great deal of money and sacrifice competitive advantage in return for journalistic accuracy. As a result, on the night of 9 June 2017 the broadcasters had a spectacularly accurate forecast of a hung parliament which was just four seats adrift of the eventual outcome (Curtice, 2017b). The broadcasters' exit poll is a very different project from conventional opinion polls, but a combination of pooling resources, significant investment and evolving new techniques has worked in an area of polling that was once seen as unpredictable and unreliable.

18. The media and polling organisations have a joint responsibility to be as transparent as possible about the detail of their polls: methodology, margins of error and the assumptions underlying any forecasts. A good example of what can go wrong is the recent controversy over the reporting of the LSE/Oxford University project on public attitudes to different hypothetical Brexit scenarios. This was a complex and innovative poll which resulted in widely reported headlines to the effect that a large number of UK voters (including 29% of Remain voters) 'would accept' the deportation of all EU citizens after 29 March 2019 and that 70% of voters supported a 'hard Brexit' - findings which were simply not what the research showed (Chu, 2017; Hobolt, Leeper, 2017).

Digital and Social Media

19. Social media is now playing a very important role in elections, both as a major distribution platform for mainstream print and broadcast media coverage and for new and hugely successful partisan websites such as The Canary in the 2017 UK general election (Connock, 2017). Trends on social media can be indicative of shifts in opinion which the comparatively smaller samples of the polls may not pick up – but they are unlikely in the foreseeable future to be a reliable way of predicting elections. The migration of more and more electoral campaigning to unregulated social media platforms make it all the more important that the polls re-establish their reputation for accurate and objective measurement of public opinion.

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31 August 2017

Twitter UK – Written evidence (PPD0031)

Thank you for your letter regarding your Committee's work on political polling and digital media.

Twitter's advertising revenue is primarily driven by our Promoted Products. Our Promoted Products are designed to be incorporated into our platform as native advertising, ideally to be as compelling and useful to our users as organic content on our platform. Given this design, Twitter's advertising differs from other platforms and most Twitter advertising does not accompany particular content. For example, Twitter does not display banner ads that accompany a news story.

Twitter's Promoted Products include Promoted Accounts, Promoted Trends, and Promoted Tweets. Promoted Accounts appear in the same format and place as accounts suggested by our Who to Follow recommendation engine, or in some cases, in Tweets in a user's timeline. Promoted Accounts provide a way for our advertisers to grow a community of users who are interested in their business, products or services.

Promoted Trends appear at the top of the list of trending topics for an entire day in a particular country or on a global basis. When a user clicks on a Promoted Trend, search results for that trend are shown in a timeline and a Promoted Tweet created by our advertisers is displayed to the user at the top of those search results.

Promoted Tweets, in the vast majority of cases, appear within a user's timeline or search results just like an ordinary Tweet, and the advertisement is the Tweet itself. These Promoted Tweets do not "accompany" any specific Tweet, nor are they otherwise linked to a particular account.

Each of these products clearly carries a label stating the content is "Promoted" and if the organization promoting the Tweet is not the same as the account holder of the Tweet being promoted, this will state that the Tweet is "Promoted by [advertiser name]"

In 2017 we began partnering with content producers to allow them to monetize their content, through pre-roll advertising, a short advert that plays before the main content.

We are also committed to launching an advertising transparency centre this year, which will further inform users about the use of our advertising tools by political entities. You can read the announcement of this initiative [here](#).

We utilize a mix of human and technological interventions to review advertisers, while we also have a robust range of policies covering what may be advertised and to what audiences. These can be viewed [here](#).

Twitter is able to collect data approximating how many people may be talking about a topic, but given the vast range of topics discussed by users every day in approximately 500 million Tweets, defining a specific proportion is very

Twitter UK – Written evidence (PPD0031)

challenging, particularly given the often grey areas at the edges of what constitutes political discussion.

Malicious automation is a worldwide priority for the company and we are taking a series of steps to further limit the ability of these actors to use the platform. For example, in December 2017, our systems identified and challenged more than 6.4 million suspicious accounts globally per week— a 60% increase in our detection rate from October 2017. We currently detect and block approximately 523,000 suspicious logins daily for being generated through automation. Furthermore, since June 2017, we've removed more than 220,000 applications in violation of our developer and API rules, collectively responsible for more than 2.2 billion low-quality Tweets.

Twitter is a platform at the heart of the news process, with journalists and users correcting inaccuracies every minute. This debate is a vital part of establishing what is happening in the world, often where in the immediate aftermath of events there is not a clear picture of events.

Some academic research has taken advantage of Twitter's uniquely open API to conduct research into specifically narrower questions regarding news and politics, investigating what content is shared and by whom. While this research is limited by only being able to use publicly available information, the contribution to academic discussion of these topics is one we value and are working to better support. For example, we have recently significantly increased the availability to access historical Tweets through our API.

One area Twitter has sought to leverage the power of the platform is through our Moments tool. Twitter moments can be made by any user, as well as a team of dedicated Twitter employees, curating a selection of Tweets and the associated content in a single Tweetable entity. Often media organisations and Governments use this tool to curate key information, whether relating to a specific news story or in the aftermath of an incident where public service information is being shared on Twitter.

We are also partnering with fact checking and digital literacy groups around the world to support their efforts and ensuring that they are able to reach the widest possible audience on Twitter.

I hope this letter is useful to your committee's work.

28 February 2018

Professor Farida Vis – Oral evidence (QQ 122–126)

Evidence Session No. 16

Heard in Public

Questions 122 - 126

Tuesday 28 November 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Baroness Fall; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve; Lord Rennard; Lord Smith of Hindhead.

Witness

I: Professor Farida Vis, Professor of Digital Media, Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University.

Examination of witness

Professor Farida Vis.

Q122 **The Chairman:** Good morning, Farida. It is very nice to see you again. I remind you and everyone here that the Committee took informal evidence from a group of experts in digital media. We were so impressed and stimulated by what was said that we decided to have a shortish session in which some of what we were told could be put on the record. I know that you have also been invited to put in late evidence. James Williams, who will join us later, has been held up on the train from Oxford. If he is held up quite a bit and you do not mind sitting in front of us on your own, we may go straight through with you and take him separately afterwards.

I will deal with the formalities. You are on television, on the Parliament channel, so watch what you say about your best friends. A written record of what you say will be prepared, but you will get a chance to correct it where you feel that you misspoke or did not get something quite right. Despite the fact that you are in public, you are protected by parliamentary privilege. Whatever you say, you cannot be sued for it, only hated for it.

Professor Farida Vis: That is good to know.

Q123 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** Thank you very much for coming back to see us. What you had to say to us last time more informally was extremely interesting and helpful.

As you know, the Committee was set up to look primarily at political polling; digital media was tacked on to our terms of reference almost at the end. Our terms of reference, the expectations on us and the resources that we have do not permit us to mount the investigation that we would like to achieve into the issues relating to digital media and

democracy. However, those are huge issues in terms of the health of our democracy, the accountability of power and, therefore, transparency.

Major inquiries are under way in Washington and Brussels. The same is beginning to happen in this Parliament with the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee's inquiry. We hope to recommend that there should be another House of Lords Select Committee to look into the issues of digital media and democracy more specifically. In the meantime, we greatly value your help in enabling us to frame the issues.

In a liberal society, everyone is free to seek to persuade everybody else of their point of view, but there is a difference between overt debate and persuasive techniques, and covert manipulation. That has been an issue in our democracy for 100 years at least, since Edward Bernays put forward his manifesto on advertising.

It would be really helpful if you offered to formulate the key issues that we as a Committee, or subsequent Committees, ought to address. We find regularly as parliamentarians that the key to making political progress is to ask the right questions—to formulate the questions exactly and appropriately. As a citizen—and an exceptionally well-informed and thoughtful citizen—will you help us to articulate the issues that need examination in this area?

Professor Farida Vis: I will certainly try. It is important to start by saying that the issues that we are facing were not anticipated and are not well understood. We are only just starting to see the scope of the potential threat that they pose to democracy. To put it differently, these social media platforms have not yet been around for 15 years. They were not built for the purposes of furthering democratic principles and ideals, despite what the platforms themselves say. They now find themselves in a unique position, where they are central to the political and public discourse of many nations and have amassed an unimaginable amount of power.

The number of users is in the billions. For example, Facebook has over 2 billion users globally. We are faced with a system that Emily Bell, writing recently in the *Guardian*, called "a highly efficient real-time trading system for targeted propaganda". That is not what these platforms set out to be. It is an evolution of an ecosystem with which we are now trying to grapple. We are doing that within the context of trying to hold on to democratic ideals.

You ask what the key issues are that the Committee should look at. It is incredibly important for us first to try to understand the problem. What is the problem we are dealing with? If we look at mainstream media coverage, we find that there is a lot of discussion of fake news, for example. That is a highly problematic term that has been weaponised, particularly by Donald Trump, who uses it essentially to undermine the free press.

We hear a lot about fake ads, for example, on Facebook. I am sure that we will delve into those later. Therefore, there is a need in the first instance to try to understand what the problem is.

A very extensive report on information disorder, led by Claire Wardle, has just come out from the Council of Europe. She and her co-author argue that we are dealing with global information pollution. The idea that this is a problem of pollution, which permeates in ways that we are only just starting to see and to understand, is a very useful way of starting to think about the depth and the breadth of the issue.

Claire Wardle and her co-author highlight three key issues, which have been highlighted by many others, including me. The first is the spreading of misinformation—information that was not intended to cause harm by whoever shared it but that was misleading or false none the less. The second is the spreading of disinformation, where the intention is knowingly to cause harm. The third is the spreading of mal-information, where information that was previously thought to circulate only in private is leaked to the public.

We are up against the coming together of those different types of information, which citizens have to try to make sense of to be able to function as citizens in a healthy democratic system. We are up against a very complex information pollution system. We are only just starting to understand the breadth of that. Therefore, we can only just start to think about remedies. I think that we are at a crisis point in terms of the threat to liberal democracies.

Lord Howarth of Newport: If we are seeking a remedy to this problem, presumably one of the issues is that under our legal system and legal systems across the West the primary accountability of social media platforms is a commercial one—to their shareholders. They do not see themselves primarily as having a responsibility for what happens to our democracy. As you have said, social media platforms were not invented with political purposes in mind, but they have been found to be very convenient for all sorts of players who want to use them as such. Have you reflected on how we might be able to redefine appropriately the accountability and responsibility of these massive transnational commercial organisations?

Professor Farida Vis: Therein lies a big tension. As you have highlighted, there is accountability towards stakeholders. If you look at the ways in which these platforms talk about what they do, you find that there is a lot of talk about further democratic ideals. For example, in September, Mark Zuckerberg from Facebook posted an extensive post highlighting nine remedies that Facebook was starting to implement and think about. Throughout that post, he talks about Facebook being there to further democratic ideals. You will find similar discourses on various Silicon Valley platforms.

You asked about accountability mechanisms. Of course, there is a lot of talk about regulation and where that should come from. Should it be government regulation? How does that work within a national context and internationally, given that we are dealing with complex international entities and individual national laws and frameworks? On the opposite side are debates around self-regulation: how can platforms self-regulate, and what would those accountability mechanisms look like?

We need to try to find a middle ground—a third space for these discussions. A lot tends to break down with finger-pointing and culpability—with making this somehow the fault of the platforms, as if it were their intention or as if they have easy and ready control over what happens on them. Those are simplistic understandings of the breadth of the problem that do not necessarily lead to a productive dialogue. Simple finger-pointing that involves saying, “Facebook, Twitter and Google, it’s your fault”, may not be the most productive way of getting players around the table to have a concrete discussion of remedies.

It also leads you into very different kinds of remedies. You introduced me as a citizen. Would citizens have faith and trust in self-regulation? There is a very big question around that. For example, would citizens trust a Facebook ombudsman? These are all discussions that are out there and that are very interesting to think about.

Another issue that we are dealing with is trying to define what these technology companies are now. In my first answer, I highlighted the fact that they are now operating in a way that is very far removed from their original design. Therefore, it becomes a question of what they are now. What is a platform? Is it a media company, or is it a technology company? Should it be interpreted as a utilities company? Again, that pushes you into all sorts of different ways in which you might think about regulation.

Existing frameworks, particularly legal frameworks, can be tightened and strengthened. One that I am sure we will touch on is advertising and the ways in which advertising and sponsored content could be regulated more clearly. We need to try to keep the platforms very much as productive collaborators and partners.

There are very promising initiatives at all the big three. It is perhaps up to the Committee to start thinking about the ways in which they can be further strengthened. Do they go far enough? How can they be tacked on to the Electoral Commission, for example? I have read its November report, which makes a set of recommendations about the transparency, for example, of spending on digital, marketing, social media and so on. There are already low-hanging fruit possibilities that can be put in place for the next general election, presumably in 2021 or 2022.

Q124 Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: There have been reports, which you will have seen, about misinformation, and probably disinformation, from Russia during the EU referendum. How can we detect the origin of that, to say that it was from Russia, and the extent of it, to say that there was so much of it?

Professor Farida Vis: Those are two very important questions, which are very difficult to answer. They come back to the transparency and trust issue. For example, what do we know about Russian ad buying on Facebook? From the congressional hearings in America, we know, mainly because Facebook put the information into evidence, that there were 3,000 ads, which Facebook handed over to the hearings. We know that there were 2,752 fake Twitter accounts.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: How do we know that?

Professor Farida Vis: That is a very good question. This is what the companies themselves are saying they have found so far. The question is whether we take that at face value. Do we trust Facebook to have found all of them?

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: I am not clear about what you mean by a fake account. Is it someone purporting to be a British person who is in fact a Russian government source?

Professor Farida Vis: Yes. I will give you an example. People may have heard of a recent example, extensively covered by the *Guardian*, involving a Twitter account called @SouthLoneStar, which has been suspended. It was a fake or troll account, an account that was set up purposefully to spread disinformation. It was funded by Russia and was one of the accounts that ended up on the list that Twitter shared of accounts that had been involved in spreading disinformation.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Do we know that it was picked up by hundreds or thousands of people? Did it have that many followers?

Professor Farida Vis: Yes. Twitter has given estimates on spread for this list of accounts, saying how many messages the accounts sent and how far their reach went; how likely you were to encounter some of this information if you were a Twitter user.

If you will permit me, I will give you the full breadth of the problem, as this account is very telling in what we are dealing with. A lot of the discussion around fake accounts has centred on bots: automated accounts that are set up purposefully to respond in an automated way. That may be done simply to aggregate news, for example. If you are interested in what is happening in the House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, you may have an account that just spits out information, because you have programmed it in such a way that it picks up on certain key words or responds to that information. That is very simple. There are other bots that I would describe as more sentient; that appear as if they are human. For example, if you talk about climate change, the bot may respond and shout you down with arguments.

Those are both automated accounts. For me, the very significant problem lies in the accounts that are essentially run by humans; they appear to be bots but are run in a very sophisticated way as a disinformation campaign by humans. This account is a very good example. It is important in the UK context because it was involved in the American elections and in tweeting around the EU referendum.

A particular example that goes to the heart of some of this related to the Westminster attacks in March. Some of you may have seen a photograph that was shared on social media of a Muslim woman in a headscarf on her mobile phone, seemingly walking past one of the victims of the attack, who, in how it was framed, was dying on the bridge. What is problematic here is that the picture was real. This happened; there was nothing doctored about it. However, the fake account presented the information by framing it in a very anti-Islam, anti-Muslim way, essentially to suggest, "This is where the UK is headed if we go down this political trajectory".

At the time, people may have picked up on the fact that this was a troll account, but it seems that they did not link it to Russia. What is even more problematic is that the account, and the information that it spread, went viral. The image was highly emotive and tapped into a national sentiment, and it was picked up in over 80 media reports in the UK. What we have here is a problem of mass amplification by a different agent that has not yet really been mentioned: the mainstream media. This is not a bot account. It is an account, sponsored by Russia, that is pretending to be a right-wing Texan citizen but that now seems to be meddling in UK politics.

You asked who pays for this and how many people are exposed to it. Those are questions that we are only just starting to unravel. Of course, the other very significant question is: what influence did it have on the public mood and on people's voting behaviour? This example starts to get at the complexity of what we are dealing with. We are not dealing with paid-for content in the sense in which some of the debates have been framed. Certainly, someone is being paid, but it is not an ad; it is a persona that has been created to shape political discourse.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You mentioned regulation. I will raise the issue at the Council of Europe's Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy on 14 December. The Council of Europe has 47 member countries. Could we do something at that level to find some kind of regulation in relation to what you have just described?

Professor Farida Vis: I think that it would be incredibly difficult. It would also be incredibly difficult to enforce across the different nation states. Regulation is a very slow beast. By the time it has gone through all the checks and balances, it will be outdated; what we are regulating for will no longer be the current situation, so I am not highly optimistic about that route. That does not mean that it should not be discussed—it absolutely should be discussed, and exhausted as a potential solution—but I see more potential in a middle ground that tries to avoid regulation, to reshape the conversation with the platforms and to explore what is possible at a platform level. There are different ways in which inroads can be made very positively, and much more quickly.

I return to the original question, which was about accountability to shareholders. In the middle of the Venn diagram, we need to find a space where everybody can have buy-in and where this becomes something everybody can get behind. For some actors, that may be purely financial, but if we can frame this in such a way that there is a financial incentive to do better, that may work a great deal better with these companies than a punitive measure.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: That is very helpful.

Q125 **Baroness Couttie:** Let us make the assumption—it is a big assumption—that somehow we are able to find a regulatory framework or the middle ground that you have talked about, between self-regulation and formal regulation. The thing I have not really got my head around is what is practicably achievable by the platforms, given that, as I understand it, it is so automated that they do not actually know, unless they go back and have a look retrospectively. That is what they have done in America when

providing evidence. It is a bit like shutting the door after the horse has bolted. What practically are they able to do in order to stop it bolting in the first place?

Professor Farida Vis: Again, this is a really good question. We can problematise it slightly further. At the moment, the platforms are trying to tackle something that is complex but is more easily definable than the wider problem. The more easily definable issue, potentially, is political advertising.

Baroness Couttie: To my mind, that is the tip of the iceberg.

Professor Farida Vis: Absolutely. They are not yet offering solutions on issue-based messaging, for example. The example that I just gave about Westminster bridge is not political advertising but issue-based messaging.

The other political advertising issue is: what do these things look like on the platforms? Advertising can be a misleading term. We are dealing with messages that are there to persuade. I know that that is a classic definition of advertising. When we think about advertising, we still think about messages that we can recognise as advertising. One of the things that came out of the congressional hearings in the States was that some of this sponsored content was about fake events, such as a rally of miners for Trump. How do you regulate against that? At an emotive level, the event is potentially highly persuasive. Here is a politician who is coming to my town and is doing something about an issue I care deeply about, but the event is entirely fake.

Baroness Couttie: What can they do practically? Let us set aside paid-for advertising, which is much easier to track. What can they do about this persuasive stuff, with misinformation and disinformation going out, and the way in which it is picked up? Can they detect at the source that either a human bot or a real bot is mass-producing this propaganda? Can they detect that by the volume that an individual is putting out—at the point at which it is happening, rather than retrospectively, so that they can shut it down?

Professor Farida Vis: Of course, there are different ways in which these networks send out signals. There is an enormous volume, as you said, or they come out of nowhere. That happens a lot with political messaging. There will be bot networks that come out of nowhere and then disappear. The other issue that we have is trying to find evidence that the thing that you suspect happened actually happened, because they are quite ephemeral.

There are things that the platforms certainly have within their capabilities. The problem is that if you are dealing with highly sophisticated actors who are intent on disinforming, they also become more sophisticated. It is a sort of cat-and-mouse, whack-a-mole problem. You stomp out certain bot networks, but by doing so you reveal your hand on the technologies that you have developed to address the problem. In turn, that makes the actors concerned more sophisticated at subverting those systems. That is certainly an issue.

We have not yet talked about literacy and education. This is not a problem to be solved by technology alone. The technology piece is incredibly

important, but, as you said earlier, it is the tip of the iceberg. Another remedy that has enormous potential is the overhauling of the national curriculum so that we can teach young people, and all citizens, how to deal with information online, full stop. One point that comes up a lot in these discussions is the suggestion that things would be a lot better if people had better critical literacy skills and were better at critical thinking. What is not well understood is that many people are not interested in critical thinking; the recent Ofcom report highlights as much. A significant number of people get their news online. The report highlights the fact that only 20% of people check other sources every single time they consult an online source in order to contextualise that information. Eighteen per cent rarely do it, and 19% never do it. With whatever literacy programme you wish to roll out, you are up against the 40% of people who have no interest whatsoever in contextualising the information that they are consuming. That is not a technology problem.

Baroness Couttie: No. It is frightening.

The Chairman: I will take questions from Onora and Kate. I am afraid that we will then have to end the session. I will give priority to those who have not got their questions in in this session when James Williams comes up.

Q126 **Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** Everything that you have said is most interesting. Do you not think that education and literacy is a pretty weak response to this problem? We know a lot about confirmation bias and the degree to which we like fast-thinking and congruent answers. Why should we think that education will work in this case?

Professor Farida Vis: It is part of a solution, part of a suite of remedies that ought to be considered. It would be too dismissive to say, "It's not going to work". In many ways, I could then ask you, "Why am I here? Why was I invited?" We approach this with the hope that there is a remedy and the hope of improving the situation. I would go at this problem with the hope and the belief that there is a possibility that we can improve it. If we do not have that, let us not even try.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: If there is a suite of remedies, maybe there are bits of regulation that one should look at. You suggested the regulation of advertising. I will not go down that road, but I will ask you about one solution that I have heard. It may not be possible to regulate the social media companies as publishers, rather than platforms. There is too much, and they cannot read or check it all. Why should they not be treated at least as publishers of anonymously posted content and have to provide evidence of the identity of the poster for others? That would deal with many of the non-political issues, such as trolling, cyberbullying, and sexual predation and grooming. It might also help with the political issues.

Professor Farida Vis: That is an important and valid point. One of the things that is important to understand is that Facebook and Twitter have very different policies on how you can present yourself in an account. Facebook has a real-name policy. There are issues with that, which are too complex to go into now, but Twitter allows anyone to open an account calling themselves whatever they want. That is partly why we are dealing with some of these issues.

Twitter is saying that it wants to give transparency to the political campaigning side—who has paid for what, which accounts are linked to political campaigns, and so on. Google and Facebook have had very similar responses. If you took that further, you could argue, “If we are dealing with accounts that focus on particular issues, should we be able to see who is behind those accounts, to enable us to understand how we are processing this information or what we are to make of it”? That poses very significant issues, not least the benefits of anonymity and why many wish to publish accounts under a pseudonym. There are very valid and good reasons why that can be a very good thing. We dwell on the negative, but there is always another side to this. It is a difficult one to resolve.

Baroness Fall: I want to carry on from the conversation that Pippa opened on information. You made the point that people do not always want to check another source. To what extent do you think that that is a new problem? Is it simply an old problem in a new age? Presumably, in former times, people read one newspaper and went to the same pub every day. There have always been single sources and echo chambers. Are we being overly worried? Are we trying to crack a problem that has never been cracked, because we see it from the perspective of an older generation looking at a new generation, or do you think that social media make it much worse and affect the integrity of the poll?

Professor Farida Vis: There is something about how we can think about it as essentially the adage, “Do not believe what you see on television”, or, “Do not believe what you read”. How is it different now? The scale, the speed and the way in which this information is packaged are entirely different. We are now also faced with a breaking of the connection between the content and the source. Previously it was much easier to say, “This information comes from that source. Therefore, I can form my opinion about it as a package of content”. These platforms focus on the spreading of content, from which the source can be divorced. If we are now dealing with content that looks as if it comes from a reputable source but is not, we are dealing with something very different because we have lost that connection.

The Chairman: We have run out of time. You have been incredibly clear and precise, and have given us an outline of the issues. As Alan said at the beginning, we are not going to do full justice to digital media, because it is not our main thrust. We will recommend that a further Select Committee be set up to look at this in more depth. You have given us the material to back up a very powerful chapter in our report that raises all these issues for the future and gets the perspective up. That is thanks to the clarity and force of your evidence. Thank you very much for coming to see us again.

Professor Farida Vis: Thank you.

Anthony Wells – Written evidence (PPD0015)

1. I am the owner and author of UKPollingReport, an independent website dedicated to reporting opinion polls in a responsible and non-partisan manner. Since 2005 I have also been employed by YouGov and am currently Research Director within their political and social department.
2. This submission is made in a personal capacity and covers my personal views upon the polling accuracy and media's reporting of polls and how opinion polls are used in social media, based on my experience of commentating on public polling. It does not reflect the corporate views of YouGov.
3. YouGov have made a separate submission of evidence referring more specifically to YouGov's own methods, approach and view of the regulatory system, which I would associate myself with.

What are the most significant challenges for conducting political opinion polling and achieving accurate results? What measures could be taken which might improve the accuracy of political opinion polling?

4. The primary challenge facing opinion polling is getting an accurate sample – that is, a sample of respondents who collectively reflect the demographics and attitudes of the wider British public. The 2015 Sturgis Inquiry into polling error concluded that it was samples that were insufficiently representative that caused the errors.
5. In practice the challenges facing polling are constantly evolving, both in the most practical ways of recruiting survey respondents, and in what quotas and weights to use to best ensure that those samples accurately reflect the public. Prior to the 1990s face-to-face polling using quota sampling was regarded as the most accurate method. The increased prevalence of landline telephones and the failure of the polls in 1992 led to a movement towards quasi-random telephone sampling in the 1990s. In turn the steady fall in response rate to telephone polls and increasing internet penetration has led to a movement towards online polling since the turn of the century.
6. Equally the quotas and weights used to ensure samples are fully representative have changed over time. Fifty years ago ensuring a sample was representative in terms of social class would have been the most important factor, whereas social class now has very little predictive value in voting intention and it is more important to ensure samples are representative on factors like age, education and attitudes towards Brexit.
7. There is hence no universally correct approach that is set in time. Polling companies need to constantly keep abreast of changes in society and our patterns of being at home or being available on telephone or online, and the changing relationships between demographics and voting.
8. For the specific focus on voting intention polls, there are additional challenges like modelling which people would vote. The more egregious errors in

the 2017 election polls appear to be down to using poor turnout models, given all the underlying samples would actually have been fairly accurate.

9. There are relatively few steps that government could take to make opinion polling more accurate, though one practical requirement of accurate polling is the availability of the robust and reliable demographic information that polling companies need to design and weight samples. Retaining the ten-year census and continuing to fund benchmark surveys like the BSA and BES are both crucial in providing the data necessary for designing samples.

How does the accuracy of political opinion polling compare to other forms of opinion surveys, such as polling on behalf of advocacy groups or official surveys?

10. There is no real dividing line to be drawn between “political opinion polls” and polls for advocacy groups and similar. Advocacy groups will very often commission opinion polls on political subjects, and media polls asking about voting intention will very often also contain questions about the same policies and issues of public interest that advocacy groups campaign upon. The methodology used by them would be the same (and indeed, questions for media clients and advocacy clients often run on the same survey instrument). Research commissioned by local and central government would, again, generally be carried out using exactly the same methods.

11. There are sometimes differences between political polling and consumer market research. Polling companies will often use more complex methods for polls on a political subject from that used for consumer surveys (e.g. most companies would weight political surveys to be politically representative in terms of past election vote or EU referendum vote, but this would be unnecessary in consumer market research).

12. There are a small number of major official surveys such as the British Crime Survey or Annual Population Survey that are conducted using face-to-face random sampling. At a theoretical level this should provide a more accurate sample and data from such surveys is often used in designing the sample frames or weighting targets of regular opinion polls. The extreme cost of genuine random sampling means this is not a realistic as a potential method for mainstream opinion polling. On the rare occasion this is attempted, they are not necessarily more accurate anyway – during the EU referendum campaign several wealthy financial organisations privately commissioned randomly-sampled face-to-face polls which reportedly produced results showing Remain ahead.

What new methods have had the most impact on political opinion polling? Can technological innovation help to improve the accuracy of polling? What is your assessment of polls that produce constituency level estimates of voting intention?

13. In the 2017 general election YouGov and Lord Ashcroft polls both used a method called MRP to make individual seat level projections from large sample polls. The YouGov model was highly successful and correctly called the election, the Ashcroft model wrongly predicted a large Conservative majority.

14. I would expect the MRP approach to play an important role in polling future elections – the YouGov model performed incredibly well in translating levels of support into seat estimates, including both Conservative gains in Stoke and Middlesbrough and Labour gains in Kensington and Canterbury. However, the poorer performance of the Ashcroft model suggests it is not a panacea, and is still very much reliant on the quality of the data that goes into it. It is also a tool that does one thing (translating national figures onto smaller geographical units) very well, rather than something that would be useful for all the other questions polls are used for where constituency level estimates are not of similar interest.

Is the polling industry's current model of self-regulation fit for purpose? Is there a case for changing the way political opinion polling is regulated? What regulatory changes, if any, would you recommend and what challenges are there to greater regulation?

15. In my view the current model of self-regulation works well. Political polling generally falls under two regulators. The Market Research Society (MRS) regulates the market research industry as a whole and their Code of Conduct covers, amongst many other areas, ensuring questions are not leading, that surveys are fit for purpose and that misrepresentations of results are corrected. The British Polling Council has more specific and extensive rules on transparency for political polling, to which their own evidence refers in more detail.

16. I cannot see any obvious advantage from changing the existing approach or what it is likely to achieve. The recent issues with polling are largely ones of accuracy, and polling companies already have every interest in encouraging and prioritising accuracy. It is in the commercial and corporate interest of polling companies to be accurate and there is unlikely to be anything that a regulator can or could do that could make accuracy more of a concern to polling companies than it already is. Over-regulation would risk damaging accuracy by preventing companies from experimenting with new methods that may be successful.

Does the media report on opinion polls appropriately? What steps could be taken to improve how the media reports the results of political opinion polls? For example, should standards be set in relation to the reporting of political opinion polls, or should a code of conduct be introduced?

17. Media reporting of opinion polls remains of mixed quality. I started writing independently about polls in 2005 largely as a reaction to what I then saw as poor media reporting of polls. Newspapers often reported polls in a hyperbolic way, overstating the importance of changes that were not statistically significant and reporting their poll in isolation, rather than placing it in the context of other recent polling.

18. In the last ten years newspaper reporting of polls on voting intention has improved across all these measures. Journalists responsible for writing up polls commissioned by their newspapers, such as Sam Coates at the Times, Andrew Sparrow at the Guardian and John Rentoul at the Independent do typically report them in a responsible and measured way with appropriate caveats and in the appropriate context when they differ from other recent voting intention polls.

In my experience this is often because of regular discussion between the polling company and the journalists responsible about what a poll means and what can be responsibly concluded from the findings.

19. Poor newspaper reporting of voting intention polls is more common when journalists who have less experience in their use end up writing up polling related stories. Media coverage of polls also tends to be poorer when it comes to polls covering policy and political issues, particularly those commissioned by advocacy groups pushing a particular angle. Some newspapers will report such polls with findings that coincide with their own political viewpoint in a very uncritical manner.

20. It would be desirable if more journalists had a better understanding of how to deal with polling data in a balanced and responsible way. The new newspaper regulator IPSO has recently shown itself willing to act against poor reporting of polls, ruling against the Sun for its reporting of a Survation poll of British Muslims in November 2015 and the Sunday Express for its reporting of a Turkish poll about intentions to move to the UK in May 2016. The Editors' Codebook and Editors' Code Committee, however, appear to offer little advice to journalists on accurate and responsible reporting of polls, and it would perhaps be useful if it offered some guidance or pointed journalists towards the guidance already published upon the British Polling Council's website.

What impact is the increased use of digital media channels having on the way in which the public engages with political opinion polling? How is political opinion polling shared across social media platforms and what impact does social media have on the accuracy and reliability of political opinion polling?

21. There is little or no impact of social media on the accuracy or reliability of polls themselves, nor any obvious reason why there should be. No current polling methodologies that I am aware of rely upon social media in their sampling.

22. Like most other political news, the results of opinion polls are widely shared on social media. Often this reflects the same "echo chamber effect" that is seen in much online political discourse. People are more likely to retweet or share poll results that they agree with or see as being "good" for their side, less likely to retweet or share poll results they disagree with. Opinion polls often face unfounded and conspiratorial criticism from hyper-partisan sources on social media, criticising companies for being biased, for their ownership (or imagined ownership) and so on. I think this is par for the course in the current political climate, and not a problem that is unique or unusual to polling.

23. Properly conducted online opinion polls should not be confused with the sort of open-access surveys that are conducted on social media and on newspaper websites (commonly referred to, in a term coined by Sir Robert Worcester, as "voodoo polls"). These make no attempt to gather a representative sample or make their sample representative and are unlikely to ever be a useful way of measuring public opinion.

24. The presence of "voodoo polls" is not a new problem by any means - in past decades the same problem came from Ceefax polls, fax polls and

newspaper phone-in polls. Social media does mean that they are more prevalent, however, as anyone is free to set up and retweet something that purports to be a “poll” on Twitter or Facebook.

25. With some notable exceptions the mainstream media are good at differentiating “voodoo polls” from genuine polls that have been conducted using sampling and weighting measures that are likely to produce a representative sample, but members of the public often seem to mistake them on social media, especially when the results of “voodoo polls” more closely align with what they would like reality to be.

26. A few newspapers have on occasion reported the results of their own phone-in or write-in “polls” as if they were legitimate polls. The new press regulator, IPSO, earlier this year ruled against the Daily Express for reporting a “voodoo poll” in a way that suggested it was a legitimate measure of public opinion. I am encouraged by the regulators willingness to rule against the misleading reporting of unrepresentative polls in this way and hope it may discourage the practice in future.

1 September 2017

Professor Leighton Vaughan Williams – Written evidence (PPD0024)

1. In this evidence, I consider the relationship between political betting and political opinion polls, and highlight peer-reviewed research I have undertaken into this. I also reference some other published work of mine on opinion polling and political forecasting more generally. Research I have undertaken into the impact of the dissemination of information via social media is also highlighted.
2. The recorded history of election betting markets can be traced as far back as 1868 for US presidential elections (Rhode and Strumpf, 2013) and 1503 for papal conclaves. Between 1868 and 2012, no clear favourite for the White House had lost the presidential election other than in 1948, when longshot Harry Truman defeated his Republican rival, Thomas Dewey. 2016 can be added to that list, following the defeat of strong favourite Hillary Clinton in the Electoral College.
3. The record of the betting markets in predicting the outcome of papal conclaves is somewhat more chequered and is considered in Vaughan Williams and Paton (2015) in which I examine, with my co-author Professor David Paton, the success of papal betting markets historically.
4. The potential of the betting markets and prediction markets (markets created specifically to provide forecasts) to assimilate collective knowledge and wisdom has increased in recent years as the volume of money wagered and number of market participants has soared. Betting exchanges alone now see tens of millions of pounds trading on a single election.
5. An argument made for the value of betting markets in predicting the probable outcome of elections is that the collective wisdom of many people is greater than that of the few. We might also expect that those who know more, and are better able to process the available information, would on average tend to bet more.
6. The lower the transaction costs (the betting public have not paid tax on their bets in the UK since 2001, and margins have fallen since the advent of betting exchanges) and the lower the costs of accessing and processing information (through the development of the Internet and search engines), the more efficient we might expect betting markets to become in translating information into forecasts. Modern betting markets might be expected for these reasons to provide better forecasts than ever.
7. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence about the accuracy of political betting markets, especially compared to the polls. The 1985 by-election in Brecon and Radnor is a classic example. On Election Day, July 4th, an opinion poll undertaken by the Mori polling organisation was published which gave Labour a commanding lead of 18 percent over the Liberal Alliance candidate. Ladbrokes simultaneously made the Liberal the 4/7 favourite. The Liberal won.

8. Forward 20 years to a BBC World Service live radio debate in 2005, in the run-up to the UK general election, when forecasts were swapped between the Mori representative and myself on the likely outcome of the election. I predicted a Labour majority of about 60, as I had done a few days earlier in the Economist magazine (Economist, April 14th, 2005) and on BBC Radio 4 Today (April, 18th, 2005), based on the betting at the time. The Mori representative predicted a Labour majority of over 100 based on their polling. The actual majority was 66.

9. More recent anecdotal evidence comes from the 2012 US presidential election. Barack Obama was the heavy favourite to win, while the average of the pollsters had the popular vote within 0.7%, and two leading polling organisations, Gallup and Rasmussen, had Mitt Romney ahead in final polls. Obama won by 3.9%.

10. During the later stages of the 2014 Scottish referendum campaign, the polling average had it relatively close (especially compared with the actual result), with more than one poll calling it for independence (one by 7%). The betting odds were always very strongly in favour of Scotland staying in the UK. The result echoed the 1995 Quebec separation referendum in Canada. There the final polling showed 'Yes to separation' with a six point lead. In the event, 'No to separation' won by one point. This late swing to the 'status quo' is credited by some with the confidence in the betting markets about a 'NO' outcome in Scotland.

11. In the 2015 general election in Israel, final polls showed Netanyahu's Likud party trailing the main opposition party by 4% (Channel 2, Channel 10, Jerusalem Post), by 3% (Channel 1) and by 2% (Teleseker/Walla). Meanwhile, Israel's Channel 2 television news on Election Day featured the odds on the online prediction market site, Predictwise. This gave Netanyahu an 80% chance of winning. The next day, Netanyahu declared that he had won "against the odds." He actually won against the polls.

12. Polling averages during the 2015 UK general election campaign often showed Conservatives and Labour very close in terms of vote share. Meanwhile, the betting odds always had Conservative most seats as short odds-on. On the Monday before polling day, for example, the polling average had it essentially tied in terms of vote share, while Conservatives to win most seats was trading on the markets as short as 1/6.

13. For the 2015 Irish same-sex marriage referendum, the spread betting markets were offering a mid-point of 60% for YES to same-sex marriage, and 40% for NO. The average of the final opinion polls had YES on 71% and NO on 29%. The final result was 62%-38% for YES, much closer to the projection from the markets.

14. If this anecdotal evidence is correct, it is natural to ask why the betting markets outperform the opinion polls in terms of forecast accuracy. One obvious reason is that there is an asymmetry. People who bet in significant sums on an election outcome will usually have access to the polling evidence, while opinion polls do not take account of information contained in the betting odds (though the opinions expressed might). Sophisticated political bettors also take into account the past experience of how good different pollsters are, what tends to

happen to those who are undecided when they actually vote, differential turnout of voters, what might drive the agenda between the dates of the polling surveys and election day itself, and so on. All of this can in principle be captured in the markets.

15. Pollsters, except perhaps with their final polls, tend to claim that they are not producing a forecast, but a snapshot of opinion. In contrast, the betting markets are generating odds about the final result. Moreover, the polls are used by those trading the markets to improve their forecasts, so they are a valuable input. But they are only one input. Those betting in the markets have access to much other information as well including, for example, informed political analysis, statistical modelling, focus groups and on-the-ground information including local canvass returns.

16. To test the reliability of the anecdotal evidence pointing to the superior forecasting performance of the betting markets over the polls, I collected vast data sets of every matched contract placed on two leading betting exchanges and from a dedicated prediction market for US elections since 2000. This was collected over 900 days before the 2008 election alone, and to indicate the size, a single data set was made up of 411,858 observations from one exchange alone for that year. Data was derived notably from presidential elections at national and state level, Senate elections, House elections and elections for Governor and Mayor. Democrat and Republican selection primaries were also included. Information was collected on the polling company, the length of time over which the poll was conducted, and the type of poll.

17. My co-author, Dr. James Reade, and I compared the betting over the entire period with the opinion polls published over that period, and also with expert opinion and a statistical model.

18. In a paper, titled 'Forecasting Elections' (Vaughan Williams and Reade, 2016b), published in the 'Journal of Forecasting' – see also Vaughan Williams and Reade, 2017, 2015), we specifically assessed opinion polls, prediction and betting markets, expert opinion and statistical modelling over this vast data set of elections in order to determine which performed better in terms of forecasting outcomes. We considered accuracy, bias and precision over different time horizons before an election.

19. A very simple measure of accuracy is the percentage of correct forecasts, i.e. how often a forecast correctly predicts the election outcome.

20. A related but distinctly different concept to accuracy is unbiasedness. An unbiased vote share forecast is, on average, equal to the true vote share outcome. An unbiased probability forecast is also, on average, equal to the true probability that the candidate wins the election. Forecasts that are accurate can also be biased, provided the bias is in the correct direction. If polls are consistently upward biased for candidates that eventually win, then despite being biased they will be very accurate in predicting the outcome, whereas polls that are consistently downward biased for candidates that eventually win will be very inaccurate as well as biased

21. We also identified the precision of the forecasts, which relates to the spread of the forecasts.

22. We considered accuracy, bias and precision over different time horizons before an election. We found that the betting/prediction markets provided the most accurate and precise forecasts and were similar in terms of bias to opinion polls. We found that betting/prediction market forecasts also tended to improve as the elections approached, while we found evidence of opinion polls tending to perform worse.

23. In Brown, Reade and Vaughan Williams (2017), we examine the precise impact of the release of information from a leading opinion polling company on the political betting markets. To do this, we use an extensive data set of over 25 million contracts that records (anonymised) individual trader IDs for the buyers and sellers of the contracts and align this to the exact time of release of this information. We find that polling releases by this prominent opinion pollster quickly influences trading volumes and market prices, but that experienced and more aggressive liquidity-taking traders bide their time before entering the market after such news events. We find that the market prices are not at their most informative in the immediate aftermath of a poll release.

24. We also conducted research into the impact of breaking news on the markets, notably via social media and live blogging. In Vaughan Williams and Paton (2015) we use an extensive data set of contracts matched on a leading betting exchange specifically regarding the outcome of the 2013 papal election. We found that genuine information released on Twitter was not reflected in the betting markets, and was only very partially incorporated when published later on the live blog of a major British newspaper. One possible explanation is that the information was not believed as it related to a closed-door conclave (Vaughan Williams, 2015a, considers closed door forecasting in another context). However, this finding was consistent in some respects with evidence in Vaughan Williams and Reade (2016a) about the limited impact on a leading betting exchange of major breaking news in a UK general election when released on Twitter, at least until the news was validated by traditional media.

25. In summary, the overwhelming consensus of evidence prior to the 2015 UK General Election pointed to the success of political betting markets in predicting the outcome of elections. In contrast, the 2015 UK General Election, the 2016 EU referendum in the UK, the 2016 US presidential election and the 2017 UK election, all produced results that were a shock to the great majority of pollsters as well as to the betting markets. In each case, the longshot outcome (Conservative overall majority, Brexit, Trump, No overall majority) prevailed.

26. There are various theories as to why the polls and markets broke down in these recent big votes. One theory is based on the simple laws of probability. An 80% favourite can be expected to lose one time in five, if the odds are correct. In the long run, according to this explanation, things should balance out.

27. A second theory to explain recent surprise results is that something fundamental has changed in the way that information contained in political betting markets is perceived and processed. One interpretation is that the widespread success of the betting markets in forecasting election outcomes, and

the publicity that was given to this, turned them into an accepted measure of the state of a race, creating a perception which was difficult to shift in response to new information. To this extent, the market prices to some extent led opinion rather than simply reflecting it. From this perspective, the prices in the markets became somewhat sticky.

28. A third theory is that conventional patterns of voting broke down in 2015 and subsequently, primarily due to unprecedented differential voter turnout patterns across key demographics, which were not correctly modelled in most of the polling and which were not picked up by those trading the betting markets.

29. There are other theories, which may be linked to the above, including the impact of social media, and manipulation of this, on voter perceptions and voting patterns.

30. I explore how well the pollsters, 'expert opinion', modellers, prediction and betting markets performed in the 2017 UK general election in Vaughan Williams (2017a) – "Report card: how well did UK election forecasters perform this time?" and explore the polling failure in the 2015 UK general election in Vaughan Williams (2015b) – "Why the polls got it so wrong in the British election", and some implications in a follow-up article (Vaughan Williams, 2015c).

31. I explore how well the pollsters, 'expert opinion', modellers, prediction and betting markets performed in the 2016 US presidential election in Vaughan Williams (2016) – "The madness of crowds, polls and experts confirmed by Trump victory", and the implications of turnout projections for opinion polling in Vaughan Williams, 2017b – "Election pollsters put their methods to the test – and turnout is the key."

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31 October 2017

James Williams – Oral evidence (QQ 127–131)

Evidence Session No. 17 Heard in Public Questions 127 - 131

Tuesday 28 November 2017

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Lipsey (The Chairman); Baroness Coultie; Baroness Fall; Lord Foulkes of Cumnock; Lord Hayward; Lord Howarth of Newport; Baroness Jay of Paddington; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve; Lord Rennard; Lord Smith of Hindhead.

Witness

[I](#): James Williams, Doctoral Candidate, Oxford Internet Institute.

Examination of witness

James Williams.

Q127 **The Chairman:** Thank you for being with us again, James, and for braving the horrors of a journey from Oxford to London, which is so challenging in this modern era.

We had a good informal session with you and colleagues earlier, but we wanted to have a more formal session to get some of the evidence concisely and on the record for the Committee's use. You are on the record, which means you are being televised. There will be a transcript, which you can alter if you misspeak or something comes out not quite as you would like. You are protected by parliamentary privilege: whatever you say, and however horrible you are to anybody, they cannot sue you.

I know that you, Margaret, have a question that you want to put to James.

Q128 **Baroness Jay of Paddington:** It is a continuation of our conversation in the previous session. As I recall, you are interested in the same area, so I hope that it is not irrelevant to your interests.

The conversation that we were having before ended on the necessity of a suite of solutions, or attempted solutions, to all these issues. I know that you have made some fairly clear remarks about how you see all of this as a threat to politics as we understand it. Could we focus for a moment on the impact on the political, rather than the more general? It is interesting that we talk of seeking the holy grail of some technical-cum-legal-cum-political solution in a world in which there is absolutely no understanding between the political systems on anything. Will you comment on that? The notion that we will agreeably get to some point by having conversations with the tech companies and developing more advanced technical solutions to some of the problems that we have raised seems to me to be pretty hopeless.

James Williams: It is a very complex problem. There are longer-term solutions, and maybe some shorter-term things that can be done. In the

longer term, as was mentioned a moment ago, the question of advertising needs to be revisited fundamentally. What do we want advertising to do for us as a society?

Baroness Jay of Paddington: May I interrupt you immediately? You ask, “What do we want advertising to do for us?” What we want in the liberal democracies of western Europe—we have talked about whether the Council of Europe, for example, would have a role—is completely different from what may be understood in Palo Alto, or wherever these companies are based, let alone in Moscow. The fundamental problem is that we are dealing, or seeking to deal, with something that is completely global, with completely different systems.

James Williams: Yes. Advertising, in combination with the technologies of the internet and the increased application of our knowledge of non-rational human psychology, has morphed into a global system of industrialised persuasion.

There are certain things that could be done. My background is not law and regulation, but I will give an example. One way of looking at what is happening is that companies are saying, “Here’s the benefit that we want to bring to users’ lives. Here’s the benefit that we want to bring to societies, or even to culture”. If you look at the metrics and the goals the technologies are being designed towards—what is on the dashboards—you find that they are very different things. A requirement of transparency could be put in place to make the persuasive design goals of the system clearer, to users as well as to the rest of society.

When a platform or a technology becomes essential to society, because it is so large or so influential, there are questions, potentially, about whether the nature of the business model needs to change at some point. For instance, some people in the US have suggested that some social media companies become benefit corporations, where they may have more wiggle room to balance their profit goals with other goals relating to social good. There are certainly things that can be done, but it is a very complex question.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: It is more than complex, is it not? It is insoluble.

James Williams: I agree.

Q129 **Lord Smith of Hindhead:** We have some information about some of the things that you have written about in the past. There is a wonderful line where you talk about the differences between impulses and intentions. You say that these technologies are “designed to exploit our psychological vulnerabilities in order to direct us toward goals that may or may not align with our own”. I suppose that is what we sometimes call dog-whistle politics. How do you think that the whole area of digital media can affect the way in which people think about politics and change their opinion? How can it drive them towards a sort of politics that may never have been theirs? You have written about this quite extensively.

James Williams: The backdrop to this is the observation of the economist Herbert Simon in the 1970s that information abundance creates attention scarcity. The fundamental goal of most of these systems

is to maximise the time and attention that people spend on them. As there is so much competition for people's attention, to do that they have to resort to exploitation of psychological biases: appealing to the lower parts of ourselves.

In the 1980s, in the era of television, the media critic Neil Postman said that we were amusing ourselves to death; that politics was becoming entertainment. Today, politics is becoming a kind of slot machine. The same psychological dynamics that are at play in machine gambling, such as variable reward schedules, are at play when people consume information, political or otherwise, on these media. That keeps us in a state of social signalling, as opposed to the consumption of information. A lot of the time, these questions are framed as if the system gives information to a person, who uses that to come to an opinion, based on which they make a decision.

I do not think that is the right framing. It is more about the fact that we have these systems where people perform a certain social identity. By appealing to the lower parts of us, particularly because of the way in which they amplify the expression of outrage online, the systems invite and induce a tribalistic psychology in people. That is a lot of what is talked about in the context of the populist uprising that we have seen in the last year or two.

These systems appeal to the lower parts of us and give us information that is meant not to inform but to induce. Essentially, that is the core mechanism by which a lot of this happens.

Lord Smith of Hindhead: Are bots so successful, whether they are automated or not, because they can send out simple messaging to people? It does not have to be a complex thing. It is about outrage; you either support somebody who thinks that, or you attack somebody who thinks something else.

James Williams: Yes. Bots, and automation more generally, can be a way for one person to have a high-leverage impact across a wide set of people.

Q130 **Lord Hayward:** May I ask two different but linked questions? First, there is a lot of tension in relation to Russia and its influence, but have we not moved on technologically to a position where relatively small groups—perhaps groups of extremists, whether they are in Britain, in America or in Germany—can achieve exactly the same thing that the Russians have achieved, or are supposed to have achieved, involving mass infiltration of social media?

Associated with that is the fact that it seems to me that the big companies have responded only when they have been threatened by a number of Governments; one thinks of child porn and the like. Is there a common thread to the threats on which companies have responded to Governments and social pressures?

James Williams: I cannot speak to the reasons that companies have for responding in different ways or to their perception of the incentives that would drive them to action. Companies have a certain set of concerns; some are financial, and some are about innovation. I worked at Google for

just over 10 years and have many friends in the tech industry. My sense is that individually people want to do the right thing, but they are dealing with so much daily that sometimes, to get the attention of companies, there needs to be a more acute sense of impact.

That could go in the other direction as well. There are opportunities for regulation. For instance, I would love to see some incentive offered to create business models that are alternatives to the business model of advertising that we have. You may be familiar with the Lunar XPRIZE. If we had an XPRIZE for getting past the attention economy, that would be a great boon for society. There are carrots and sticks. Companies certainly respond to sticks.

The Chairman: May I inject a slightly contrarian and balancing view? I remember the last thing in my lifetime that came along that was a bit like this: Vance Packard and *The Hidden Persuaders*. We were persuaded for a year or two that we were totally in the hands of advertisers and that the whole future of society would be shaped by advertising. That did not happen, for a variety of reasons; indeed, it created a consumer reaction against it. Advertisers now struggle to get the attention that they so easily commanded in those early days, and they are toughly regulated.

In the last general election, the party that spent most highly on social media by a long way was the Tories, whose opinion poll lead went down from about 20% to about 2% on polling day. You use phrases such as “making politics impossible”. Is it really as fundamental as that, or is it just the latest thing on the scene, to which we will adapt and which in due course will come to take its place in a mixed economy of politics?

James Williams: I disagree that the people who warned us about the threats of persuasion, as opposed to coercion, over the last century have been proved wrong. I think they have been proved exactly right; it is just that we have adapted to the new world in a way and have forgotten how it was previously.

In his introduction to *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman said, “What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one”. That is what I mean when I talk about the increasing impossibility of politics. Thomas Paine said, “When men yield up the privilege of thinking, the last shadow of liberty quits the horizon”. The risk is not that people will be misinformed and that there will be fake news, but that people will not care whether or not it is fake. Those deeper questions, to do with the medium, not the message, are really the threats to the possibility of politics.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: Chairman, you finished by saying that, post-Vance Packard, advertising is very appropriately regulated. What we have discovered from our discussions this morning is that there is no hope of regulating this new phenomenon.

The Chairman: That is a point of view. We have also heard suggestions of ways in which we could regulate it. However, that is an issue.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Baroness Jay and you are in danger of spoiling my whole day and upsetting me completely with this hopelessness.

Baroness Jay of Paddington: I am a terrible Eeyore.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: Many years ago, when I tried to get a ban on smoking in public places, people said, "It can't be done. There's no way. Freedom!" By regulation—by laws—we have now stopped people killing themselves and other people. There must be some way of doing it, if we set our minds to it. People such as you, Professor Vis and others can advise us on how to do it.

Awareness is the first thing. You are helping us. Until now, people have not been aware of what is happening. There must then be some way of regulating it. Give us some hope.

James Williams: Sure. To be clear, I am not pessimistic about the possibility of regulation. There are things that can be done, such as reform of the practice of advertising. As I mentioned earlier, we should rethink what we want it to do for us. We could say that advertising that is attention oriented—that is just trying to grab people's attention, to keep them using a product—is unacceptable and incompatible with the goals of society and maybe the possibility of democracy, whereas advertising that supports people's goals and intentions is a system that helps them to reflect on, and to think critically about, the information that is in front of them. There are forms of advertising that can do that, and ways of steering the system in that direction, but the information and attention shift is so deep that it requires thinking about the fundamental purpose of some of these systems. Ultimately, that is what makes it so hard.

Q131 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** You have very helpfully suggested that it would be fruitful for us to look at the psychological aspects of what is going on and that the competitive determination of the platforms to maximise the attention of consumers and the time that they spend looking at social media has consequences, such as endemic frivolity, as systematic trivialisation takes over public discourse. The experience tends to provoke anger, a persistent rage that foments antagonism and fragmentation of our society. It is commonly suggested that there is a very deliberate and malevolent pursuit of that goal by Russian trolls, or whoever, who take advantage of the way in which the process works.

You suggest that the use of social media becomes addictive and ought perhaps to be looked at in public policy as a phenomenon of addiction, but we are not any good at dealing with addiction in our societies. Prohibition does not work, and if we medicalise problems we still do not really know what to do about them. Is that right, in your view? If we are to understand this better and to grope our way towards partial solutions, do we need to study the psychology of it?

James Williams: Absolutely. The idea of setting up a separate Select Committee was mentioned, because this is such an enormous issue. I would suggest that it be a Select Committee on the attention economy or the exploitation of human non-rational psychology by design. When you were speaking, a quote from Aldous Huxley, who is an intellectual hero of

mine, came to mind. He said, "We cannot reason ourselves out of our basic irrationality. All we can do is learn the art of being irrational in a reasonable way". It is why stop signs are red: we notice them more. There are ways of using the fast, more heuristic thinking that we have to support our values.

Lord Howarth of Newport: To be irrational in a reasonable way is a very good motto for politics.

The Chairman: We are pretty much at the end of our time. Thank you very much for coming in to see us again. I say on behalf of the Committee that both sessions—the first with Professor Vis and the second with you—have been incredibly valuable. They have given us a lot on the record, which we can draw on to create an end to our report that draws attention to the need to tackle some of these things more fundamentally than we can do as a Committee. We are very grateful to both witnesses for coming before us and giving such excellent and clear evidence.

James Williams: Thank you.

World Association for Public Opinion Research – Written evidence (PPD0006)

1. This paper is submitted by the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR)⁶⁰. WAPOR is a leading international professional association whose members recognise the central importance of public opinion in shaping and serving society. Our organisation promotes the right to conduct and publish scientific research in across the globe and we work with academics, practitioners, journalists and other stakeholders to seek to constantly improve research understanding, knowledge, methods and their reporting. WAPOR has more than 500 members across more than five dozen countries.

The importance of political opinion polls in a democracy

2. Independent political polls are crucial to free and fair elections. These polls are an assessment of public opinion, which are independent of the State and of partisan interests, and which attempt to be objective and politically neutral. Opinion polls are essentially the only source of information about public opinion based upon systematic measurement. In Britain, as elsewhere, political opinion polls are normally conducted by market research agencies, with political polling forming a small fraction of their business. Yet the reputational issues associated with political polling (especially voting intention polling during election campaigns) means that the political polls they publish have a potentially high impact on their company's credibility. These companies have no incentive to falsify results, distort their findings or compromise on standards. They have every incentive to carry out polls honestly, professionally and, to the best of their ability, accurately gauge current popular support for each party, the state of support for different parties at various points in time, and try to predict final vote shares as accurately as possible.

3. Political opinion polls, especially during election campaigns, are important precisely because people are interested in what other people think and some people may be influenced by this. WAPOR opposes the banning of opinion polls during election campaigns, as this would mean that the only source of information about the state of public opinion would involve non-scientific means. All legislatures need to take account of public opinion so that when they debate and decide on laws they can be responsive to the public's views. Opinion polls are the best available scientific approach of giving the public a voice in an objective way. If the House of Lords committee is considering the regulation of how opinion polls are reported, it would directly interfere in the freedom of the media and would run counter to the UK's long established leadership in promoting democracy and freedom across the globe⁶¹.

⁶⁰ This submission was drafted by a special committee comprising: (1) Claire Durand, WAPOR President; (2) Mark Gill, WAPOR Secretary-Treasurer; (3) Timothy Johnson, Chair of WAPOR's Professional Standards committee; (4) Nick Moon, WAPOR national representative for the UK; and (5) Jane Green (member from the University of Manchester). It was approved by WAPOR's Council (<http://wapor.org/executive-council/>) on August 30, 2017.

⁶¹ We recommend that the Committee also receive into evidence a study published in 2001 titled *Who's Afraid of Election Polls?*, which was published by the Foundation of Information and authored by a past WAPOR President (1995-96), Professor Wolfgang Donsbach. This report

Question 1. What are the most significant challenges for conducting political opinion polling and achieving accurate results?

4. No researcher or polling company can guarantee that polls are perfect and the media, commentators and the public should not expect them to be. Given the questions raised in the Call for Evidence, it is important that members of the House of Lords committee fully appreciate both the strengths and limitations of political opinion polls, and are clear on how “accuracy” should be measured.

5. All polls and surveys that rely on randomly sampling a population are subject to a margin of error. Very approximately, on a standard survey of c.1,000 adults, the “95% confidence interval” (also often referred to as the “margin of error”) on a reported share is + 3 percentage points. Polls, statistically, cannot measure more precisely than this and no serious researcher would claim otherwise. So, if a poll projected that 46% of the public would vote Conservative and the actual result had them at 44%, this should not be regarded as being inaccurate.

6. In practice however, the margin of error for any survey is greater than this, as there will always be other non-random errors that can impact on accuracy⁶², like the fact that some groups of the population with specific characteristics are more difficult to reach and/or will not be as willing to cooperate or reveal their voting intention. For example, it may be more difficult to reach younger people or to gain the cooperation of those who are less politically engaged. This may introduce bias in estimates that can never be entirely eliminated. Pollsters use their professional judgement, both in the design of their survey and the statistical modelling of raw data, to try to correct for these types of bias.

7. Experience in the UK and elsewhere illustrates that this can be problematic if the behaviour of voters changes from election to election. The evidence from the 2015 and 2017 general elections highlights this point – many of the polling firms adjusted their methodologies in 2017 to correct for the problem of over-estimating Labour’s vote share in the 2015 general election, but this new adjustment did not work in 2017 and some pollsters ended up under-estimating Labour’s vote share as a result.

8. Two other important factors need to be taken into account when evaluating the “accuracy” of voting intention polls. One of these involves the timing of polls, which, apart from the final poll before an election, cannot in any sense be regarded as a prediction. If public opinion changes after a poll has been taken, of course it will no longer match the findings of the poll. For example, between September and December 2015, the vast majority of the polls on the EU referendum showed a lead for Remain, but this cannot reasonably have any

provides compelling normative and empirical arguments for the freedom of pre-election surveys (<https://wapor.org/pdf/who-is-afraid-of-opinion-polls.pdf>).

See Article 19 of the UDHR or Article 10 of the ECHR

⁶² See, for example, Mellon and Prosser, in-press, Missing nonvoters and misweighted samples: Explaining the 2015 great British polling miss. Public Opinion Quarterly:

<https://academic.oup.com/poq/article/doi/10.1093/poq/nfx015/3852137/Missing-Nonvoters-and-Misweighted>

World Association for Public Opinion Research – Written evidence (PPD0006)

bearing on the accuracy of polling as a whole in the 2016 June referendum⁶³. It is worth noting that of the 72 referendum polls conducted during the official campaign, 35 polls showed a Remain lead and 33 polls showed a Leave lead, with 4 showing dead heats. The 2017 general election also clearly demonstrates that campaigns matter and they can and do change people's attitudes and intentions to vote. At the start of the 2017 campaign, the Conservatives enjoyed a considerable lead of around 19 points over Labour. The fact that, 8 weeks later, the election ended in a small Conservative lead tells us nothing about the accuracy of these early polls⁶⁴. In fact there is plenty of evidence that the Conservatives were significantly ahead during April and early May. For example, the May local elections showed that the Conservatives did very well and Labour fared poorly. It was the subsequent campaign that shifted opinions (and therefore voting behaviour) -- not that the "polls were wrong" from the beginning.

9. British opinion polls measure vote shares and not seats in the House of Commons, although it is the latter that determines who will form a government. There is no simple or constant relationship between the share of vote that a party receives and the number of seats it will win. Much of the criticism of British polling in recent years has been based on the mistaken belief that polls can do this. In 2015, the Conservatives won 37.7% of the GB vote share, yet this equated to winning just over half of the seats in the House of Commons. If commentators use models that rely on incorrect assumptions (e.g., uniform swing or that the electoral system is biased to one party), this is not a sign that the polls were wrong. This is a problem in other countries too where first-past-the-post systems are used, as witnessed in the 2016 US presidential election. The national polls accurately forecast Clinton would win the popular vote by a narrow margin (the average of the polls suggested a lead of 3.2 points and the final outcome was a lead of 2.1 points), but this translated into Clinton winning only 227 electoral college votes – far short of the majority required.

(2). How does the accuracy of political opinion polling compare to other forms of opinion surveys such as polling on behalf of advocacy groups or official surveys?

10. Electoral opinion polls are one of the few forms of survey research in which there is a straightforward and readily available measure (the election results) against which they can be independently and publicly tested. We note, though, that the science of sampling, the art of asking non-biased questions, and the limitations of margin of error apply to all forms of survey research, whether conducted by independent companies, academics or official statisticians.

⁶³ Both The Guardian and The Telegraph (24 June 2016) used referendum polls dating back to September 2015 as justifications for their headlines "How the pollsters got it wrong on the EU referendum" (Guardian) and "Britain leaves the EU: how the pollsters got it wrong... again" (Telegraph).

⁶⁴ The average vote share of the 20 polls where fieldwork was conducted from 18th-30th of April gave the Conservatives a vote share of 46% - not far from the party's actual 44% GB vote share in the election on 8th June. The main change was that over this time period Labour's vote share went from 27% during the second half of April to 41% on election day. This movement was clearly tracked in the opinion polls, even if the final polls significantly underestimated Labour's performance (with an average prediction of 36%). We note that at the local elections in May 2017, Labour received the equivalent of 27% of the national vote, according to analysis by Professor John Curtice for the BBC.

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11. Further, surveys conducted for official statistical purposes may have some advantages over opinion polls if people believe they are compulsory and if the methodology allows for longer fieldwork periods. It is worth noting that the frequent revisions required of, for example, official economic forecasts (which are often wholly or partly based on survey evidence) suggests that such difficulties are by no means confined to forecasting election results. However, it is generally more difficult (although not impossible) to validate the results of other kinds of surveys with an external criteria. This is one of the reasons why much of the research aimed at improving survey research is based on electoral polls. They allow for a better understanding of bias around sampling, weighting and other factors; and the not-so-perfect relationship between attitudes and intended behaviour, on the one hand; and current behaviour, on the other hand.

(3). What new methods have had the most impact on political opinion polling? Can technological innovation help to improve the accuracy of polling? What is your assessment of polls that produce constituency level estimates of voting intention?

12. The ability to conduct research, including political opinion polls, using the internet has made surveying much cheaper and quicker to conduct. There is no consistent evidence that political opinion polls conducted online are more or less accurate than traditional methods. It is possible, however, that the emergence of internet polls have allowed for more polls to be conducted and published, particularly in smaller markets – Scotland, for example – where sponsors cannot afford to pay for many polls conducted using traditional methods. This is a positive development since the more published polls there are, the less likely any one specific poll that might give inaccurate estimates and have a meaningful impact on the campaign.

(4). Does the public have confidence in the accuracy of political opinion polls? How, if at all, has public confidence changed?

13. Ipsos MORI has tracked trust in polling professionals since the mid-1980s, including a question about opinion pollsters since 1993⁶⁵. The most recent study, in October 2016, found that 49% of the public said they trusted pollsters to tell the truth, compared with 42% who did not and 9% who did not have an opinion. The average trust rating between 1993 and 2016 for pollsters is 48%, which has ranged from 39% (in 2011) to 55% (in 1997). More people trust pollsters than say the same about journalists (24%), government ministers (20%) or politicians generally (15%); although television news readers are more likely to be trusted (67%)

(5). Can polls be influenced by those who commission them and, if so, in what ways? What controls are there on the output of results, for example, to prevent “cherry-picking” of results?

14. Poll results can be influenced in a number of ways. Among these are the wording of voting intention questions, the sequence of questions preceding voting intention questions and the hypotheses used to model likely voters. These topics have been the focus of considerable research. There is general agreement

⁶⁵ Full details are available here: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/trust-professions>

for example that the voting intention question should be placed at the beginning of the poll so as not to be influenced by preceding questions. Modelling the likely voter is a more difficult task, as evidenced in the 2015 and 2017 general elections. In the US 2016 presidential election, different likely voter models applied to the same data set gave estimates that ranged from Trump +1 over Clinton to Clinton +4 over Trump.⁶⁶

15. In the current environment of high levels of transparency and a competitive marketplace, we do not see that it would be easy for voting intention polls in Britain to be influenced by those who commission them. British polling companies that are members of the British Polling Council (BPC) are required to have well-publicised and transparent methodologies. Given that so many polls are published, it would normally become obvious if one is out of line. In addition, there are well-established transparency rules for those pollsters who belong to the BPC. Pollsters do sometimes change their models during a campaign for reasons that have nothing to do with who commissions a poll, as an attempt at improving estimates, but these changes are made transparently.

16. It is, of course, possible that a client chooses to commission a poll when they think the results will favour them or their point of view. There is nothing that polling companies can do about that this. In practice this is more of an issue with the less common non-voting intention polls conducted for advocacy groups. Simply put, “cherry picking” is discouraged through transparency and best practices in media reporting. BPC Rules address this issue explicitly: If the results from a question on any topic are published, then the results from all other questions on the same topic must also be made public.

(6). What impact do political opinion polls have on voters, politicians and political parties during election campaigns? To what extent does the publication of voting intention polls affect voters’ decisions, for example, in terms of turnout or party choice? What are the implications for election campaigns if polls are inaccurate?

17. Considerable academic research has examined the role of both public opinion and opinion polls on voters and their behaviour. The evidence is not clear as to what, if any, systematic effect opinion polls have on voters and there are a number of competing theories.^{67, 68, 69} We can never be definitively sure about the full impact of the reporting of opinion polls on voters as it is almost impossible to precisely measure it. We can be sure, however, that the impact almost certainly varies by circumstances. In any election, some voters will be affected, but the number affected will vary and it will not always be in the same direction. Further, it may be the case that different voters are influenced in

⁶⁶ See: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/09/20/upshot/the-error-the-polling-world-rarely-talks-about.html?action=click&contentCollection=The%20Upshot&module=RelatedCoverage®ion=EndOfArticle&pgtype=article>

⁶⁷ Moy and Rinke, 2012, Attitudinal and behavioral consequences of published opinion polls. In Strömbäck and Holtz-Bacha (Eds.), *Opinion Polls and the Media: Reflecting and Shaping Public Opinion*. Palgrave-Macmillan.

⁶⁸ Gallup and Rae, 1940, Is There a Bandwagon Effect? *Public Opinion Quarterly* 4, no. 2, 244-249.

⁶⁹ McAllister and Studlar, 1991, Bandwagon, underdog, or projection? Opinion polls and electoral choice in Britain, 1979-1987. *Journal of Politics* 53, no. 3, 720-741.

different ways and therefore the net effect is null.

18. However, this debate largely misses the point. It is the right of potential voters to rely on whatever information they wish in order to come to a decision as to whether to vote or not, and for which party or candidate. This has been a core feature of free and fair elections in electoral democracies for many decades⁷⁰. If the concern is that opinion polls can have a subliminal effect on voters and that voters are somehow unconsciously affected by polls, then, as far as we are aware, there is no solid evidence that proves this. Researchers have found evidence that voters can be affected by what they believe other members of the public think, but this is not necessarily dependent on opinion poll evidence. Voters may judge public opinion through a variety of means (e.g., talking with friends, reading a newspaper, watching television etc.) and are influenced by what they consider public opinion to be, regardless of opinion polls. Election polls, even with their limitations, are a more scientific means of collecting opinion data than other more subjective means.

19. Clearly, politicians and political parties pay careful attention to opinion polls and often commission them. No organisation should rely solely on opinion polls to make their decisions. Opinion polls (and market research, more generally) are part of the decision-making process, not its master; and it is necessary to bear in mind that polls are not infallible, or that the opinions that they measure can change subsequently.

(7). How does the conduct and accuracy of political opinion polling in the UK compare internationally? Are there lessons to be learnt for polling in the UK from other political contexts?

20. Researchers, academics and polling companies are constantly trying to learn from one other. This is one of the key reasons why WAPOR was established in 1948 and why we continue to exist and support one another today. Research suggests that the accuracy of UK opinion polls (measured as the closeness of the average of final polls to actual election results) is neither higher or lower in comparison to other countries, nor higher or lower within the UK over time^{71, 72, 73}. Hence, there appears to be no unique 'problem' to UK polling or recent UK polling.

(8). Is the polling industry's current model fit for purpose? Is there a case for changing the way political opinion polling is regulated? What regulatory changes, if any, would you recommend and what challenges are there to greater regulation?

⁷⁰ And a principle that the UK has long promoted and subscribed to, as per Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ("Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers Bélanger and Soroka, 2012, Campaigns and the prediction of election outcomes: Can historical campaign-period prediction models be combined? *Electoral Studies* 31, 702-714

⁷¹ Wlezien et al., 2013, Polls and the vote in Britain, *Political Studies* 61, Issue 1 Supplement, 66-91;

⁷² Jennings and Wlezien, 2016, The timeline of elections: A comparative perspective. *American Journal of Political Science* 60, 219-233.

⁷³ Sanders, 2003, Pre-election polling in Britain, 1950-1997, *Electoral Studies* 22, no. 1, 1-20.

21. WAPOR opposes state bans on opinion polls for the following reasons:

- A ban on the publication of polls would be undemocratic, as it goes against freedom of the press that is the basis of democratic societies.
- A ban on the publication of polls would be unfair since polls will be conducted but their results would be available only to sponsors and well-connected citizens.
- A ban would be impractical: Parliament has the theoretical ability to ban or restrict political polling by British companies. However, given that the vast majority of polling is now conducted over the internet, it would be impossible to stop foreign companies from polling, as Parliament has no jurisdiction in stopping the spread of the reporting of polls on the internet or in media based in foreign countries.
- A ban would lead to “black-market” polling: The effect of banning or restricting the publication of polls would be to create a “black market” for this type of information. Such information would likely be selectively leaked to the public in a far less transparent, and more manipulative, manner.
- A ban would result in reduced transparency: If political polling were conducted by companies outside the UK, there would be no self-regulation or oversight and therefore no guarantee of the polling companies’ competence or even the provenance of the polls.
- A ban would decrease polling quality: If well-established and respected organisations are restricted from polling, others will fill the void or some people would simply make up poll results to suit their own needs. These “polls” would be more easily believed, as there would be no objective polls against which to compare them. As always in a black market, it is much easier to sell duff goods.

22. The UK has a well-established and robust system of self-regulation both for the transparency of political opinion polls through the BPC,⁷⁴ and more widely for issues of professional conduct, integrity and methodological best practice, through the Market Research Society (MRS).

23. Finally, WAPOR is in fact surprised to see the ad hoc Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media asking questions regarding how the government might improve the accuracy of political opinion polling⁷⁵. To our knowledge, no government has ever regulated the way that polls are conducted. We do not believe that government regulations can improve the accuracy of polling. On the contrary, since methods are changing on a regular basis in part to adjust for changes in modes of communication and other aspects of the social environment, pollsters must continually adjust to these changing situations. Prescribing how polls should be conducted would reduce the healthy diversity of existing methods and prevent the development of new methods needed to correct problems that arise. It would prevent the development of improved polling methods.

⁷⁴ The disclosure requirements for pollsters that are members of the BPC are in line with international best practice and WAPOR’s Code of Conduct:

<http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/statement-of-disclosure/>

⁷⁵

https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201617/ldselect/ldliaison/144/14406.htm#_idTextAnchor008

(9) Are there lessons to be learned for the regulation of UK political polling from other countries and political contexts? For example, should the publication of political opinion polls be restricted in the run up to elections and referendums?

24. WAPOR has been conducting international surveys since 1984 to monitor the freedom to conduct and publish opinion polls⁷⁶ around the world. As a professional association, WAPOR opposes state regulation of opinion polls and believes that self-regulation by the industry is most effective. Two types of regulation are present in some other countries: one that prescribes the information that should be present in the media when a poll is published, and another that regulates the prohibition of polls during certain time periods.

25. Regarding the information that has to be disclosed when reporting poll results, one relevant case is Canada where a law was promulgated in 2000. The information required is quite similar to the current norms adopted by the polling industry in most countries. However, research has shown that the media in that country have never been informed of their duty and the law has never been enforced by Elections Canada⁷⁷. It is the self-regulation of the industry, the education of journalists and the ease of providing the information on the internet that brought pollsters to make the information publicly available.

26. Another case, “extreme” in a way, is France where pollsters are required to submit their methodology and data to the Commission des Sondages before publication. This is required from a date decided by the Commission (January 1st for the presidential elections) until the end of the election cycle. Experts appointed by the Commission analyse all the polls and may issue statements regarding the reliability of methods used by some pollsters. While it could be seen as a very stringent state regulation, it is important to recognize that, even here, the process requires input from pollsters and active negotiations between regulators and pollsters.

27. In regards to outright bans on the publication of public opinion polls, three cases help illustrate the unexpected consequences. First, in the French presidential campaign of 2007, a Tunisian pollster published a poll on voting intention in France without respecting any aspect of the French law. Since the pollster was not based in France, the French law was easily circumvented. Second, in the French presidential election of 2017, two media outlets, Belgian (La Libre Belgique) and Swiss (La Tribune de Genève), published poll results on Saturday, April 22, the day before the election, despite the French ban on the publication of polls on that day. In the case of La Libre Belgique, the poll results were quite different from all other poll results that had been previously published. The poll had been conducted for an unnamed candidate, according to the media. Since this information was published outside of France, there were no sanctions despite the complete absence of information regarding the pollster and the methodology used. The third example comes from Tunisia, where the new Constitution bans the conduct of polls during the entire electoral campaign. With this ban in place, in the Tunisian parliamentary elections of 2014, instead of having access to poll results that could be vetted, voters were forced to rely on

⁷⁶ <http://wapor.org/freedom>

⁷⁷ Durand, 2002, The 2000 Canadian election and poll reporting under the New Elections Act. *Canadian Public Policy/Analyse de politiques* 28, no. 4, 539-545

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(PPD0006)

rumours circulating regarding the supposed results of unverified polls. It was never known whether these polls had actually been conducted or not.

(11). Does the media report on opinion polls appropriately? What steps could be taken to improve how the media reports the results of political opinion polls? For example, should standards be set in relation to the reporting of political opinion polls, or should a code of conduct be introduced?

28. WAPOR encourages and provides resources to educate journalists⁷⁸. Together with the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) and the Poynter News University, it has set up an international online course for journalists that covers best practices for reporting and interpreting polls. Research in many countries has consistently shown that media reporting of polls, including election polls, is frequently misleading, and often draws conclusions that the data cannot statistically support⁷⁹. We believe that everything should be done to help journalists make better use of and interpret polls since these are the best way to inform the public. If Parliament prevents journalists from reporting public opinion as they understand it based on opinion polls, then they will be left with no objective data on which to rely. Independent opinion polls provide the media with evidence on which to report public opinion on a more objective basis. Polls can also be used as a way to countering those commentators, campaigners, or advocates who try to mislead the public⁸⁰.

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⁷⁸ <http://wapor.org/resources-for-journalists/>

⁷⁹ As an example, see Petry and Bastien, 2013, Follow the Pollsters: Inaccuracies in Media Coverage of the Horse-race during the 2008 Canadian Election, *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 1, 1-26.

⁸⁰ We can see this with the Oldham West and Royton by-election in December 2015. Many commentators had expected a close race between Labour and UKIP, with some predicting a UKIP win. There were no opinion polls during the campaign to back-up these assertions and the result was described as a "shock" when Labour both increased its share of the vote and defeated UKIP by almost 11,000 votes. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-35003373>

YouGov plc – Written evidence (PPD0016)

1. YouGov is a full service market research company. We operate in 20 countries, have 30 offices and currently employ 800 people. YouGov is a commercial organisation listed on AIM in London. Though most well-known for our political polling, it only accounted for 8% of our UK revenue in the last financial year.
2. YouGov has carried out political polling since 2001. We have conducted polling for the Sunday Times since 2002. From 2002 to 2010 we conducted regular polling for the Daily Telegraph, from 2010 to 2015 we carried out daily polling for the Sun and since 2015 we have polled for the Times. We have also conducted British political polling for the BBC, Channel 4, Channel 5, ITV Wales, Evening Standard, the Scotsman and other media clients. Internationally we partner with CBS in the USA and Handelsblatt in Germany.
3. As well as media clients, YouGov's political team have been the fieldwork provider for the online element of the British Election Study, the Welsh Election Study and the Scottish Election Study, we also have a long-standing partnership with Cambridge University, YouGov-Cambridge. In the USA we conduct the co-operative congressional election study (the CCES). We also conduct commercial work for a wide range of clients including think tanks, charities, trade unions, public affairs companies, NGOs and other campaigning organisations.
4. Joe Twyman is the head of political and social research for Europe, the Middle East and at YouGov. He has worked for the company since it was launched in 2000. Joe is an affiliated lecturer at the University of Cambridge, a visiting professor at the University of Sheffield, a visiting Research Fellow at the University of Manchester and a lecturer in research methods at the University of Essex Summer School in Social Science Data Analysis and Collection.
5. Our submission covers YouGov's views on our polling methods and technological innovation, the ability of clients to influence opinion polls, regulation of the industry and the media's commissioning of polls (questions 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 9 and 12 in the call for evidence). We have not sought to address the impact on polling on voting behaviour or international comparisons, where there are independent academic experts, how the use of polling by financial institutions, which is a matter better addressed by financial authorities, nor how the media present and report polls.

Polling methods and accuracy

6. Our opinion is that the main challenge facing opinion polling is the difficulty of contacting a representative sample. Falling response rates for face-to-face polls, but particularly telephone polls, have made it increasingly difficult to obtain representative samples through that measure, while at the same time increasing internet penetration has made online research a far more viable approach.
7. We believe that the primary requirement for accurate online polling is the quality of the panel itself, and whether it accurately represents the population that you are trying to poll. The quotas and weights applied to samples are

important and it is crucial to select measures that correlate with what you are trying to measure and which correct any skews in your original sample, but these are built upon the foundation of having a high quality panel to begin with.

8. Ensuring a panel that can accurately represent the population requires active management, investment, and panel care to retain panellists and keep them engaged. Our online panel is actively recruited in order to ensure there are sufficient members from all socio-demographic groups in Britain, allowing representative samples to be drawn from it. A widely representative panel is achieved using targeted online advertising to focus on those groups that are under-represented. We ensure that existing panellists are given a balanced number of surveys – that they are not sent to many, or too few – that they always receive a paid survey when they respond to an invite and are not sent away because a survey is “full” and that surveys are technically well designed, work on a range of different devices, do not crash and are not too long.

9. Following the 2015 general election we conducted an internal inquiry into the polling inaccuracy that affected the polls in 2015, overseen by Doug Rivers, YouGov’s Chief Scientist and professor of political science at Stanford University. This is available online at <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/12/07/analysis-what-went-wrong-our-ge15-polling-and-what/>

10. Our 2015 findings were that the inaccuracy in the 2015 general election was down to unrepresentative samples, which concurred with the findings of the independent BPC/MRS Sturgis Inquiry. Specifically we identified the cause as poll respondents being too engaged with politics and more likely than average to pay attention to current affairs.

11. Since 2015 we have invested over £100,000 in actively recruiting more people to our UK panel who have a low level of interest in politics, lower levels of education or who did not vote at previous elections in order to ensure our panel fully represents all parts of British society. We have also changed our quotas and weighting to include highest educational qualification and level of attention paid to politics.

12. Selecting the right variables to quota and weight the sample are crucial to accuracy. Polls need to be representative in terms of the things that drive voting intention and these change over time. Forty years ago, it would have been crucial that polls were representative in terms of social class. With class de-alignment, it is now crucial that polls are representative in terms of things like age, education and attitudes to Brexit.

13. 2017 was a more mixed election, with some polling companies performing relatively well and others heavily overstating the Conservative lead. Our view is that the errors at the 2017 election were due to some companies trying to correct the problems caused by unrepresentative samples in 2015 by adopting very strict turnout models, rather than by trying to address the underlying cause. While such changes would probably have helped in 2015, increased turnout meant these changes backfired in 2017 and led to some companies wrongly showing double digit Tory leads.

Differences between political and other polling

14. YouGov uses the same panel, sampling and weighting for polls asking voting intention for media clients and other polls carried out for think tanks, pressure groups or academia. Indeed, in many cases the questions for different clients are asked on the same survey instrument – there is, therefore, no difference in accuracy.

15. For the British Election Study there is some difference in sample quotas because the BES sample is a long term tracker that seeks to re-contact respondents originally interviewed before we were using quotas on political interest and education. The BES sample is being gradually brought into line with our main sample, and during the 2017 election campaign the results of the voting intention question in our BES samples was broadly in line with the results of the voting intention questions in our published polls for the Times.

Polling Innovation

16. Opinion polling has always been and probably always will be in a state of methodological change and innovation, as society changes and the best method of obtaining a representative sample changes. Until the 1980s face-to-face quota-sampling was seen as the most effective method of sampling. Rising telephone ownership in the 1980s gradually made the use of quasi-random telephone sampling a more effective method, and it gradually replaced face-to-face sampling after the failures of the 1992 polls. Since the 1990s response rates to telephone polls have fallen steadily as people became more reluctant to answer or participate in cold-calls, and migrate towards mobile phones that display caller numbers. At the same time internet penetration has consistently risen, meaning by the turn of the century online sampling using panels of volunteers became an increasingly viable approach to sampling.

17. The movement to online polling offered several advantages in terms of accuracy. Using quota sampling from a panel of volunteers who we already hold extensive demographic data upon allowed for more detailed quotas to be set on who was interviewed, ensuring greater representativeness on more variables. Online interviewing also reduces or removes the interviewer effect (that is, people being embarrassed to give answers seen as socially undesirable to a live interviewer) and addresses the issues of false recall when using past vote weighting, which is now standard across almost the whole industry.

18. In the 2017 general election YouGov pioneered the use of Multi-level Regression and Post-Stratification (MRP) to produce a model that included projections for each of the 632 seats in Great Britain. This was highly successful, correctly predicting the hung Parliament and the overwhelming majority of the seats, including results that were seen as very surprising in the media, such as the Labour gains in Kensington and Canterbury.

19. The MRP model works by using large scale datasets (approximately 50,000 interviews each week, and over 300,000 over the whole campaign) that are only realistically possible to gather online. We see the MRP model as a clear example of where using new and innovative techniques can offer significant advantages compared to traditional polling techniques.

20. YouGov provided predictions based both on the MRP model and conventional polling. We published these with a clear statement about it being our mission to apply experimental science to opinion research in conditions of complete transparency, and that we could not know which method would be more accurate. Afterwards, we concluded that we would rely on MRP in the future where the work justified the extra investment.

Can polls be influenced by clients?

21. With the exception of major academic projects where academic clients may have specific requirements on the sampling and weighting of data, clients do not typically have any input into the sampling or weighting of a survey. All standard political surveys of Great Britain use identical sample quotas and weights and, though the details of this are clearly set out, there is no opportunity for clients to have any input to this.

22. It is the job of YouGov's staff to ensure that questions are fair, balanced and not biased. Any questions with any political angle (that is, any questions asking about political parties, politicians or policies or from organisations likely to use results for political lobbying) are referred to the political team for advice. Researchers will work with clients to draft questions that meet our standards, and will only sign off on questions that we judge to be fair and unbiased. On the occasions that clients are unwilling to accept advice on necessary changes to make questions fair and unbiased we will refuse to run questions.

23. After results have been sent to clients we require them to have any press releases approved by YouGov before release. At this point, we check that figures have not been misrepresented.

24. YouGov is a member of the British Polling Council and this requires us to release the data tables for any results that are published so that the public are able to see for themselves the exact wording used and full details of the results. The BPC also require that any other questions in the survey that cast doubt upon the published results are released, in order to prevent partial publication being used to create a false impression.

25. Our own procedures ensure that any questions that we run are fair and balanced, and the BPC requirements ensure that a false impression cannot be created by a partial release of a question or questions. However, the reality is that we cannot force any client to commission polls so partisan organisation will always seek to ask questions exploring a side of the argument they think favours their case, and will rarely commission questions in areas where they expect the public to disagree with them. This is why the BPC requires all pollsters to release details of who commissioned a poll, and recommends to journalists that they consider who commissioned a poll.

Regulation

26. YouGov believes the current regulatory system is fit for purpose in terms of the British Polling Council's remit of promoting transparency and the Market Research Society's wider role in regulating fairness and good practice.

27. The requirements for ethical behaviour and fair and balanced questioning are already regulated by the MRS and we do not believe there is any need to duplicate the existing measures through new regulatory bodies.

28. The transparency requirements of the British Polling Council function well, with all regular polling companies choosing to be members and abiding by the central rules of publishing tables and methodology to allow journalists, observers and members of the public to judge for themselves the utility of questions.

29. Companies already have an overwhelming self-interest in being as accurate as possible, as political polls tend to be the “shop window” where the accuracy of their methods are displayed. The reputational benefit or costs of getting election polls right or wrong already outweighs any incentive for accuracy that regulation might provide. The errors across the industry in 2015, and the errors by some pollsters in 2016 and in 2017 have been seen as some as something requiring regulation, but as the Sturgis Inquiry demonstrated, there is no single agreed “right” method of polling, that companies could be regulated into following. Indeed, heavy handed regulation would risk stifling the innovation and experimentation that leads to better polling methods.

Restrictions on the publication of polls during election periods

30. YouGov would not support restrictions upon the publication of polls during an election period. This is in spite of the fact that we would make much greater profits from research sold to those private clients who act on predictions and who would benefit much more from the public and public markets having less available data.

31. From a moral and political point of view, however, we would see it as highly detrimental to a democratic society. Opinion polls, however imperfect at times, are the only realistic method of measuring public opinion on ad hoc questions in an organised and quantifiable way. In a democracy where many would expect elected politicians (or those seeking election) to consider or reflect the will of the public, it is necessary for there to be some way to measure and report the will of the public.

32. Some supporters of restrictions on the publication of opinion polls in election campaigns do so on the basis that people may be influenced by wider public opinion and cast their votes in a tactical way in the context of such considerations. We would contend that some people will always cast their vote in such a light, that in the absence of polling information they would judge the political situation using other methods (such as party claims that “only X can win here”) and that an independent source of information can only help.

33. Banning opinion polls during election campaigns would not prevent the media speculating upon the state of the horserace or reporting the race through the prism of who they believe is winning or losing. It would only prevent it being based upon polling data. The Oldham West & Royton by-election in 2015 was a clear example of this – there was no polling conducted at all, but the media nevertheless came to the conclusion that it was a tight race between Labour and UKIP and consistently reported it through this prism. In the event, Labour easily held the seat.

34. Polling is, ultimately, a method of measuring public opinion in a quantifiable way and, as such, as way of giving a voice to the public. We can only see any attempt to reduce the voice of the voter in election campaigns as a backwards step.

Has increased media demand for political opinion polls had an impact on accuracy?

35. In our opinion, the increased volume of polling has been driven by an increased number of polling companies, lower costs and lower barriers to entry to the industry, rather than demand from the media. Political polling for the media brings in comparatively little money and in most cases is done at discounted rates as a loss-leader in order to increase companies' public profiles and advertise their accuracy. The lower marginal costs of running additional questions online and the lower boundaries to entry in the industry have therefore resulted in more companies publishing more regular voting intention polls.

36. Given the ongoing drops in newspaper sales and advertising revenues and the financial restraint affecting all of the newspaper industry, the amount of money that newspapers have available to spend on commissioning polling also appears to have fallen over recent years. As such the timetable and frequency of polls is now far less dependent upon the demands of newspapers.

1 September 2017