Opinion Polls:
Why they remain the reference

Henri Wallard

From Criticism to Praise: the true value of polls

Opinion polls and electoral polls have been subject to real scrutiny in the wake of the 2016 experience, followed by a return to praise in the first months of 2017.

Indeed, 2016 was a year of very disruptive political changes, with the vote for "Leave" in the EU referendum in the United Kingdom followed by the election of Donald J. Trump in the United States. In both cases the outcomes came across as contrary to what the polls had been predicting. We should note that other methods such as poll aggregation which made Nate Silver successful in the 2012 US election did not prove effective in 2016 and contributed to the wave of criticism of polls in general. A wave of "poll bashing" then followed.

In return, at the beginning of 2017, the accuracy of polls both for the Dutch election and for the Presidential election in France when compared to final results led commentators to switch back to praising opinion polls. This turnaround was fuelled by several factors. First, the Dutch and French election (first round) were seen as difficult ones for polls because they featured a wide offer of political competitors combined with a truly evolutive climate of opinion. Second, the stakes were high regarding the risk of giving strong power to populist candidates. In the case of France, founding member of the EU, the result of the election could lead to strong disruptions in Europe generally and for the Euro in particular.

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Lastly because, after the criticisms of polls made in 2016, many players generated an anticipation that they would deliver a reliable prediction and were presented as "modern", powered by digital measures and Big Data. This claim that so-called "modern" approaches should be trusted was also echoed by French politicians supporting the candidates rated ahead by these companies, and by media expressing distrust for opinion polls. One of the major newspapers in France, *Le Parisien*, had even gone as far as banning any polls during the French Presidential election campaign. All this was attracting interest not only in France and in Europe but also around the world because of the potentially huge political, economic and monetary implications.

A simple look at the curves representing the evolution of polls, election night estimates and actual results in France shows an outstanding level of precision, echoing the great accuracy of Dutch polls. To the extent that several articles were published after the French election not only praising the polls again but even saying that pollsters would have their "revenge", anticipating that a fight would continue between polls as a traditional approach and social media or big data as a modern approach. But this analysis is not relevant. The debate is not about opposing pollsters as supporters of "traditional methods" on one side and social media or Big Data analysts as promoters of "new methods" on the other side. It is about implementing the *right method* combined with a responsible attitude towards citizens and media.

2017 ÉLECTION PRÉSIDENTIELLE

VOTING INTENTIONS, ESTIMATIONS AND RESULTS OF THE FIRST ROUND

Ipsos
INTENTIONS DE VOTE
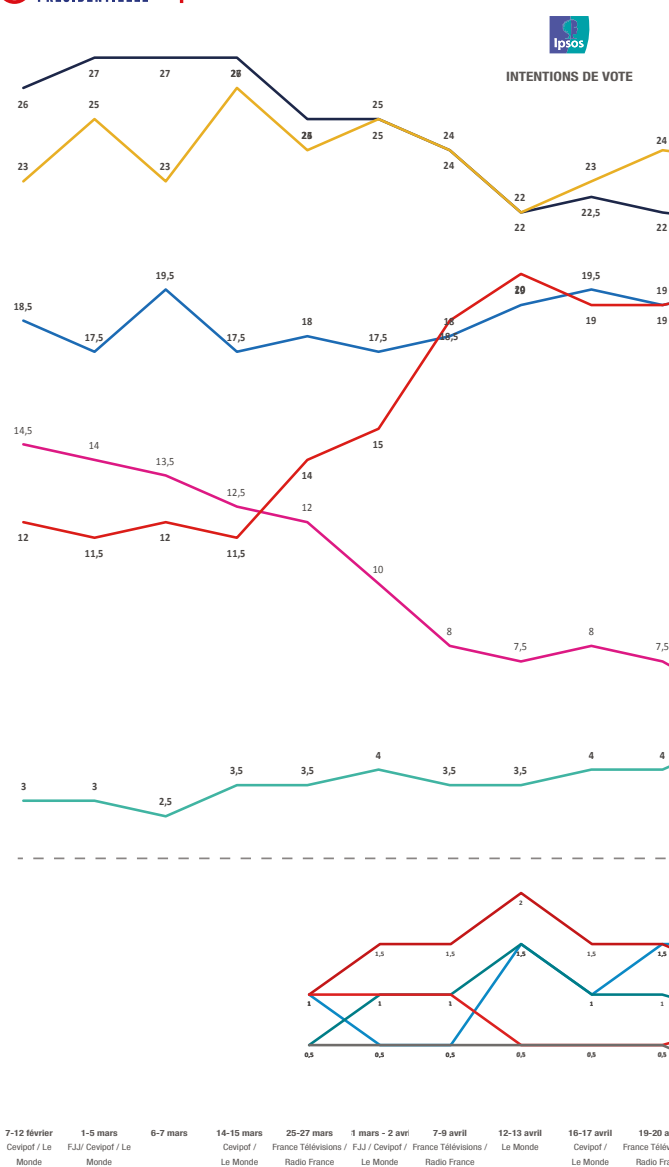
Ipsos
**CHAÎNE D'ESTIMATION
SOIRÉE ÉLECTORALE 23 AVRIL**

**RÉSULTATS OFFICIELS
MINISTÈRE DE L'INTÉRIEUR**

20h00	20h42	21h47

23,7 % 23,7 % 23,9 %   **24,0 %** Emmanuel Macron

21,7 % 21,9 % 21,7 %   **21,3 %** Marine Le Pen

19,5 % 19,7 % 20,0 %   **20,0 %** François Fillon
19,5 % 19,2 % 19,2 %   **19,6 %** Jean-Luc Mélenchon

6,2 % 6,2 % 6,3 %   **6,4 %** Benoît Hamon

5 % 4,9 % 4,8 %   **4,7 %** Nicolas Du-pont-Aignan

1,5 % 1,4 % 1,2 %   **1,2 %** Jean Lassalle
1,2 % 1,2 % 1,1%   **1,1%** Philippe Poutou
0,8 % 0,9 % 0,9 %   **0,9 %** François Asselineau
0,7 % 0,7 % 0,7 %   **0,6 %** Nathalie Arthaud
0,2 % 0,2 % 0,2 %   **0,2 %** Jacques Cheminade

7-12 février	1-5 mars	6-7 mars	14-15 mars	25-27 mars	1 mars - 2 avri	7-9 avril	12-13 avril	16-17 avril	19-20 avril
Cevipof / Le Monde	FJJ/ Cevipof / Le Monde		Cevipof / Le Monde	France Télévisions / Radio France	FJJ / Cevipof / Le Monde	France Télévisions / Radio France	Le Monde	Cevipof / Le Monde	France Télévisions / Radio France

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It is unfortunate that in the end the belief was spread that a new "miracle" method would resolve the potential difficulties in measuring the people's vote. Unfortunately, the thirst for "magic" methods is so strong at times of uncertainty and disruption that the exercise of care, modesty and validation is often forgotten. We do not pretend here of course that polls are always right, and there have indeed been problems widely discussed in 2016, but we do maintain that the method is based on solid theoretical ground. Yes, sometimes it is not implemented with enough care or precision. But it would be foolish to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Here are a few myths that we absolutely need to debunk.

First, market research firms and pollsters use a variety of methods to provide clients with reliable and accurate information. At Ipsos we are also using social media, big data and machine learning, and these techniques have actually become mainstream in some parts of our activities. But we use a variety of techniques precisely because there is not one unique method to answer all marketing and opinion research questions. The business problem to resolve is what drives the choice of the method, and the danger is to let people believe that

one given method can answer some problems when it can't. Hence our interest in and passion for Behavioural Economics, Neurosciences, Machine Learning, Big Data and social media. The art is to combine these approaches with surveys in a way which is effective; we do not try to force a certain solution if we believe it is not adequate and ready. We do not close the door of course to the potential benefits that could be brought by Computational Social Intelligence.[1] While this new emerging discipline can be promising, based on the fact that individuals now generate numeric traces of virtually anything we do, there are still numerous difficulties such as legal, technical and ethical barriers as well as privacy concerns. We can

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expect development of Computational Social Science but there is a long way to go. What is misleading in the claim that social media and Big Data can predict elections is actually the very limited amount of reliable sources available; it should currently be called "small data" in the context of what Social Intelligence could really be one day. Social media alone used the way they are now, often with simplistic metrics, are insufficient – and can generate biased information.

There is also the temptation to say that as in some elections the outcome was predicted right by social media methods, this is a proof of validity. This is where the claims are again misleading. The real validation is not to have been right once, but to have enough cases where you can observe the validity of your method. Polls have accumulated a vast number of observations and their reliability has been confirmed by numerous elections all around the world, even if of course they are not 100% accurate all the time. It may be interesting to refer as an example to an article from Kennedy et al. published in the review "Science" in February 2017 about "Improving election prediction internationally".[2]

This research work was supported in part by the US Intelligence Advanced Research Project Activity (IARPA) and is both totally independent from any polling firm and provides a thorough analysis of the benefits of analysing polls at an international level.

As such, some of the findings of this research resonate well with the way Ipsos is organised as a global polling organisation: we are also building databases about elections internationally for research purposes and sharing knowledge across the world. From our perspective, using a database of 450 elections around the world we have created an Ipsos "base model" that lets us compute probabilities of different parties' success in elections, taking into account the cases where the incumbent runs (or not) and the level of support for the governments.[3]

Using a variety of modelling methods, Kennedy et al. show that, with the incorporation of either economic data (such as changes in GDP, or inflation), or polling data, the probability of predicting the right outcome can be as high as 90% and that polling data were indeed *"powerfully predictive"*. They conclude that, even if polls or economic factors will never be perfect predictors of election outcomes, they can provide a generally accurate representation of the likely result: *"We predict that reports of the death of quantitative electoral forecasts are greatly exaggerated."*

Lessons learned and actions taken

We have shown above the value of polls, but it remains true that while opinion surveys in general and electoral polls in particular are, and remain, based on very sound scientific grounds, one should not be complacent and recognise that lessons had to be taken from 2016 problems. When errors happen they are not related to fundamental flaws in the theory behind the method but to practical imperfections in the way the surveys have been designed, executed and analysed. The main reasons why polls may be inaccurate relate to their very specific execution combined with some degree of miscommunication about them by the media.

All in all, the potential sources of errors in polls are well known and have been subject to considerable academic scrutiny and numerous publications. By and large they tend to relate to a handful of key issues such as sampling, as a fully representative spread of different types of voters (and non-voters) need to be interviewed, the potential impact of non-response rates, the design of questionnaires, the data collection tools used (telephone, online or mobile for instance), and lastly the best way to analyse, weight and filter the results. For example, polling

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organisations weight the respondents once the survey is completed to compensate for some possible gaps with prior known information such as the results of past elections or match the level of education in the sample with that of the population at large. While this is a very short list of the many methodological caveats, it should enable readers outside the industry to have a pretty good idea of where the main problems may lie.

Electoral polls face further difficulties in execution as the challenge is to derive, from a survey, what people will *actually do* a few days later in an often volatile situation, when the time finally comes to cast their ballots. While people may declare that they will vote and state the certainty of their choice, we know that these statements should not be taken at face value and empirically various models have been developed to predict the turnout of the elections, deriving this from the answers provided by respondents. Data needs to be collected as closely as possible to election day to minimise the risk of missing last minute switches in the opinion. However, freedom to publish polls shortly before an election is restricted in some countries for fear of influencing voters.

After the disappointment of Brexit and the US election we conducted a thorough review and made some key decisions on how we will operate differently.

Without in any way deflecting responsibility towards the media, it is also true that some of the messages delivered by pollsters are often not heard in scenarios when it is "too close to call" or when the results run against "the consensus". In response to these experiences, we have changed how we operate in two ways.

First, we decided that each election needs to be seen as a special case and requires a rethink from A to Z in the survey design and execution. This means (for example) that some categories of voters may require special attention and more sampling, that the likely voters model may need adaptation and that post-survey weighting may require different variables. So, in any specific election, there needs to be a special focus on where are the real "high stakes" are.

Second, as a global organisation we decided to move from a rather localised process to a fully international approach, where for each election we now have an expert outside our local team who acts as an independent challenger at all stages of the process. This peer review process enables a cross-examination of the methods being used locally, and lets us apply our international footprint and expertise, using knowledge accumulated from a database of hundreds of elections around the world. Indeed, if one wants to make an analysis of

electoral polls it is very difficult to just focus on one country, as there is a limited number of observations: for instance, Presidential elections in the US happen only every four years. An international approach gives us a much greater number of observations of polls and election results.

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Conclusions

While electoral polls are not perfect predictors, they remain an excellent method based on sound theory and claiming that one could replace them (for example) by simplistic metrics derived from social media is just a fallacy.

However, it is true that the devil is in the detail of practical implementation and that our industry should not be complacent; it needs to continue to invest in scientific progress and rigorous practice. More broadly, opinion research is an excellent way to prepare well for electoral polls and will continue to offer for the foreseeable future an invaluable way to understand societies in all their complexities and constant evolution.[4]

As pollsters and market researchers, we do not pretend we get everything right and we learn from our mistakes. We certainly keep an open mind towards what we can learn from the latest scientific breakthroughs including in the fields of Psychology, Social Sciences and Data Sciences. To this end, we will continue to work with academic institutions to enhance the scientific knowledge and strength of this industry for the benefit of open debate and neutral analysis of societies, of public opinion and of voting behaviour.

But we also need to resist the dangerous appeal for simplistic methods and overclaims. Leonardo da Vinci said "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication." That is very different from being simplistic…

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[1.] "*Computational Social Science":* Lazer et al. in Science Vol. 323, February 2009

[2] "*Improving election prediction internationally*". Kennedy et al. Science 355, 515-520, 3 February 2017.

[3] "*Forget the debate:* Two simple reasons a Republican will likely win in 2016". Young, C. and Clark, J. Reuters.com, 14 October 2015

[4] "*The Year of Disruptive Elections*". Ipsos presentation to the US Embassy in Paris, October 2016. Available on www.ipsos.com

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