UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY

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The Death Of Polling?

Foreword

Bobby Duffy

Welcome to this international edition of Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute's Understanding Society. 'The Death of Polling?' may be a deliberately dramatic title to mark one year on from the UK General Election, but it's fair to say it has not only changed the British political landscape, but has also shaken the polling industry. But are we alone in facing these challenges?

In this edition, we examine the state of polling across the world, using case studies from some of the 30 countries and five continents Ipsos MORI has polled in since 2007. Our political experts, Gideon Skinner and Julia Clark in the London and Washington offices take us through the modern challenges of polling. This includes universal themes like the rise of insurgent parties and technology changing the way we reach people, as well as challenges that are specific to each country.

Lessons need to be learned, but should political polling be reduced to simple 'horse race' predictions? We are delighted to have discussed this with Professor Samuel Wang, eminent neuroscientist by trade who somehow finds time to also be a ground-breaking polling analyst. Sam founded the Princeton Election Consortium website, featured in the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, and is adamant that polling is not dead, but very much alive and evolving. He argues that the "breathless" reporting of the 'horse race' in the American press misses the richness of polling data and the insights it can offer us. Sam also discusses why we need both political forecasters and pollsters and how the popularity of data journalism can improve the reporting of elections.

Returning to the UK election, it was this time last year when our (and many other partners') exit poll was projected on to the BBC's Broadcasting House. Lord Ashdown (a previous contributor to this journal) declared that if the numbers were right, he would eat his hat. Of course, the exit poll was accurate - it was the eve-of-election polls that were out, none predicting the Conservative majority. Gideon reflects on how we ended up with that surprising final result in May 2015, and how it was the "war of the weak", a term coined by *The Evening Standard's* Political Editor Joe Murphy. Our polls for this newspaper showed that in the run up to the election, both Labour and Conservatives had as many weaknesses as strengths – it's just that Labour's were more decisive.

Ann Treneman, journalist and author of All in this together: *My five years as a political stalker,* takes us on the campaign trail and gives us a candid view of how Westminster politics played out. We are also delighted to include Dr Rob Ford's analysis - one of the most prominent thinkers of this election. Ann Treneman is sure that David Cameron had no idea that he was still going to be in Downing Street while Dr Ford views the result as an "unexpected resumption of normal service", and dissects the rise of the insurgent parties.

Social media played a significant role in this election. Ipsos MORI is known for its political polling, but it makes up less than one percent of what we do. Our range of research is much broader and increasingly focuses on applying social research methods to the digital space. Our head of Ipsos MORI Digital Steve Ginnis, in collaboration with Demos, the Centre for Analysis of Social Media and University of Sussex, recall, among other things, how John Major and Ed Miliband (for a very short time, admittedly) got more mentions on Twitter than Kim Kardashian and One Direction!

And finally, you can't talk about last year's election without the momentous shift in Scotland. Mark Diffley, head of our Edinburgh office, recalls Ipsos MORI's poll following the Scottish Independence referendum in October 2014, which was the first to show Labour's collapse in Scotland. Mark gives us his reflections on the referendum, as well as the factors behind Nicola Sturgeon's continued election success.

We hope you enjoy reading about this General Election special, one year on. The answer we offer to the question posed by this publication is that polling is not mortally wounded, and will continue to play an important role in political insights. Sam Wang says it best: *"change is not death – it is life. Like Sarah Palin said, only dead fish go with the flow! Polling is as interesting as ever."*

Ipsos MORI remains committed to understanding society from our broad range of social and political research, in the belief that this leads to better politics, policy and practice. If you would like to discuss any of the research here, please get in touch.

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The Death of polling?

An international perspective.

Julia Clark
Washington

Gideon Skinner
London

One year on from the UK general election and the British polling industry is still dealing with the consequences. The British Polling Council Inquiry has released its report into the failures of the polls,[1] and while many pollsters are still introducing changes to their methodologies the upcoming referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union is keeping the spotlight firmly on the latest measures of public opinion. But it's not just in Britain where the science of political polling has received some body blows in recent years. To take just a few examples, the surge towards Beppe Grillo's MoVimento

5stelle was underestimated in the 2013 Italian elections,[2] while in Israel, the polls were predicting a dead heat, which Binyamin Netanyahu overturned in the final vote.[3]

Of course, as pollsters, it is in our interest to point out the outstanding accuracy of other recent polls carried out in South Africa, Canada, during the US primaries, and most recently for London's Mayoral Election. But as the largest polling company in the world, it is also our responsibility to scrutinise failures and seek to remedy them. So, in the spirit of 'glass half full', we take these recent polling failures

as an opportunity to step back from the day-to-day and review the state of polling across the world. Ipsos, having conducted polls in almost 30 countries over 5 continents since 2007, is uniquely positioned to undertake this assessment, given that our experts are the public face of polling in many of these countries. For this article, we've spoken to our experts from Italy, Sweden, Ireland, Canada, South Africa, the Netherlands, Australia, India, the UK and the US – to answer the question: is polling really dead? Spoiler alert: Not even close.

Figure ONE.

The performance of the polls, from the good to the could-do-better.

Italy 2013		GB 2015		Sweden 2014		Ireland 2016		Canada 2015		South Africa 2014	
Poll	Result	Poll	Result	Poll	Result	Poll	Result	Poll	Result	Poll	Result
Riv C 3.3%	2.3%	Con 36%	37.7%	Mod 21.7%	23.3%	FF 23%	25%	Lib 38%	40%	ANC 63%	62.2%
Centre Left 34.4%	29.5%	Lab 35%	31.2%	Lib 6.4%	5.4%	FG 28%	26%	Con 31%	32%	DA 22%	22.2%
Centre 11.9%	10.6%	UKIP 11%	12.9%	Cen 5.7%	6.1%	Lab 6%	7%	NDP 22%	20%	EFF 5%	6.4%
Centre Right 28.3%	29.2%	LibDem 8%	8.1%	KD 5.7%	4.6%	SF 15%	14%	BQ 4%	5%	Other 10%	9.3%
5* 20%	25.6%	Other 10%	10.2%	Soc Dem 28.6%	31%	Other 28%	29%	Green 4%	4%		
Other 2.1%	2.8%			Van 7.6%	5.7%						
				MP 10.3%	6.9%						
				SD 9.4%	12.9%						
				F! 3.6%	3.1%						
Average error	2.4		1.5		1.6		1.4		1.2		0.8

2.

We are only as good as our last poll

So what is the state of polling across the world? Our data suggests it's a real mix. Given the range of countries we cover, it's not surprising that the nature of the challenges faced varies substantially. For example, in countries such as India and South Africa, there are real practical difficulties given their demographic profile: very large populations and geographies, rural and urban differences, with many different ethnicities and languages to cover. And there are further challenges in getting accurate responses, such as the dominance of the caste system in India, the question of how to get past the influence of the village head in some areas of South Africa, or ensuring that women can express their choices freely in more patriarchal societies. These are all instances when there is no substitute for local expertise on the ground, but there are also some common methodological issues that our experts are grappling with in every country – in particular, how to respond to changing social factors, challenges in interviewing a representative sample, and how to best account for turnout.

First of all, the social context is more complex, technology is changing, and politics is fragmenting in many countries, which has implications for polling as much as the societies whose views we are trying to understand. Countries struggling to recover from the economic crisis, where there is growing disaffection with politics, decreasing turnout, with increasingly fractured politics and rising insurgent parties all create difficulties for polling that didn't exist in the early years of the industry.

To look at just one of those, the rise of radical or insurgent parties is often difficult for polls to pick up, especially where there is a lack of historical data to provide the empirical basis for our assumptions. For example, as shown in Figure Three, Sweden's electorate has transformed from two political blocks to three in just ten years. And in an otherwise good performance by the polls, the Swedish Democrats were underestimated in the most recent

general election there. Similarly, in Italy, the Five Star Movement was underrepresented (although the overall increase was picked up), and in South Africa polls have tended to overestimate the ANC, the biggest party.

Having said that, the impact of rising insurgents doesn't always have the same implications for the polls. In the Netherlands the left wing Socialist party was over-estimated, and in the UK the polls generally performed better than expected in predicting the vote shares for the minor parties. Finally, Ireland is an interesting case study of how social change can affect poll estimates for different parties. A decade ago the bias was towards the biggest brand, Fianna Fail, but since the economic crisis for which Fianna Fail received much of the blame, if anything there is a now a reluctance to admit to voting for them.

Sampling is another key concern, for all survey researchers. In the UK, the challenges of getting a representative sample (in particular, getting enough people who are not engaged in politics) was the key issue identified by the British Polling Council inquiry. In Sweden, while the polls were mostly accurate, our analysis suggested they underrepresented areas that voted Sweden Democrats, and overrepresented areas with high support for the Greens (intriguingly, one
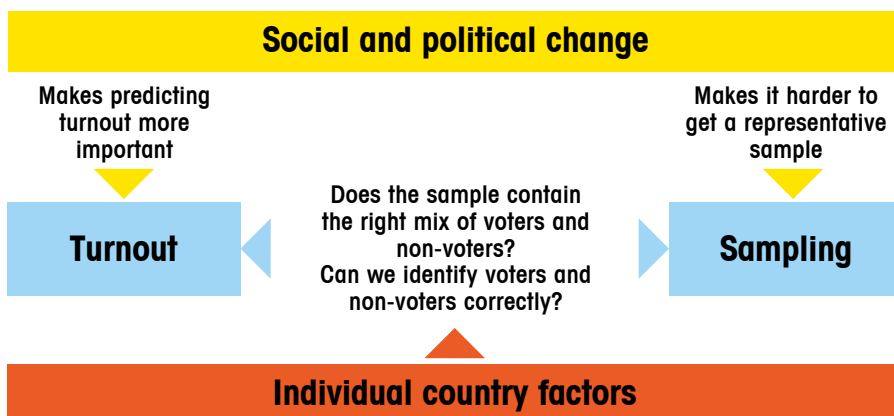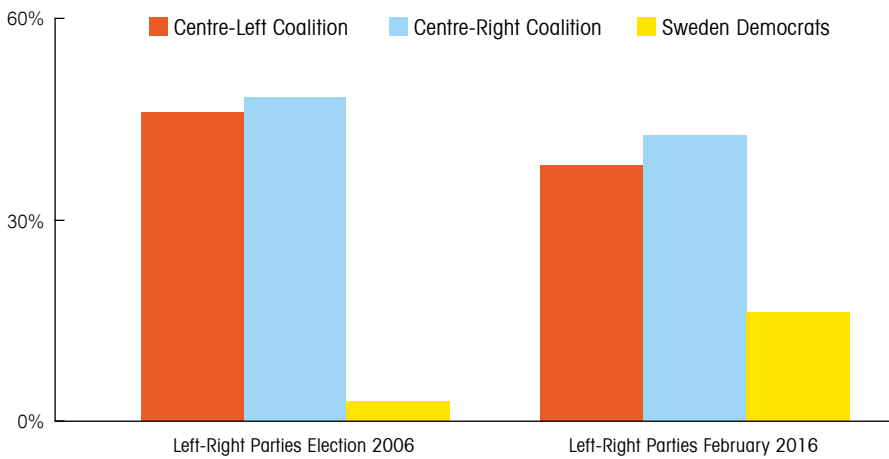
Figure TWO.

The challenges for the polls.

3.

Figure THREE.

The rise of insurgents – how Sweden moved from two political blocks to three in ten years.

Legend: ■ Centre-Left Coalition ■ Centre-Right Coalition ■ Sweden Democrats

Left-Right Parties Election 2006   Left-Right Parties February 2016

factor here seemed to be an interviewer effect – where interviewers had a foreign-sounding name, or a different accent, response rates were lower in high Sweden Democrat-supporting areas). And the general problems of low response rates affect many around the world.

Difficulties in getting representative samples are often linked with changes in the way polling is carried out (the 'mode'), especially where there has been a move towards newer methods of interviewing, such as greater use of mobile phone interviewing, or online panels. Again, though, our international perspective reminds us that this is not the case everywhere. In countries such as India, South Africa and Ireland, traditional face-to-face polling is still the norm – and often very successful too, such as in the 2016 elections in Ireland (where telephone sampling can over-represent more middle-class and public sector voters), and indeed the lack of

landline penetration in countries such as South Africa means telephone is not a viable option at this stage.
This method is expensive though, and

so can lead to fewer polls overall, and the demand for faster, cheaper, and more regular polling in other countries has led to a greater diversity of methods and sampling approaches.

This in turn creates further challenges for pollsters, for example difficulties getting young people to answer calls on their mobiles from unknown numbers, the lack of geographic identifiers on many mobile numbers making it harder to sample across regions, or the difficulties online panels can have in covering the very oldest groups in the population. At other times, though, mode seems to make little difference – in both the UK and Italy, for example, despite a range of methods, no mode was obviously superior to the others.

Turnout is another crucial factor that affects many countries, especially given the general decline in turnout throughout the world (as shown in the chart below). As usual, there are some

Figure FOUR.

Voter turnout in parliamentary elections. (%)

Legend: ▬ Global average ▬ Commonwealth ▬ Europe ▬ Northern America

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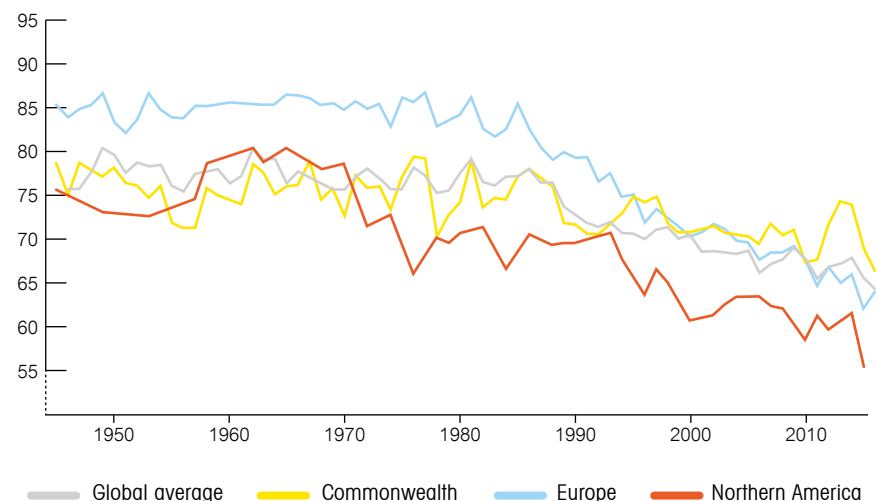
exceptions to the rule – in countries such as Sweden and Australia turnout is high, and so makes less of a difference (helped of course by compulsory voting in Australia, although even then there is a need to deal with the small proportion of spoilt ballot papers).

The impact differential turnout has on results can be significant (although again not in every country – for example Canada ran a sophisticated likely turnout model in the 2015 elections, and found that different turnout levels made no difference at all to the final prediction). In Italy, part of the cause of the underestimation of the 5Star vote was an assumption that the more disillusioned voters would not vote, as they had in the past – but instead they were motivated to vote for this new party. In the UK, although not identified as a prime cause by the BPC inquiry, better turnout predictions are likely to be a key aspect going forwards – some pollsters have developed sophisticated turnout

models based on the constituency patterns of voting in 2015, and the results in our polls showed dramatic changes in predicted levels of turnout with no change in sampling procedures. In the US, the level of turnout can make all the difference between a Republican victory and a Democrat one, as shown in the chart below.

How to respond?

Given the range of individual country factors, there is unlikely to be a single silver bullet response to these challenges – indeed, the variety of methods provides a rich variety of lessons to learn from. Achieving more representative polls can be helped by improving sampling coverage from first principles (although a move to pure random probability sampling is unlikely to be the answer, not least because of the time and expense they

need to do properly), and by better weighting procedures. In the UK, for example, downweighting the proportion of readers of quality newspapers in our polls is already improving our coverage of non-voters. There is a particularly interesting response in Canada, where our successful pre-election survey of 2015 (with an average error of just 1.2%) employed a mix-mode methodology. Our analysis there suggested that different modes had biases towards certain types of voter attitude-types, even when correcting for basic demographics – online modes tended to overestimate progressive voters, while telephone polls tended to overestimate conservative voters (again, it is worthwhile pointing out that this is not always the pattern seen in other countries). A mixed mode approach, then, was developed to cancel out the different biases in the different methods, involving 1,000 interviews online (both from panel and non-panel sources) and

Figure FIVE.

Turnout levels make a big difference in the US. 2014 Generic Congressional Ballot by Turnout Levels.

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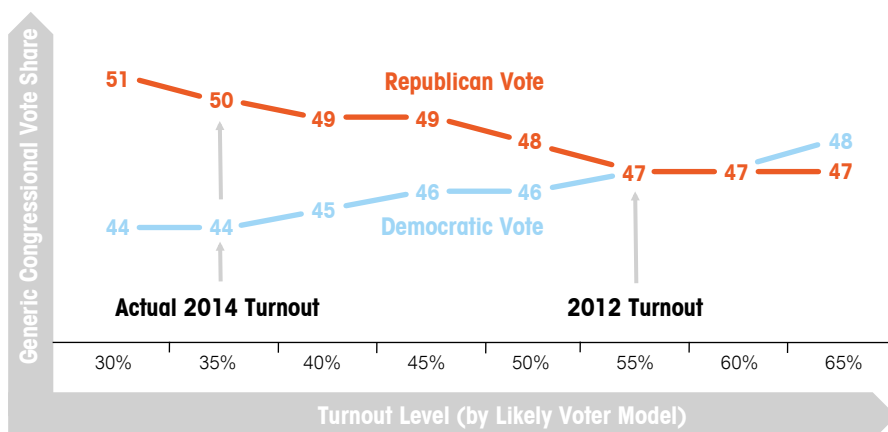
1,000 interviews by telephone (both landline and mobile phone). The accuracy of our prediction based on this method suggests it is well worth exploring further.

There are also some very thought-provoking responses to dealing with turnout, with South Africa a good example. First of all, our polling there includes rigorous tests that go well beyond simply asking respondents their likelihood to vote, involving sanity checks against official registration figures, and physical checks during the interview itself to ensure respondents have their ID books proving they are registered to vote (obviously only possible thanks to their face-to-face methodology). Secondly, given the importance of turnout to the results, we publish predictions based on high, medium and low turnout scenarios, modelling responses from a number of different questions taking into account both expressed likelihood to vote *and*

broader attitudes and motivations towards voting. In the 2014 general election, for example, we estimated that the ANC would receive 61% - 65% of the vote, depending on the level of turnout (for example, we predicted 63% if turnout was moderate). In the end turnout was 74%, in line with our 'moderate' turnout category, and the ANC received 62%, very close to our prediction.

The future of polling

So what changes might we see ahead? Some might laugh at the idea of pollsters trying to predict what might happen in the future, but when it comes to developments in our own industry there are some common patterns developing.

1. Already touched on above is the move towards new/mixed mode methods, in response to the desire for more, faster, and cheaper polling, and to correct biases in the old methods. Again, the practical implications of this may differ from country to country. In South Africa, for example, the relative preponderance of mobile phones may mean that polling via SMS is the next step after face-to-face polling, while in Canada as mentioned above we are already exploring a four-way mixed sample split. And there are other techniques too taking advantage of new digital methods to understand public opinion in greater depth, such as our analysis of social listening during the British general election, and the online community we ran for the BBC, which allowed us to build up a close relationship with individual panel members week-by-week as the campaign evolved.

2. Related to this, the challenges of diminishing client budgets – especially in the media – but rising expectations for rapid and comprehensive insight on the state of public opinion is something that is faced in every country in which we poll, and helps drive the need for constant innovation in the way we do polling.

3. One trend, in response to growing awareness of the limitations of polling, is to see more attention beginning to be paid to figures beyond the simple 'horse-race' results. This is exacerbated by the difficulty in many countries of translating national vote shares into seat forecasts (for example, in the

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UK even if the polls had shown the correct vote shares, traditional seat calculators would still have struggled to predict the exact final outcome). The most famous example of this is Gallup in the US, who have stopped producing vote intention figures and now focus on monitoring public opinion on other variables such as leader approval and issue ratings.[4]

4. Another response to the limitations of any individual poll is greater use of modelling/big data approaches. The US is taking the lead here, perhaps not surprising in a country that has seen the total number of polls explode to over 17,000 published in the 2012 presidential election alone, and at Ipsos we are now polling continuously 24/7, totalling 11,000 interviews a month. This hugely increases the opportunities to aggregate different polls and develop models based on the full set of data available to us, rather than expecting any single poll to provide a perfect prediction. For example, this allows us to demonstrate that it is much more likely for an incumbent to win an election based on a given approval rating than it is for a new candidate.

5. The final trend we are seeing is an increasing focus on transparency initiatives, as pollsters take on more responsibility for improving public understanding of our research. An early example of this is the National Council for Public Polls (NCPP) in the US, set up in 1969,[5] which provided the model for the British Polling Council, established in 2004. At the same time, Ipsos has been heavily involved in setting up the Canadian Association for

Figure SIX.

How big data and aggregation allows us to model for the impact of incumbency.
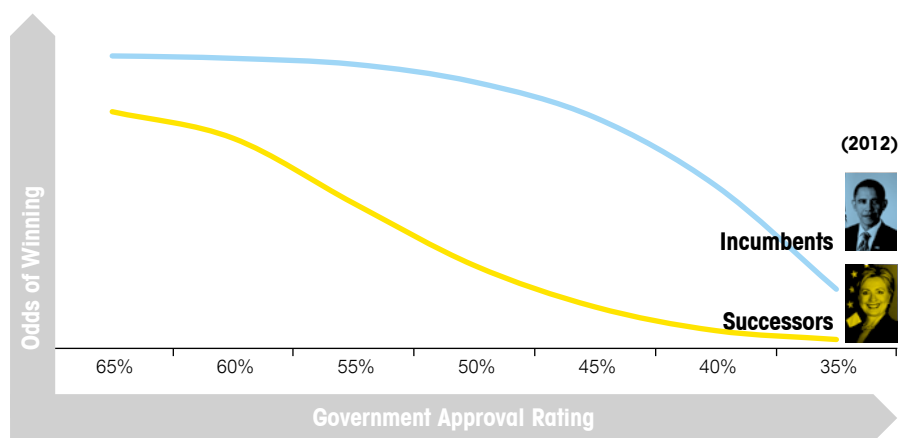
Public Opinion Research (CAPOR) in 2015, and is a charter member of the AAPOR Transparency Initiative in the US.[6] The common thread throughout these is a commitment to transparency in order to promote better research standards, and a better understanding among the media and wider public on how to interpret polls and make use of their results.

So where does this leave polling – apart, perhaps, from a feeling that it is surprising that anyone should try in the face of this challenges? It seems clear that the future will bring more changes – some no doubt will fail, but others will advance the quality and accuracy of polling (as Professor Sam Wang says in our interview later, "change is not death, it's life – polling is as interesting as ever"). And the more doom-laden prophecies ignore the often less-heralded successes pollsters have in many countries around the world, not

to mention the alternatives, such as the recent Oldham West by-election in the UK,[7] which in the absence of polls still recovering from their general election failure, was called wrong by both pundits and betting markets.
Most importantly, as we try to show in the rest of this edition, even if we are unlikely to see the end of 'horse-race' polling any time soon, the true value of our research is much broader, in what it can tell us about the wider attitudes, values, and motivations of the public, to truly help us better understand the societies in which we live. Polling isn't dead yet, especially in information-hungry societies where comment and conjecture would quickly replace data. But it is incumbent upon us as professionals to ensure that our polling is transparent, reliable and accurate to keep it alive and well.

7.

Poll position

Bobby Duffy interviews Professor Samuel Wang.

Bobby Duffy
London

Sam is a professor of neuroscience and molecular biology at Princeton University. In 2004, he founded the Princeton Election Consortium website which takes a meta-analysis approach to polling. Sam's election analysis has featured in titles like the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

You are a professor of neuroscience and have authored several books on the subject. What made you want to create your own model of political polling?

I was watching that movie, *Fahrenheit 9/11* and it begins with Al Gore greeting the voters of Florida. I wanted to know why he chose that state, how he knew to be there– was it just by chance? Gore obviously has high levels of talent available to him, and I, by reading the polls and careful analysis published in *The New Republic* could see that the race depended on which way Florida would go. So if I could see that, certainly some high paid consultant on the campaign was telling Gore the same thing – that Florida was critical.

I became fascinated with that because it was a very close and unusual race. I realised that it came down to Florida, Pennsylvania and Ohio and whoever won two of those would probably win the presidency. I got into arguments about it with a colleague who is a string theorist. When he thought about it, he agreed - I was just so delighted to win an argument with a string theorist that I thought I could do a fancier version of that. I came up with a tracking index that turned all the states into probabilities, took the analysis further and posted it on a blog. My analysis became popular that year among financial traders and social scientists, and was on the front page of the Wall Street Journal.[8] So I was hooked.

What is your approach to predictive analysis - is it different to what forecasters like Nate Silver are doing?

I view my calculations as presenting a fresh snapshot of current conditions. In a general election campaign, public opinion doesn't move that fast, so it is possible to have some clue about what will happen months into the future by looking at polls only. In the US, midterm elections are harder to predict, so it's really only the immediate view that polls give.

At FiveThirtyEight, they like to use econometric factors which have predictive value at times far from the election. It's a separate activity, which is good for making predictions before polls are available, and for predicting states or districts where data isn't available.

Polling has had some well publicised lapses of late – Israel and the UK for example. But it has also had some successes – Canada, Sweden and South Africa. What's your view on whether the accuracy and value of polling is changing – is it getting worse or not?

As far as I can tell, every decade or so, there is some crisis that makes people think that polling is dead. Polling failures have occurred frequently throughout history, and are usually linked with changes in how pollsters reach people. *The Literary Digest* once said with great assurance that Franklin Roosevelt would be defeated in a landslide. Of course, they were wrong, and it turns out they were using a mailing list from a previous election. People had moved in the intervening time, especially those hit by the Great Depression, making the list of voters they could reach biased towards Republicans.

My point is that there will always be new technology that makes it easier to reach people. Look at the US - in the

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last five years, we have had a major transition from landline to cell phones. So it would be a good idea for pollsters to think about how to keep up - our changing population requires new technology for reaching them.

So I don't think polling is getting worse. Pollsters are trying out new methods all the time. In decades to follow, landline phones became a better method – and now internet sampling. Call me contrarian, but I think polling is more interesting than ever.

Has the recent rise in multi-party elections, challenger parties and firebrand candidates made polling more challenging?

Multiparty elections like the UK and Israeli elections, where strategic voting occurs, are hard to poll. In the US, polls in two-party races are as accurate as ever. So far in the US Presidential race, polling errors have been between two and five percentage points. Opinion can move fast in primaries, and that's not so different from past years.

But I also don't think that polling should just be about the two horse race question. Pollsters are asking so many other questions that are super interesting. They are asking why young voters like Bernie Sanders and older voters prefer Hilary Clinton. There's all kinds of richness in polling data.

That's very interesting. People don't always make the connection between polls as a way of predicting a horse race and giving a wider insight. Do you think expectations of accuracy on that narrow question are too high?

I think it's important to know how accurate polls are going to be - we know

When you look into what pollsters have taken the trouble to ask, there are all kinds of interesting material inside polls – not just the top line number.

that general elections polls are pretty accurate in the US, primary elections aren't so accurate and multi-party elections are extremely challenging. Both readers and journalists should think about what to expect from polls. Given the difficulties of reaching people, I think it's a miracle we can get within five points. In both the recent Iowa and New Hampshire elections, Trump came in with two to four points - and that's an open primary. It's pretty impressive.

When you look into what pollsters have taken the trouble to ask, there are all kinds of interesting material inside polls. I think journalists do use that information but that's the huge part of the value of polling – not just the top line number.

In the aftermath of the May 2015 election, the British Polling Council's findings show that the challenge of sampling was a key factor in the UK.[9] You already mentioned that the method of reaching voters keeps needing to evolve. What else do you
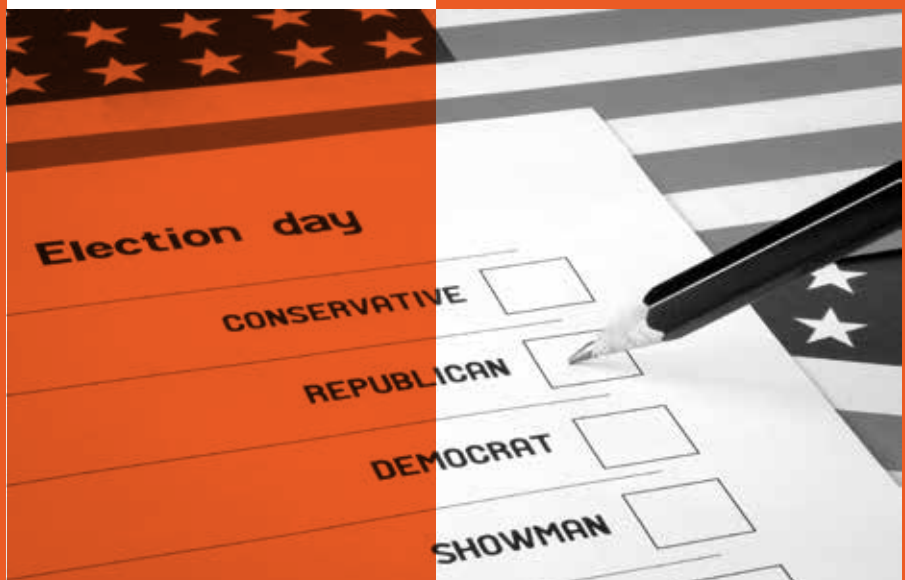
think are the challenges facing polling in the US?

In my view, the biggest challenge is low turnout in midterm elections, which happens in the US when there is no Presidential race. In 2014, which was a midterm year, turnout was the lowest it had been in over 72 years.[10] In such a situation, it is hard to identify likely-voter populations with accuracy.

Consistent with that, midterm elections have the largest polling errors. As most voters become less engaged, this becomes an important issue - not just for pollsters, but for democracy. Another big challenge is how to survey movable populations. States like Nevada and Alaska have many residents who just arrived, or are about to leave. In those cases, eligible voters often have out-of-state area codes. In these cases, voter lists, cell phone sampling, and internet sampling are important.

In the last decade or so, there has been a rise in poll aggregators, forecasters and new models both in the US – your website, The Upshot/ FiveThirtyEight/RealClearPolitics – and in the UK – Polling Observatory/ (Rob Ford/Chris Hanretty/Will Jennings). With the availability of aggregation tools and technology, can everyone and anyone be a forecaster now?

I think it's an area that's maturing – Nate Silver and people like him have really blazed the trail. His success in the *New York Times* inspired them to found *The Upshot,* that now features some pretty interesting voices.

When I got into this activity in 2004, I had the idealistic hope that statistical methods could reduce the breathless

I had the idealistic hope that statistical methods could reduce the breathless horserace commentary that followed the release of a single poll.

horserace commentary that followed the release of a single poll. I thought that this would open up more airtime for analysis of issues – that hasn't quite happened! Instead, we have a genre of commentary on polls and the horserace, divorced from issues. It's become popular, but I wonder whether we are really any better informed for it. I think those sites can contribute by analyzing the data by itself, as a separate object; and then the data in the context of issues. That is very hard, and requires both data people and journalists.

Should polling and forecasting stay separate? Your modelling approach is fairly clean and straight. So you don't want pollsters to be modelling or 'messing' with their base data?

Yes, I think poll analysis and forecasting should be kept separate, for two reasons. First, people often want to know what the polls say, and that is a statistically well-defined problem. Second, I think the forecasting question is equally interesting. When the two are in tension - that is important news. For example, polls currently strongly favour Donald Trump for the Republican nomination but predictive factors like endorsements point in a very different direction. That's a fascinating story and focussing too much on the nerdy horse race predictions misses that tension. Data journalists are in a unique position to tell that story, as long as they keep the two separate.

On that, we have seen a huge rise in data journalism as an important part of media outlets. Do you think there is an over reliance on polling in political debates these days or does it still provide an important function in telling voters what others think? There is discussion in the UK about restricting the publication of polling in the run-up to elections.

Polls play a central role in shaping coverage. However, I have noticed that journalists are perfectly capable of weaving a story that is completely at odds with what polling data tell them! So I am not entirely sure what the net effect [of restricting polls] would be.

It's important for writers to know what polls can't tell them. A single poll is never to be trusted, especially when it gives a result that is different from other

polls. That's called an outlier and usually to be discarded. Broadly, I think the details of polls often have rich information about the voting public. There are many stories to be found in the cross-tabs of polls.

The reporting of outlier polls hasn't

In the case of polling, change is not death - it is life. Like Sarah Palin said, only dead fish go with the flow. Polling is as interesting as ever.

declined because it's not in the media's interest to avoid it - outliers are the unusual and interesting event. If Donald Trump talks about building a wall or Marco Rubio gets stuck on a script, that's unusual and journalists will report it. But if they are discussing a statistical outlier -a data point that is different from other data points taken at the same time - that's not the kind of 'unusual' they should be reporting.

What ways do you think we can improve media reporting and public understand of how to interpret polls?

Journalists are storytellers and their stories inevitably have an emotional tone, but I think there needs to be a balance there with factual content. It would be cool if they were trained to ask whether their stories were consistent with numerical data like polls. Also, it would be great if they could tell when they were being swept up in a wave of enthusiasm. I think that journalists follow, or at least trail, public opinion more than they realise, and are more aware of one another's attitude than they acknowledge. They are social animals like the rest of us but have an extra responsibility to be aware of unknowing biases. Data based analysis has the potential to provide a way for writers to check these biases.

Do you think the increased popularity of books on the application of statistics is a good thing - are statistics finally sexy?

This is super important. People who are good with numbers have many career advantages. I've been spending a lot of time with legal scholars lately, working on the problem of gerrymandering. The

Supreme Court has had difficulty in establishing a clear standard and I think the right way to approach it is statistical. Now judges and lawyers are not known for their love of statistical analysis and, as far as I know, nobody chooses to study law because they love math. But here is an example of a discipline that could use this powerful method of reasoning, but it's not a common tool to them – the legal profession is filled with very smart people who don't always turn to math. So there is something missing here.

As for the popularity of statistics, I guess there is a nerdy glamour to people like Mark Zuckerberg and Nate Silver, which helps...

What changes do you see for forecasters and polling in the future? What will accurate and successful forecasting/polling looking like five or ten years from now?

As Yogi Berra said "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future". Forecasting in other domains, like the economy, seem to get slightly better with time. As the track record gets longer, we are going to develop a better idea of what we don't know.

Our title for our journal is the "Death of Polling?" What's your view of its state of health?

In the case of polling, change is not death - it is life. Like Sarah Palin said, only dead fish go with the flow. Polling is as interesting as ever.

Sam's analysis can be found here: http://election.princeton.edu/

11.

How Britain voted

A comprehensive analysis of the 2015 election campaign.

Gideon Skinner
London

The death of polling maybe a grand description of what happened last May, but it is clear that it does need some resuscitation. The Exit Poll broadcast, just after Big Ben struck 10pm on Thursday 7th May, pointed to a Conservative majority, when many had been expecting a hung parliament.

There was a variation in the vote shares predicted in the eve-of-election polls, but they all pointed to broadly the same outcome, and none picked up the extent of the final Conservative lead.

We have already covered some of the reasons that might explain the performance of the polls, and the areas where we need to improve next time – particularly in picking up differential levels of turnout among different party supporters. Nor should it be forgotten that the polls did make several correct calls, some of which we were expecting to be harder to get right – for example the collapse of the Liberal Democrats, the SNP landslide, and the rise of UKIP to third place (not to mention the Exit Poll itself in which we were heavily involved).

It is though worth taking a wider look at what the polls had to say. Much of the daily focus on opinion polls in the media and the Twittersphere was on small, often statistically insignificant changes in the horse-race voting intention figures. Many of us working in polling would argue that that undersells the full value of public opinion polling. Certainly it's not what we at Ipsos MORI find most interesting in our research.

It also ignores all the other types of research that we are utilising to gain a richer understanding of the motivations behind voters' behaviour, such as online and traditional focus groups, social media analysis, in-depth digital communities, longitudinal tracking studies, learning from neuroscience and behavioural techniques, and so on. Our mission is to make sense of society, so what can we learn from all the research we conducted over the election that explains the final result?

12.

The Conservatives had real problems. They struggled to reach out to certain groups, in particular younger women, and in much of the country outside of the South East and South West.

Labour's "despites"

Let's begin by examining Labour's strengths and why it thought it had a chance of winning. Labour were consistently much more liked than the Conservatives – the party of the heart (if not of the head, to which we will come). In our party image questions, Labour did particularly strongly on "understanding the problems facing Britain", and "looking after the interests of people like me".[11] They were also the only major party to be more liked than disliked – 52% said they liked the Labour party, compared with just 33% liking the Conservatives.[12]

The Conservatives had real problems. They struggled to reach out to certain groups, in particular younger women, and in much of the country outside of the South East and South West. They were strongly associated with being closer to the rich, businessmen, and the City – not the most popular groups in a country still recovering from the 2008 financial crisis. Meanwhile, the "Rose Garden" sheen of the UK's first coalition for many years had quickly worn off, and Britons reverted to their traditional dislike for this form of government.

The Conservatives themselves were facing structural barriers to achieving their first outright victory for 23 years. The so-called bias in the electoral system meant that they needed around twice as big a lead as Labour to achieve a majority. History was also against them – regardless of what the opinion polls said, only two governments since 1900 had increased their vote share after more than two years in office, and none in the last sixty years.

The rise of UKIP, although taking votes from all parties, was also particularly attracting past Conservative voters. Our final election aggregate analysis estimates that 14% of 2010 Conservative supporters switched to UKIP in 2015.[13]

Furthermore, Ed Miliband had clearly touched a nerve with his campaign on the cost of living. Eight in ten agreed with him that there was a cost of living crisis. Personal economic optimism was half that of country economic optimism and only one in five thought their family would benefit from the growth in the economy. The public thought he "got" the problems they faced – his best score on his own detailed image ratings was for understanding the issues facing Britain.

Finally, there was Labour's trump card – most trusted on public services, and particularly on the totemic issue of the NHS. The 2014 winter crisis boosted the NHS to the top of voters' concerns, and although David Cameron had had some success in nullifying Labour's strength on the NHS prior to the 2010 election, this time Labour were going in with their customary lead.
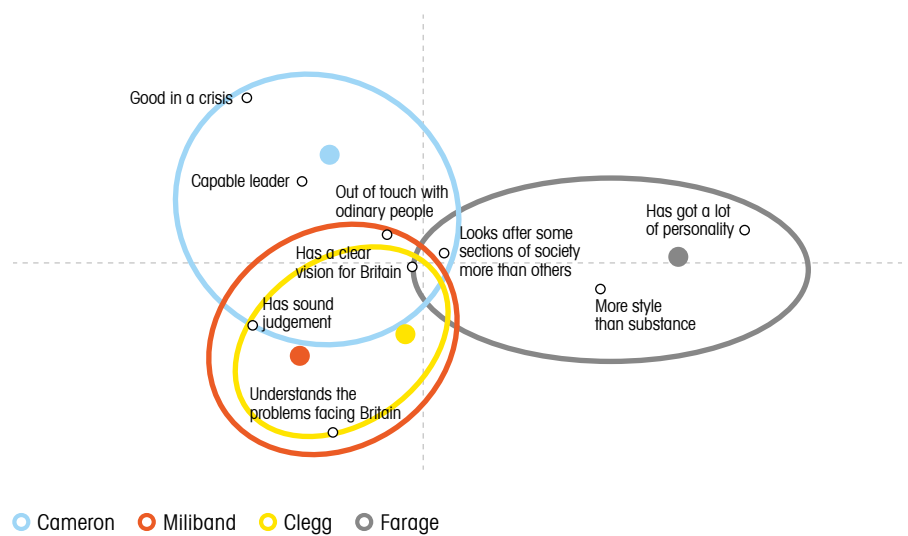
The Conservatives make their strengths count

So how does our polling help to explain why the Conservatives were able to win despite these challenges? It was *The Evening Standard's* Political Editor Joe Murphy who first characterised the 2015 election as the "war of the weak" when using our polls. In fact, for several years it was clear that

13.

Labour's biggest problem was the image of its brand. Despite being seen as the party of the heart, the Conservatives had regained their reputation as the party of the head.

Figure SEVEN.

Despite a better campaign for Ed Miliband, Cameron owned key 'PM' qualities throughout the Parliament.

Good in a crisis

Capable leader

Out of touch with ordinary people

Has a clear vision for Britain

Has sound judgement

Looks after some sections of society more than others

Has got a lot of personality

More style than substance

Understands the problems facing Britain

○ Cameron   ○ Miliband   ○ Clegg   ○ Farage

Labour had as many weaknesses as strengths, and neither party could count on their advantages.

Labour had similar structural and historical challenges to the Conservatives and their own precedent to overturn. No opposition party for over 80 years had managed to win a majority after a single term out of office.[14] And they also had their own challenger in the wings. Polling consistently showed – to widespread incredulity – that the SNP had managed to snatch victory from the jaws of independence referendum defeat, and were on course to achieve an astonishing swing in Scotland, putting many of Labour's safest seats at risk. This held a double whammy for Labour – the prospect of the SNP having influence over the next government was as much a turn-off

for Conservative supporters as the prospect of UKIP in government was for Labour supporters.

Labour's biggest problem was the image of its brand. Despite Labour being seen as the party of the heart, the Conservatives had regained their reputation as the party of the head – a perception they lost to New Labour in the 1990s and early 2000s. Labour also failed to paint itself as a One Nation party. It was seen as the party of its traditional client groups (the working classes, the North, trade unions, benefit claimants and immigrants), but not as representing the South, middle-classes, homeowners or businesses.

The difference was even starker when the voters compared the two leaders. Leader image counts to voters – they are making an emotional decision as well as

a purely rational one – and our historical data shows two things. Firstly, that no Prime Minister had ever been successful with ratings as low as Ed Miliband's so close to an election. Secondly, the traits that make most difference to voters are not personality or even being out of touch, but classic competency issues such as being a capable leader, good in a crisis, and having sound judgement. And they were the very issues that David Cameron had captured in the public's mind, in some cases leading Miliband by over 25 percentage points.

Our tracking data during the campaign showed that Miliband did improve public perceptions of him, but from a low base, and not enough on the key Prime Ministerial attributes (for example, more people said their opinions had improved of him than any other

leader since the start of the campaign, but in the same survey Cameron was still twice as likely to be seen as capable).[15]

In the end, Labour didn't make their strengths count. They were unable to convince voters that they would make a difference to their lives – particularly on the economy.
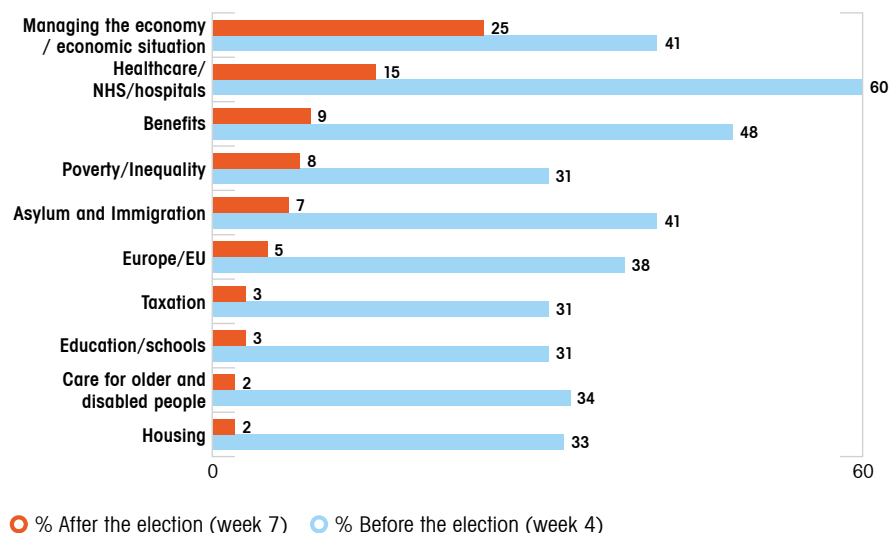
Despite Labour's campaign on the cost of living, it was the Conservatives who convinced voters they were to be trusted on the economy, recovering from the 2012 "omnishambles" budget[16] to retake the lead on this key issue.

Our post-election polling showed that when it came to the crunch, it was the economy, not the NHS, that was the most important factor for voters. Qualitative research suggests that while the Conservatives were unable to completely allay fears that they would

Despite Labour's campaign on the cost of living, it was the Conservatives who convinced voters they were to be trusted on the economy.

Figure EIGHT.

Q: Before - Looking ahead to the next general election, which if any, issues do you think will very important to you in helping you decide which party to vote for? After - Thinking about the general election, which single issue was most important to you in helping you decide which party to vote for?

Issue	% After the election (week 7)	% Before the election (week 4)
Managing the economy / economic situation	25	41
Healthcare/NHS/hospitals	15	60
Benefits	9	48
Poverty/Inequality	8	31
Asylum and Immigration	7	41
Europe/EU	5	38
Taxation	3	31
Education/schools	3	31
Care for older and disabled people	2	34
Housing	2	33

○ % After the election (week 7)　　○ % Before the election (week 4)

15.

bring in privatisation of the NHS, people also suspected Labour of using it as a political football. The issue even reinforced perceptions of Labour as inefficient and wasteful.

As a result, while Conservatives were almost as likely as Labour voters to say the NHS was an important issue to them, it was Conservative policies on the NHS that they saw as credible, not Labour's.

During the election campaign, Ipsos MORI hosted an online community with the BBC and found similar patterns in the follow-up interviews. People wanted to send Labour a message that it needed to change, and it was caught both coming and going. On the one hand people felt that it was still tainted by the previous Labour government, with too many of the same faces, failing to learn the lessons of the crash, and losing touch with its core support. But on the other, Labour had lost one of its most successful features of the landslide years – the sense that it stood for "aspiration but with fairness". Meanwhile, the Conservatives offered reassurance and credibility, especially while the economy was still recovering.
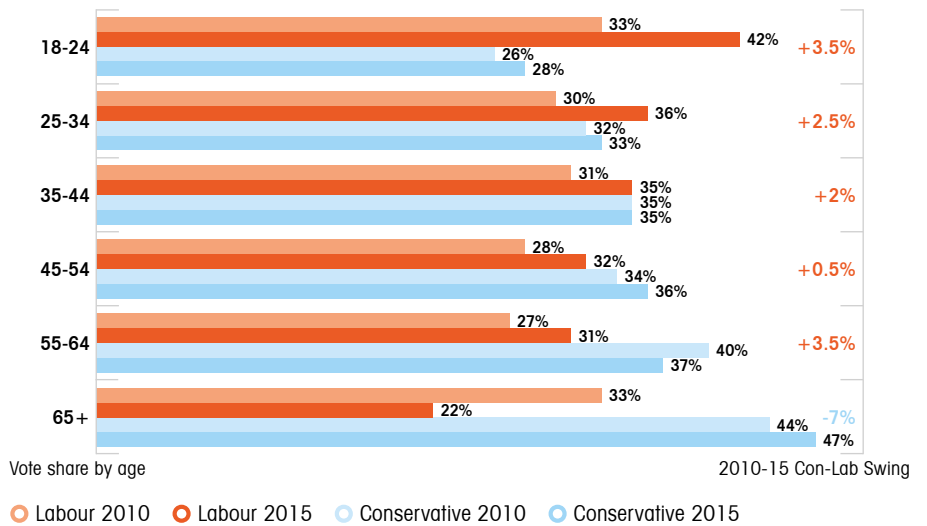
The road to 2020

The 2015 general election saw the smallest swing between Conservatives and Labour since the Labour party was founded, and the worry for Labour (and hope for the Conservatives) must be that so far there is little sign of any major shift in the parties' positions.

The Conservatives consolidated their position among the groups most likely to vote – the old, and the middle classes – and won 19 seats across the South East and South West.[17] Labour failed to build

Figure NINE.

Labour increased the lead it already had among young people. But the party actively lost ground among the oldest group – those most likely to vote.

Vote share by age   2010-15 Con-Lab Swing

○ Labour 2010 ● Labour 2015 ○ Conservative 2010 ● Conservative 2015

a broad coalition of support outside their heartlands of young people, renters, London and the North.

The SNP remain well ahead in Scotland, while Labour's task of winning seats in England is not made any easier by a reversal of electoral bias in the system. Thanks in part to the Conservatives picking up many seats from the Liberal Democrats for a relatively small increase in vote share, an equal number of votes between the two main parties would now give the Conservatives nearly 50 more seats. And while the impact of the Boundary Review is still unknown, most estimates suggest it will increase the Conservatives' net lead over Labour.

Meanwhile, the Conservatives continued to solidify their message of a long-term economic plan. Reaction to

the Summer Budget was more positive than negative, and George Osborne is holding on to the best ratings for any Conservative Chancellor since Nigel Lawson (although it has fallen since the March Budget 2016).

Ipsos MORI's latest polling on public services also suggests that people may be changing their expectations in the light of ongoing austerity. Fewer people feel affected by the cuts now than in 2012, even though clearly many more cuts have been carried out since then, the balance of opinion still thinks cuts have been necessary, and perceptions of quality across many public services have held up (with one notable exception of the NHS, where concern is at record levels).

And what of Labour's leader, Jeremy Corbyn (whose victory, incidentally,

was picked up first by the polls)? He is certainly seen as representative of a new type of politics – a focus group watching his conference speech live told us he seems "one of us", "he's believable, he's passionate",[18] and our analysis of social media gave him a resounding thumbs-up.

However, it's not just supporters on Twitter he has to win over. Corbyn is polarising opinion to a rare extent so early in his reign, but concerningly for Labour age remains one of the dividing factors, with younger people much more positive, while older voters are sceptical.

He speaks more to those who already describe themselves as left-wing, than those who put themselves nearer the centre. And the events of the leadership campaign itself, and its aftermath, have seen dramatic increases in those describing Labour as extreme or divided.

Overall, Labour still has to answer the question it failed to do so in 2015, as one swing voter told us:
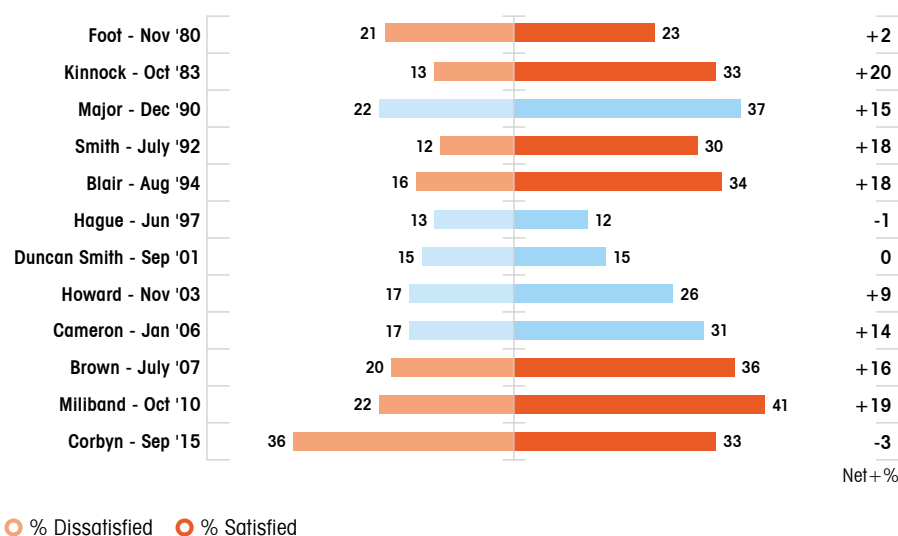
"I've got a mortgage and two young kids and I feel secure right now… if Labour come in would they rock the boat?"[19]

Of course, that does not mean 2020 is in the bag for the Conservatives. The interconnected issues of Europe and immigration, concern about housing, tax credits and a prospective leadership battle all have the potential to take away their upper hand. But despite all their faults in predicting the final outcome, the underlying reasons for the Conservatives' victory were identified by the polls a long way in advance of the election itself.

The polls need to improve the accuracy of their final predictions in the future, but they will play a crucial role in making sense of the next election result too.

Figure TEN.

Q: Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way… doing his job as Prime Minister/Leader of XX Party?

Leader	% Dissatisfied	% Satisfied	Net+%
Foot - Nov '80	21	23	+2
Kinnock - Oct '83	13	33	+20
Major - Dec '90	22	37	+15
Smith - July '92	12	30	+18
Blair - Aug '94	16	34	+18
Hague - Jun '97	13	12	-1
Duncan Smith - Sep '01	15	15	0
Howard - Nov '03	17	26	+9
Cameron - Jan '06	17	31	+14
Brown - July '07	20	36	+16
Miliband - Oct '10	22	41	+19
Corbyn - Sep '15	36	33	-3

○ % Dissatisfied   ○ % Satisfied

Labour still has to answer the question it failed to do so in 2015, as one swing voter told us: "I've got a mortgage and two young kids and I feel secure right now…if Labour come in would they rock the boat?".

17.

Cracks in the foundation

The impact of UKIP, the Greens and May 2015.

Rob Ford is a politics lecturer at the University of Manchester and has co-authored *Revolt on the Right* and *Sex, Lies & the Ballot Box*.

In some respects, the British election of May 2015 was an unexpected resumption of normal service. The Conservative party won enough seats to govern Britain with an absolute majority, and the Labour party remained dominant as the only plausible alternative government. The two main parties won 86% of the seats in the House of Commons, about the same as their share in the previous election. The Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives' coalition partners, collapsed and the idea of multi-party coalition politics seemed to collapse with them.

Closer examination suggests a more complicated picture. An electoral tidal wave has transformed Scotland from a Labour heartland into an SNP one party state. Nicola Sturgeon's nationalists now control 56 of the 59 available seats, after achieving swings so large that they nearly broke the BBC's election night swingometer. The main reason for this is the realignment of Scottish politics around the independence question - more voters now back independence, and almost all of those who do now back the SNP. However, the SNP's success also reflected Labour's long neglect of Scotland; voter loyalties and local parties alike had decayed, and local candidates unaccustomed to genuine competition found themselves unable to respond to the SNP dual appeal to nationalism and traditional left wing values.

There was also a great insurgent wave in England and Wales. Nigel Farage's UKIP won 3.9 million votes, 3 million more than in 2010, the best performance by an upstart party with no links to the existing Westminster establishment since the emergence of Labour over a century ago. The Greens won another 1.2 million votes, more than quadrupling their 2010 total. Yet both parties found themselves nearly shut out of Parliament thanks to the workings of the British electoral system on parties with evenly spread support - despite winning nearly one in six of the total votes the two parties only have a single MP each among the 650 who sit on the Commons benches. Under the proportional representation electoral systems employed in many European countries, UKIP could have 80 or more MPs, and the Greens as many as 25.

While the electoral system suppressed its political impact, this was an unprecedented rejection of politics as usual by the British electorate. What sorts of voters turned to the two insurgents, and what impact will their surging support have on British politics in this Parliament and beyond? The surge in UKIP support was driven by "left behind" voters - older white British voters of modest means and few educational qualifications. UKIP's best performances came in economically declining towns, often ports and manufacturing areas where industry collapsed years ago and nothing has come to replace it since. Farage's voters express deep disaffection with traditional politics,

Nigel Farage's UKIP won 3.9 million votes, 3 million more than in 2010 - the best performance by an upstart party with no links to the existing Westminster establishment since the emergence of Labour over a century ago.

which has delivered nothing for them, but strong attachment to British, or more usually English, nationalism and identity. Immigration and the EU have become the twin lightning rods for these voters. Immigrants as both a scapegoat to blame for their marginalised and declining economic and social position and a threat to the traditional identity and values they treasure. The EU as a symbol of the distant, alien and unaccountable political elites who run their lives yet ignore their concerns.

Green voters are, in every respect but one, the polar opposite to Ukippers. While UKIP's support is strongest among the oldest and those with no qualifications, the youngest and most highly qualified voters are the Greenest. While UKIP voters are strongly nationalist, hostile to the EU, and socially Conservative, Green voters are cosmopolitan, committed Europeans and socially liberal in every respect. Ukippers oppose immigration as a cultural and economic threat and dislike immigrants, Green voters embrace it as economically beneficially and enriching to society, and are the most welcoming towards immigrants. While UKIP voters concentrate in declining and homogenously white former industrial towns and ports, Green voters are heaviest on the ground in booming university towns and cities and the diverse and rapidly growing boroughs of central London. There is only one thing Green and UKIP voters agree on - "politics as usual" in Britain is broken. Greens, like Ukippers, have very negative views of mainstream politics and very low trust in the political system.

The simultaneous surge in support for two parties with polar opposite views reflects a deep change in our political system. The old social divisions of

The old social divisions of class and status, and the old political arguments about the role of the state, no longer motivate voters as they once did.

class and status, and the old political arguments about the role of the state, no longer motivate voters as they once did. New values and new arguments have taken their place, in particular deep divisions over identity, social values and social change which pits progressive young graduates against their conservative grandparents. This divide poses problems for the traditional British parties of government as it cuts across the traditional conflicts which have defined them, and splits both of them down the middle. Labour has voters who proudly wave St. George cross flags, and others who see the same flag as a symbol of oppression. The Tory tent encompasses social liberals who embrace diversity and immigration, and social conservatives who find mass migration very threatening. These internal divisions make it hard for either party to muster a coherent response - any strong position risks alienating as many voters as it attracts. This inability to respond effectively has helped create the space

in which the new parties have grown.

What next? UKIP and the Greens have given voice to powerful concerns, but at present they lack systematic representation in Parliament thanks to the effects of the electoral system. Without a strong presence in Westminster, both parties will struggle to win attention and resources commensurate to their electoral support. They could buckle under the weight of frustrated expectations - many Green voters could be attracted by the idealism of Jeremy Corbyn's Labour, UKIP voters could decide that they are better off aligning with a Conservative majority government than a single UKIP MP. The strength of these voters' concerns, and the depth of their disaffection, suggest this will only delay a reckoning. The partisan and class loyalties that bound voters to the traditional parties are long gone, and unlikely to return. Voters no longer want to fall into line behind two large parties, who can longer represent the range of their concerns and values. The likelier outcome in Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, is thus for more volatile and pluralistic politics. Britain's old political elites need to figure out how to respond to this change. As Scotland shows, if the cracks in their foundations grow too wide, even the mightiest party fortresses can come crashing to the ground.

19.

On the campaign trail

Journalist and author Ann Treneman gives us her thoughts on the election and beyond.

It is amazing how quickly we forget when it comes to politics. During the election, as a special treat to myself, I kept a dictionary of the words that defined GE2015. Words like "kitchen", and "Russell Brand" and "'Ed Stone". Words like "Sturgeon" and "pumped up" and "green surge" (and, yes, "brain fade"). Do you see how, even reading those words now, they feel as faded as charity shop rejects?

It was billed as the biggest election in a generation. It was going to be so close that all of us press at Westminster cleared our diaries until the end of May, assuming that we'd all be at work, covering whatever painful version of the hung parliament that had been elected. But then, because voters will do what they like, despite what the press says, it wasn't really so close after all. The election that was going to change the world didn't even change who was in Number 10.

But we shouldn't be too fooled by that. The fact is that the result was a shocker. Whatever they say now, David Cameron had no idea that he was going to stay at Downing Street. Indeed, I rather think that Samantha was already planning their next life phase. Ed Miliband reacted to his defeat like a man who had been stung by a deadly jellyfish. And Nick Clegg? I think that, until 10.03 on election night, he rather fancied his chances as staying on as Deputy Prime Minister.

So where did we go wrong? How did we miss the train coming down the tracks, heading straight for us? Part of the reason is that we were looking elsewhere, mostly inwards towards the Westminster Bubble, talking to ourselves about ourselves. Devolution may be top of the political agenda but the press and the commentariat remains SW1-centric. Here, then, are a few factors that we should have paid more attention to:

Scotland

Westminster has consistently underestimated the SNP and the power and allure of passionate politics. It was interesting for me, when I looked back over my sketches during the coalition years for my new book *All in this together*, how little Scotland featured. In the first few years, the issue of Scottish independence was virtually invisible. It was only when the referendum was upon us, that Westminster got excited, moving en masse north of the Border and then, after the result, just as quickly back. But the fact is the SNP may have lost the battle but, buoyed by a tsunami of energy from their supporters, they are now winning all sorts of wars.

The Liberal Democrats

When I looked back through the sketches it was clear that the Lib Dems started losing the country (though not the commentariat) almost immediately. The truth is that the press forgives easily, drawing a line and moving on, but the voters are not as kind. It wasn't tuition fees, it was the hypocrisy of the about-turn that did for the Lib Dems. What if, I ask myself, the Lib Dems had handled coalition government differently, refusing the lure of tuition fee increase? What if they hadn't taken on the Sisyphean task of Lords reform? What if they had focused instead on core vote issues of helping the poorest in terms of tax, schools, health, transport? The election could have looked very different.

Labour

I interviewed Ed Miliband during his leadership election and listened to his belief that Labour, by moving a bit to the left, would attract back those voters it had lost to the Lib Dems. All of his efforts over the next five years, and during the election, were aimed at that, creating a world of moral capitalism where Lib Dems would feel at home. But in the process, he forgot to pay attention to the angry dispossessed who were drifting towards UKIP and the furious Scots who were sick of being taken for granted. Ed Miliband concentrated

> Whatever they say now, David Cameron had no idea that he was going to stay in Downing Street.

We have yet to understand fully how the allure of passionate politics is going to reshape the political landscape, but underestimate it at your peril.

on non-doms instead. He fought HIS election but this turned out to be the wrong one and he paid the price.

The Tories

It was striking for me how, during the coalition years, one man changed almost everything: his persona, his appearance, his policies. George Osborne began as a rather unpopular (remember the Olympic booing?) artisto-Chancellor. He ended it as a man who invented the Northern Powerhouse, stealing Caesar's hair-cut and Labour's clothes. When the Tories announced that they were now the party of the workers, I admired the chutzpah but laughed. But I had underestimated George Osborne who is determined not only to reinvent himself but his party too.

It strikes me, looking back, that David Cameron may remain in Number 10 but almost everything else has changed. All of our main parties are in the throes of change brought about by the coalition and the election. We have yet to understand fully how the allure of passionate politics is going to reshape the political landscape, but underestimate it at your peril, as the Labour Party has found out. No one ever imagined that the one with the beard was going to win.

So what are my predictions for the future? The Labour party is, like a wonky shopping trolley, always turning in on itself. The Corbynistas are going to, at some point, have to deal with the world as it really exists. That should be fun. UKIP hope Europe will give them a surge. I wouldn't be so sure. As for the SNP, Nicola Sturgeon may just win her war of independence: now that really will be a crisis (for the SNP). As for the Tories, events such as pig-gate continue

to amuse (us) but George Osborne is not so easily derailed. And, yes, I did say Osborne. He's the future leader of the Tory party. I don't need a crystal ball to see that.

Ann Treneman's new book, All In This Together, is published by Robson Press at £14.99. She was the parliamentary sketchwriter for The Times from 2003 until September 2015.

The digital election
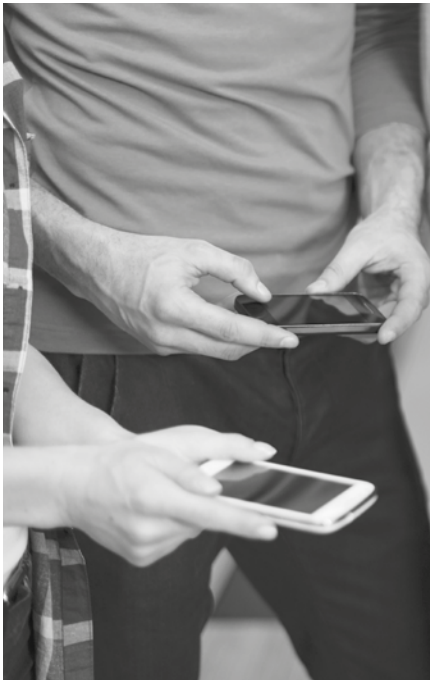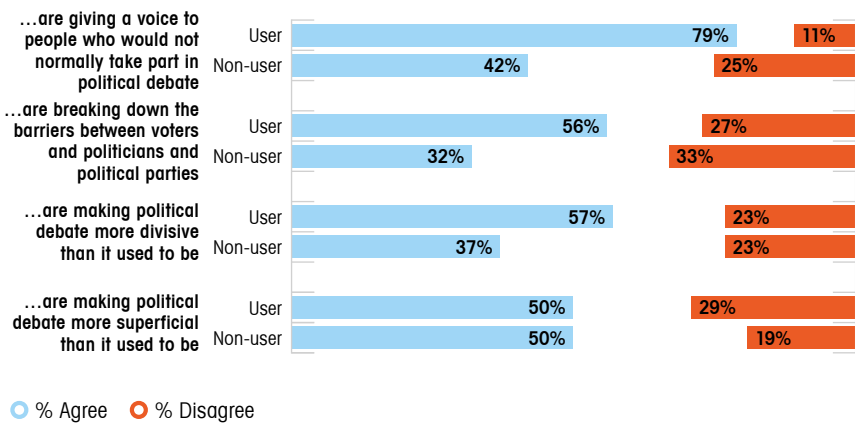
A new kind of debate?

Steve Ginnis
London

Figure ELEVEN.

Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter…

		% Agree	% Disagree
…are giving a voice to people who would not normally take part in political debate	User	79%	11%
	Non-user	42%	25%
…are breaking down the barriers between voters and politicians and political parties	User	56%	27%
	Non-user	32%	33%
…are making political debate more divisive than it used to be	User	57%	23%
	Non-user	37%	23%
…are making political debate more superficial than it used to be	User	50%	29%
	Non-user	50%	19%

○ % Agree ○ % Disagree

The jury is still out on the value of social media to the political debate. On the one hand, we believe that social media platforms are giving a voice to those who would not normally take part, and are breaking down the barriers between voters, politicians and parties. On the other, we are concerned that the same vehicles for discussion are making political debate more divisive and more superficial than it used to be. So which is it?

Wisdom of the Crowd, a research project by Ipsos, Demos, University of Sussex and CASM LLP, analysed social media engagement during the 2015 general election and found that the sheer volume of discussion during the campaign was evidence enough of a new type of political dialogue. Over the course of the first televised debate, hundreds of thousands of its

four million viewers sent 3,000 Tweets per minute into the Twittersphere. Over the course of the second debate, 239,000 Tweets either mentioned one of the party leaders or used the debate hashtag to pass comment.

The biggest 'boos' and 'cheers' in this new dual-screening commentary seemed to map the peaks and troughs collected through the real-time 'worm' Ipsos conducted on behalf of the BBC.[20] Whereas the worm asked a carefully-selected few (50 participants per debate) to constantly rate what was being said during the programme using a keypad, social media gave a platform to thousands of voices who otherwise would not have been heard. Across both formats of research, the biggest cheers in the second debate arrived when party leaders joined together to criticise David Cameron's no-show, the biggest boos

were reserved for Nigel Farage's claim that the studio audience was biased.[21]
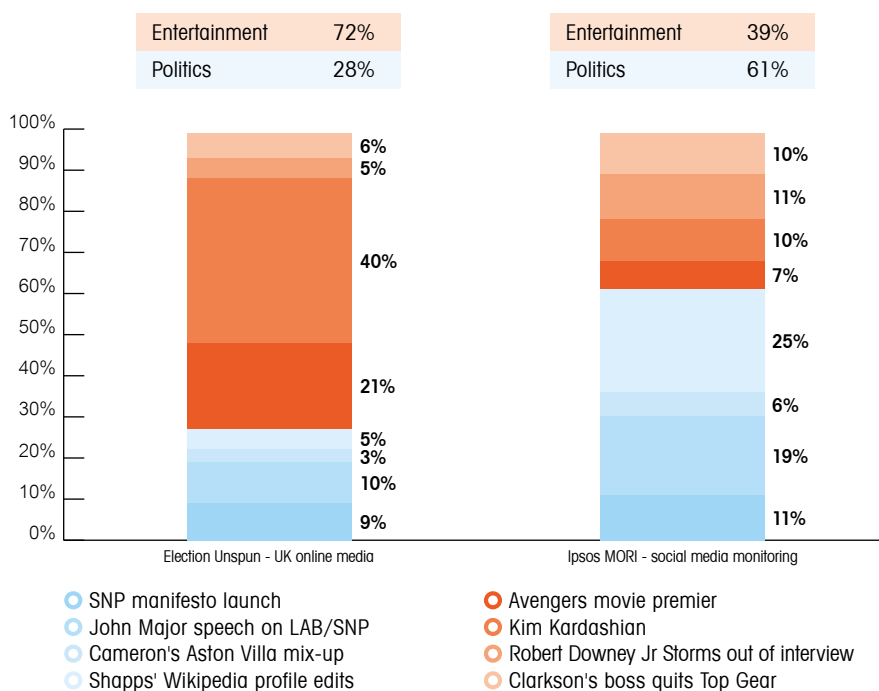
Whilst the televised debates provided the biggest concentration of social media activity during the campaign, there was also evidence of a prolonged social media dialogue which was breaking down the barriers between MPs and voters. Our partners at Demos counted 479 MPs and 794 prospective candidates with accounts on Twitter, with 1.88 million Tweets exchanged between politicians and voters in the weeks leading up to the election. Perhaps surprisingly, 23% of the 59,179 messages sent by MPs were counted as 'replies' to messages from other people, rather than just re-tweets or posts aimed at broadcasting policy.[22]

**Ed Miliband
and David
Cameron
received more
mentions per
week than
One Direction
- even John
Major's speech
warning of a
Labour-SNP
deal got more
mentions
than Kim
Kardashian
in that time
period, such
was the
social media
momentum.**

Figure TWELVE.

Comparison of coverage of events 20 – 26th April 2015.

% coverage as proportion of total articles collected

| Entertainment | 72% |
| Politics | 28% |

| Entertainment | 39% |
| Politics | 61% |

Election Unspun - UK online media

Ipsos MORI - social media monitoring

○ SNP manifesto launch
○ John Major speech on LAB/SNP
○ Cameron's Aston Villa mix-up
○ Shapps' Wikipedia profile edits

○ Avengers movie premier
○ Kim Kardashian
○ Robert Downey Jr Storms out of interview
○ Clarkson's boss quits Top Gear

Such was the social media momentum, that over the last three weeks of the campaign our analysis showed that Ed Miliband and David Cameron each received more mentions per week than One Direction; even John Major's speech warning of a Labour-SNP deal got more mentions than all discussions relating to Kim Kardashian in the same week. Compared with data from coverage of the election by traditional news sources, collected by the Media Standards Trust in 'Election Unspun',[23] social media appeared to give a greater share of coverage to politics over popular entertainment stories.

However despite the magnitude of engagement, there are also signs that the role of social media, as an agent of political debate, was limited. Firstly, to what extent was social media really giving voice to those who otherwise wouldn't have a platform? The accounts mentioned the most in our collection of conversation about David Cameron and Ed Miliband were the accounts of the Daily Mail, Telegraph, the i100, political party accounts, and

23.

Figure THIRTEEN.

Response to television debates.

David Cameron Conservative	Ed Miliband Labour	Nigel Farage UKIP	Nick Clegg Liberal Dem.	Natalie Bennett Green Party	Nicola Sturgeon SNP	Leanne Wood Plaid Cymru
32% cheers / 68% boo	47% cheers / 53% boo	40% cheers / 60% boo	48% cheers / 52% boo	64% cheers / 36% boo	83% cheers / 17% boo	66% cheers / 34% boo

Boos and Cheers
For each minute we sum the score, a boo is worth -1 and a cheer is worth 1
Peaks show popular moments and the dips show the opposite.
Those tweets not clearly a boo or a cheer are not counted.

Legend: Cameron, Sturgeon, Farage, Clegg, Bennett, Miliband

journalists. This suggests that social media was partly just an extension of the traditional political debate.

Secondly, a review of the networks in which conversations took place on social media also suggests less evidence of true political debate between people with opposing views. In a thorough mapping of the Twittersphere, Demos were able to identify distinct galaxies of conversation between political ideologies. Although the Labour-leaning galaxy was by far the biggest in terms of both number of accounts and number of contributions, discussion was confined between those who held the same political views and rarely took place at the pan-galactic level.[24]

In addition to the 'who' and the 'who-between', sceptics might also point to the quality of content generated through social media. Despite the vast number of people Tweeting their views during the live televised debates, we classified just 11% of these comments as relating directly to policy issues such as education, the economy or immigration. The vast majority of comments related instead to the personality of the leaders, including comments about their appearance and unprompted sledging.

What did voters make of it all? At the height of the campaign, we asked members of the BBC's 2,000 strong Election Uncut digital community for their views on the role of social media in the election. The active supporters of social media in political debate had had positive experiences of using social media during the campaign. They enjoyed the speed at which news
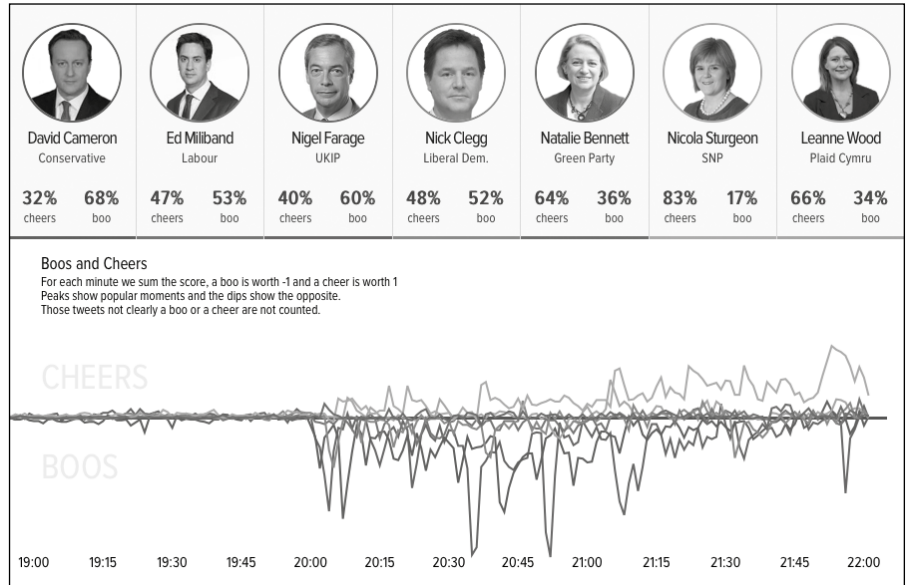
could be shared and believed that social media content was subject to less bias and more honesty than the spin portrayed in traditional media. However, whilst it appeared to benefit some voters, others were disappointed by the evidence they had seen. These voters

were concerned that conversation on social media was being dominated by a few loud voices, and that the tendency towards humorous content made it difficult to sustain serious debate.

During the first televised debate, hundreds of thousands of its four million viewers sent 3,000 Tweets per minute into the Twitterspherse.

Active supporter:

I have seen posts from friends and colleagues from all sides of the political spectrum where there has been lively "debate" and where video links have been posted to back up the discussions. It has been **quite informative**.

Disappointed by the evidence:

I think it **'dumbs' down the debate** when it becomes so casual: it's very 'normal' for politicians to be slated, our country to be complained about etc, and social media really provides the fuel for this to happen.

Those who had little or no direct experience of social media for political debate fell into two camps. Passive supporters believed that social media was the future and a key to giving a voice to voters who might not otherwise share their opinions. In contrast, others were opponents in principle, and believed that political debate through social media will always be fundamentally unrepresentative, unhelpful and inappropriate.

Passive supporter:

Many would not stand up in a public meeting to air a point of view, but **would be able to do it via social media**.

Opponents in principle:

Social media is **full of egotistical, self-seeking people** who bend their party line to meet their followers/friends. It is not a true representation of what people thing. It is extremely superficial.

It is clear that social media brought great benefit to some voters who used it either to find information about policies and candidates, keep informed with developments in the campaign, or engage directly with politicians. But it is also clear that these benefits were not shared by all. Our analysis cannot give definitive answers to the exam question of how social media changes debate, but it does conclude that there is some truth in all our perceptions of social media's impact on political debate, both for good and ill.

25.

We need to talk about Scotland

How Scotland voted and what it tells us about the future of British politics.

Mark Diffley
Edinburgh

Support for Labour in Scotland has fallen in every UK General Election, bar one, since 1997.

Unlike in the rest of the UK, the story of the election in Scotland was clear cut; the surprise was not that the SNP won but that it took so many seats in its landslide.

The starting gun on Scotland's general election campaign was fired in the early hours of September 19th 2014, when David Cameron stood on the steps of 10 Downing Street and announced a plan for 'English Votes for English Laws' to run alongside the process of enhanced devolved powers for the Scottish Parliament.

Coming in the immediate aftermath of the independence referendum, the Prime Minister's statement set the tone for the election and highlighted that the

question of Scotland's constitutional future would remain at the forefront of political debate here in Scotland.

Our poll in October 2014[25] gave the first indication of something extraordinary happening in Scottish politics; that the referendum's losers, the SNP, were likely to be winners in the next big electoral test, the 2015 general election.
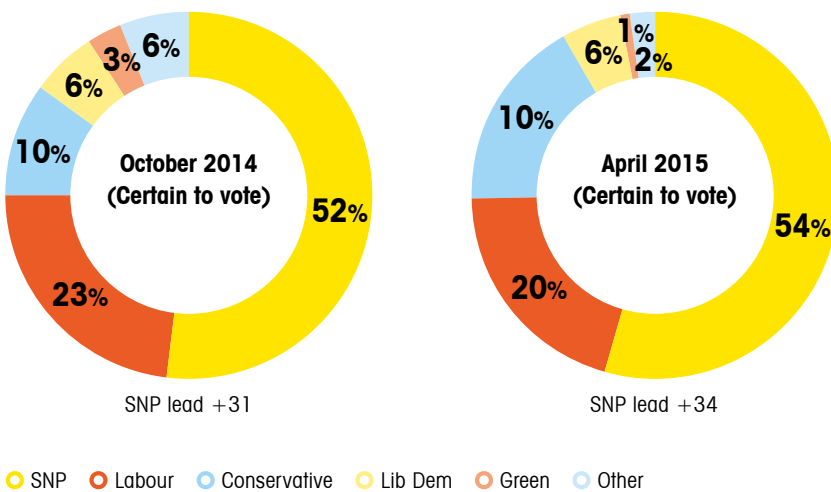
And from October 2014 all the way through to the election the picture remained stable and consistent. The question was not whether the SNP would be the largest party in terms of votes cast, but how many seats would turn yellow in the landslide.

In the end, Scotland returned 56 SNP MPs from our 59 seats, a triumph that nobody could have predicted as the referendum polls closed on September 18th.

On one level, the SNP victory was unsurprising; the 45% who voted 'Yes' were always most likely to cast their vote just months later for the party most identified with independence. The electoral preferences of most 'No' voters were split between the three main 'unionist' parties giving the SNP an inherent advantage. The fact that our referendum polling regularly highlighted around 1 in 10 'No' voters backing the SNP only enhanced the party's advantage as the election approached.
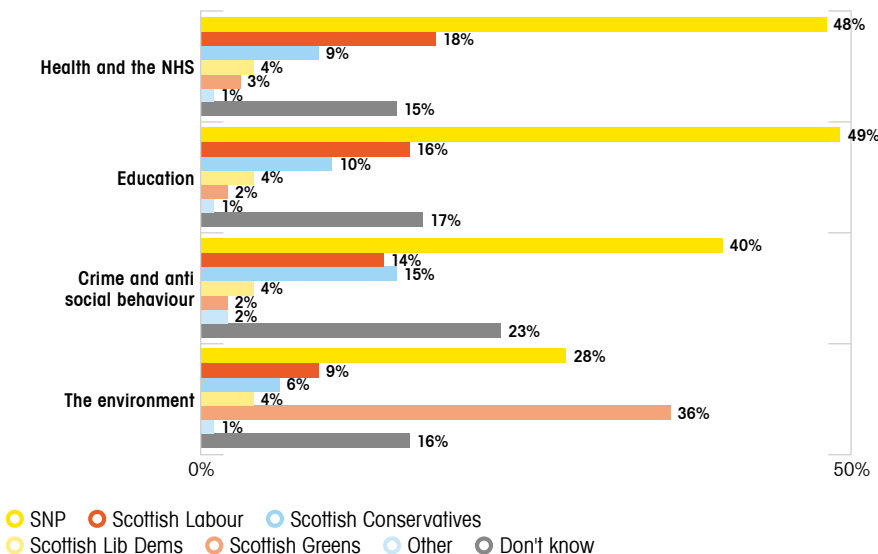
26.

Figure FOURTEEN.

Q: How would you vote if there were a General Election tomorrow?

October 2014
(Certain to vote)

52%
23%
10%
6%
3%
6%

SNP lead +31

April 2015
(Certain to vote)

54%
20%
10%
6%
1%
2%

SNP lead +34

○ SNP ○ Labour ○ Conservative ○ Lib Dem ○ Green ○ Other

Voting intention in Scotland, October 2014 and April 2015

Figure FIFTEEN.

Q: Which party do you think has the best policies for Scotland?

Health and the NHS
48%
18%
9%
4%
3%
1%
15%

Education
49%
16%
10%
4%
2%
1%
17%

Crime and anti social behaviour
40%
14%
15%
4%
2%
2%
23%

The environment
28%
9%
6%
4%
36%
1%
16%

0%   50%

○ SNP ○ Scottish Labour ○ Scottish Conservatives
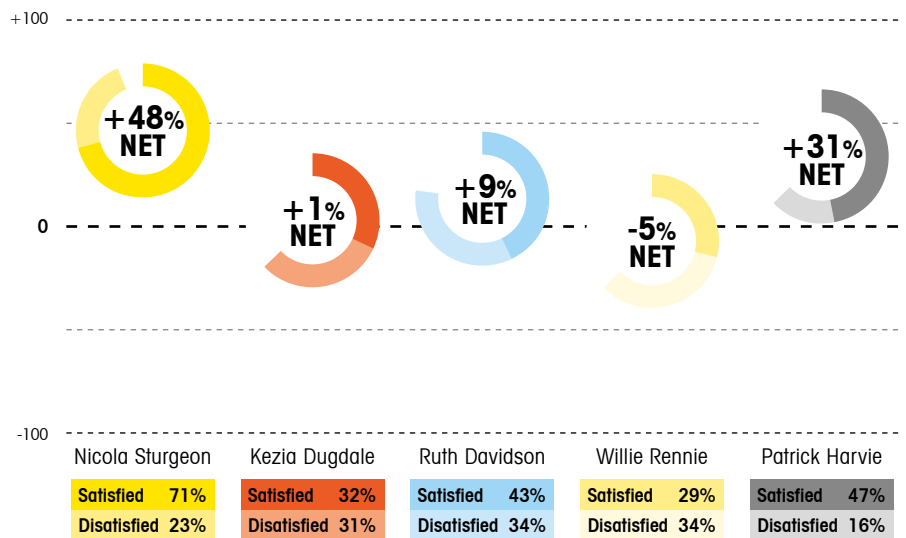○ Scottish Lib Dems ○ Scottish Greens ○ Other ○ Don't know

Our poll in October 2014 was the first to give indication of something extraordinary happening in Scottish politics; the referendum's losers - the SNP - were likely to be winners in the next big electoral test.

27.

On one level, the SNP victory was unsurprising; the 45% who voted 'Yes' were always most likely to cast their vote just months later for the party most identified with independence.

Figure SIXTEEN.

Q: How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way… is doing her job as first Minister / his/her job as leader of the XXXX party?

	Nicola Sturgeon	Kezia Dugdale	Ruth Davidson	Willie Rennie	Patrick Harvie
NET	+48%	+1%	+9%	-5%	+31%
Satisfied	71%	32%	43%	29%	47%
Disatisfied	23%	31%	34%	34%	16%

However, while the reasons for the SNP success in May were reinforced and heightened by the independence referendum, they have actually been established over a much longer period.

Part of the story lies in the long-held advantages the SNP has in public perceptions of key policies and the party leaders. Our most recent poll for STV highlighted the advantage the SNP holds over its rivals across each of the key policy areas in deciding voters' preferences.

At the same time, the public continues to be highly satisfied with the performance of First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, further reinforcing the overwhelming dominance of her party. With at least 70% of voters regularly happy with her performance, she towers over her rival party leaders, attracts plaudits from across the political spectrum and looks likely to remain Scotland's leading political figure for some time to come.

The roots of this decline are varied and complex. Having been the dominant party in the coalition administrations in the first seven years of the new Scottish Parliament, the party now trails the SNP on all important voter measures, resulting in its collapse at the general election.
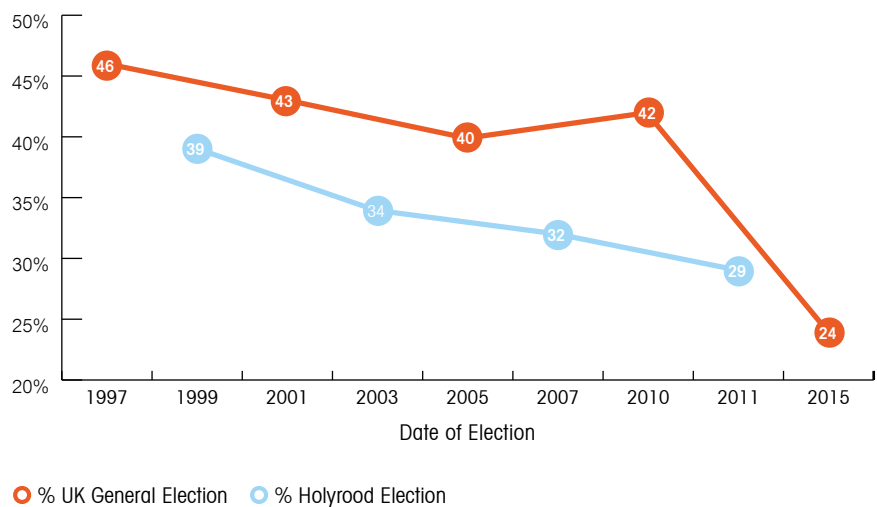
And there is no sign of the decline being halted in the near future. The challenges facing both the Scottish leader Kezia Dugdale and UK leader Jeremy Corbyn in attempting to return lost voters to Labour's fold are numerous and significant.

As forecast, the 2016 Holyrood election[27] produced a clear victory for the SNP, continuing the party's dominance of Scottish politics. However, the failure to achieve a second overall majority in the parliament means that the party will head a minority administration for the next five years.

It is the Conservatives, rather than Labour, who made the biggest dent in the SNP majority, winning a record 31 seats at the election and making it the dominant opposition force. All of which means that the SNP will need to cooperate, negotiate and compromise with the other parties to ensure it achieves its manifesto goals. It also means that the road ahead to a second independence referendum may be a little less straightforward.

Figure SEVENTEEN.

Labour's falling vote share in Scotland.

- ○ % UK General Election   ○ % Holyrood Election

Support for Labour in Scotland has fallen in every UK General Election, bar one, since 1997.

29.

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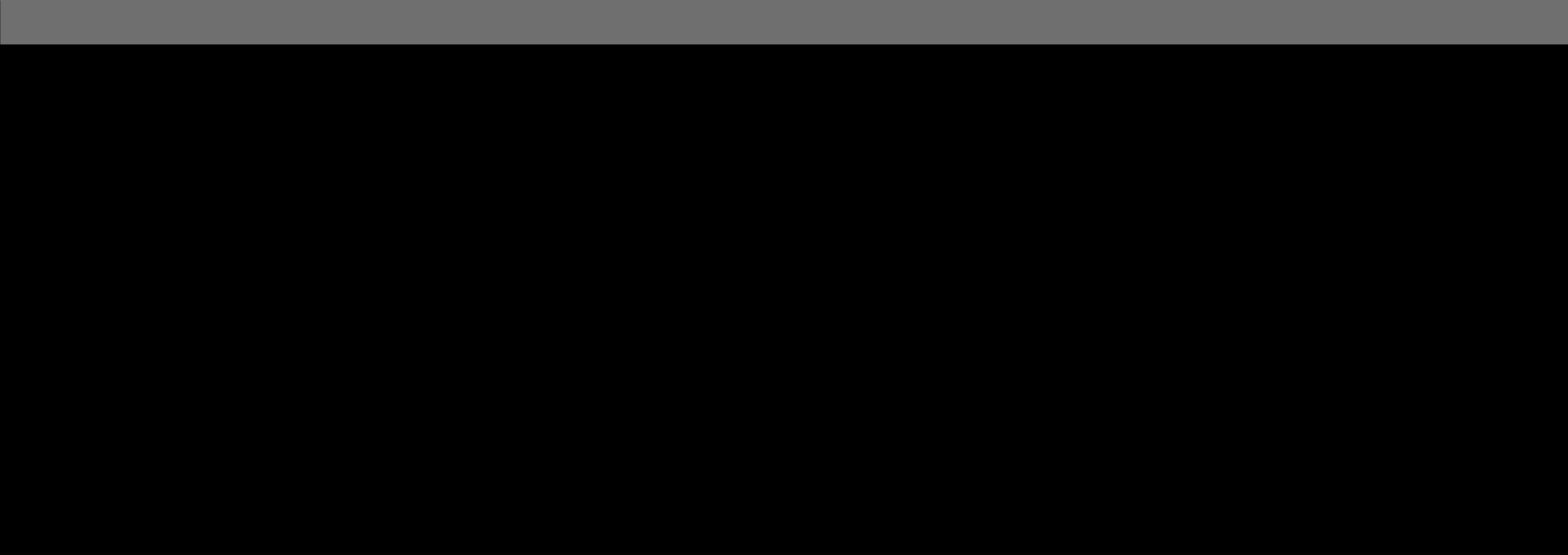
32.

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