

# OPINION POLLS

A Tour of the Territory

By Henri Wallard | October 2020



**IPSOS  
VIEWS**

**GAME CHANGERS**



# POLLING IN THE SPOTLIGHT

**Political opinion polls come under great scrutiny in the run-up to elections, when tensions are high and as we try to make sense of changing and fragmented political landscapes.**

Depending on how close they are to the outcome, opinions of polls themselves can swing between criticism and praise. After the election of Donald Trump as US President in 2016, *The Economist* published an explainer on “How did the polls get it wrong?”.<sup>1</sup> Then, referring to Emmanuel Macron’s presidential win in 2017, a *New York Times* article asked “After French Vote, a Question: How Were the Polls So Right?”.<sup>2</sup>

## THE “PROBLEM”

Political opinion polls are the public face of the entire research industry and are an important source of information for the media, the public and the decision-makers. So a good understanding of their contribution is necessary. Our view at Ipsos is that polls remain absolutely vital to predicting election outcomes - and this is not only the perspective of polling professionals.

Looking outside the polling industry itself, we can refer to an article by Kennedy et al. published in the journal *Science*: “Improving election prediction internationally”. Their study analysed more than 500 elections and concluded that polls “provide a generally accurate representation of likely election outcomes and help us overcome the many biases associated with human ‘gut feelings’”.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, errors made by single or multiple polling organisations can spark debate about the reliability or validity of methodologies used. So how is it possible for pollsters to get it so wrong? One of the popular but erroneous assumptions is that they could and should have done something differently or better. This leads to the search for new, modern “miracle” methods.

When the sole use of these methods (e.g. social listening) show themselves to be successful in predicting outcomes, this gives further fuel to the questioning of so-called “traditional” methods and the work of established polling organisations.

But, while these “miracle methods” can be right in isolated elections, more often than not they fall wide of the mark.

The promise that the difficulties we face in measuring voting intention can be resolved by a new methodology or tool is, frankly, misleading. It means that – especially in times of uncertainty and disruption – the exercise of care, modesty and validation is often forgotten.

## FINDING THE WAY FORWARD

The task in hand is not to replace polling that still gets it right in the vast majority of cases with an entirely different approach, but to adapt them using extreme rigour in the implementation and incorporate fresh approaches as they are needed.

The discussion that sets pollsters as so-called supporters of “traditional methods” on one side and social media or Big Data analysts as keen promoters of “new methods” on the other side is an unhelpful categorisation and does not reflect the reality. We cannot fall into the trap of being overly reliant on evidence from isolated incidents. Instead we need to think about implementing the right method in each context.

What is important is that the method is based on solid theoretical ground, and that it is implemented with enough care and precision. So, while problems and inaccuracies may occur, we can’t deny the foundations of the polling methods, and it would have been foolish to ‘throw the baby out with the bathwater’.

After the experience of Brexit and the US elections, Ipsos conducted a thorough review of how it does polling and made some key decisions on how we will operate differently in the light of these learnings. In this paper, we reflect on these recent experiences and consider how the practice of opinion polling is evolving in today’s volatile environment.

## SOME RECENT HISTORY: POLLING IN THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR

Widely considered a year of disruptive political changes, 2016 saw the British public vote “Leave” in the EU referendum by a small margin, followed by the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. In both cases, the outcomes were viewed as contrary to what the polls had been predicting.

Methods such as poll aggregation<sup>4</sup> (which made Nate Silver successful in the 2012 US election) did not prove effective four years later and contributed to the general wave of “poll bashing” that then followed.

But, at the beginning of 2017, the accuracy of what the polls had predicted both for the Dutch election and for the Presidential election in France when compared to final results led commentators to switch back to praise of opinion polls. This turnaround was fuelled by several factors. First, the Dutch and the French election (first round) were considered difficult ones for polls because they featured a wide offer of political competitors combined with a truly evolutionary climate of opinion. Second, the stakes were high in terms of the “risk” of giving power to populist candidates.

The arrival of completely new candidates and parties to the political landscape represents a challenge. We saw this in the UK European elections in 2019. Predicting the results of this election was a difficult exercise given the methodological questions posed, brand new parties (one of whom topped the poll), low turnout, and a lot of uncertainty: 32% told us they might change their mind even in the very final days before the poll, much higher than we

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normally see in general elections. All of this was set against a very volatile political backdrop. However, Ipsos’ final poll was very accurate, getting the main story of the night right, with an average error of under one percentage point - the most accurate of all the final polls released by members of the UK British Polling Council. This level of accuracy continued at the subsequent December 2019 General Election.

One of the enduring roles of polls remains to ensure they are telling the story. At the 2019 Canadian federal elections, we showed the public and our clients how our research can not only predict what is going to happen but, more importantly, *why* it was happening.

It is the ability of Ipsos to tell this story of “why” and to provide a deeper understanding of the voter numbers that we can be particularly proud of: this is what sets us apart and adds value to our client work.

### THE CORONAVIRUS EXPERIENCE

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a current and powerful example of how polling can make a real contribution to telling the real story of what is happening on the ground. Opinion polls have built a nuanced understanding of the crisis, charting people’s experiences as the weeks have become months. They have helped governments (and businesses) get closer to how perceptions are changing over time, by population sub-group and between countries. Public health agencies have been able to quantify information gaps and better understand motivations, for example on take-up of the much-anticipated coronavirus vaccines.

In Britain, the UK government has drawn on the principles of good research practice its Covid-19 Home Testing programme which, by September 2020, had provided results based on a representative sample of 594,000 people from across England. This major study provides an accurate picture of how many people have the coronavirus at any one time.<sup>5</sup>

**“Our research can not only predict what is going to happen but, more importantly, *why* it was happening”**

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A close-up photograph of a hand holding a red circular sticker. The sticker has the text "I Voted" written on it in white, bold, serif font. The background is a blurred landscape with mountains and a cloudy sky.

**I  
Voted**

# CHOICES, CHOICES: METHODOLOGY MATTERS

Knowledge, experience and continual learnings are central to polling performance. Opinion surveys in general, and electoral polls in particular, were originally designed on scientific grounds and remain this way. But it is not enough to rest upon and replicate what has already been done. The market research industry must continue to invest in scientific progress and rigorous practice.

## THE POLLSTER'S TOOLKIT

The choice of methods is the key question. Ipsos uses a variety of techniques precisely because there is not one unique method that can sufficiently answer all marketing and opinion research questions. Insights can be gained from Behavioural Economics, Neuroscience, Machine Learning, Big Data, and social media. These techniques have become mainstream practice in many of our activities.

Each election needs to be taken as a special case and requires a rethink from A to Z in both survey design and execution. This could mean that some categories of voters require special attention and more sampling, that the likely voters model needs adaptation, or that post-survey weighting requires different variables. In any specific election, there needs to be a special focus on where are the real “high stakes” are.

Ipsos has moved from a rather localised process to a fully international approach, with the advantage of giving a greater number of observations of polls and election results than is available in a single country. A database of information from 500 elections around the world informs an Ipsos “base model” that allows us to compute probabilities of different parties’ success in elections. For each election, an expert outside the local team acts as an independent challenger or “referee” at all stages of the process. The referee makes sure the latest learnings are applied by the local team and any new lessons are captured and reported back.

Through this process, the cross-examination of methods lets us apply our international footprint and accumulated knowledge and expertise from elections around the world. But this is not to say that one-size-fits all. Quite the contrary, in fact. The Australian system involves compulsory voting with a completely different parliamentary system to the United States, for example.

But, through looking at this topic through a strictly international lens, we build a more rounded understanding of the dynamics involved in what we are trying to do. For example, large, young or urban populations might require different combinations of techniques; turnout may be quite volatile among certain groups, including the so-called “left-behinds”.

Techniques that can work well in some countries – such as polling aggregation – don’t work everywhere. So polling practitioners should draw on all available tools, including social media, in order to come up with the best approach every time.

## THINGS TO WATCH OUT FOR

The potential sources of errors in polls are well-known and have been the subject of considerable expert discussion and academic scrutiny. They tend to relate to a handful of key issues such as:

- **Sampling:** a fully representative spread of different types of voters (and non-voters) need to be interviewed
- The potential impact of **non-response rates**
- **Questionnaire design** including the perils of leading questions or not asking the right ones
- The **data collection tools** used (telephone, online or mobile for instance)
- The best way to **analyse, weight and filter the results.** For example, polling 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.

The 2020 US election provides a specific example of one additional area of complexity that pollsters have to take into account. The contest sees nine states conducting their elections primarily by post, with another 36 allowing voters to request one. It provides an additional component of potential error, widening the window of data collection and requiring pollsters to adapt their models as they calibrate their final estimates. In any country allowing at least some voting by mail, the proportions casting their vote in this way (as well as their demographic and political complexion) may vary considerably. Another reason why the

techniques successfully adopted in one election will still need to be reviewed and potentially adapted next time around.

One central challenge today is to deploy the right elements of the polling methods to model voter turnout. Overall levels of turnout are not always stable between one election and another. For example, the proportion voting at recent Canadian federal elections ranged from 58.8% in 2008 to 68.3% in 2015. In the UK, just 59.4% voted at the 2001 general election, the lowest since 1918. Fifteen years later, 72.2% of the British electorate cast their vote at the 2016 referendum on membership of the European Union.

What's more, we often find that rises and falls in turnout are more pronounced among particular groups. Pollsters often find themselves struggling to identify which segments of the population are going to show up at a given time in circumstances which are often very different to what came before. For example, participation of 18-24 year olds in Canadian federal elections rose 17 points between 2011 and 2015. The 2019 election then saw a four point *decline* in turnout.

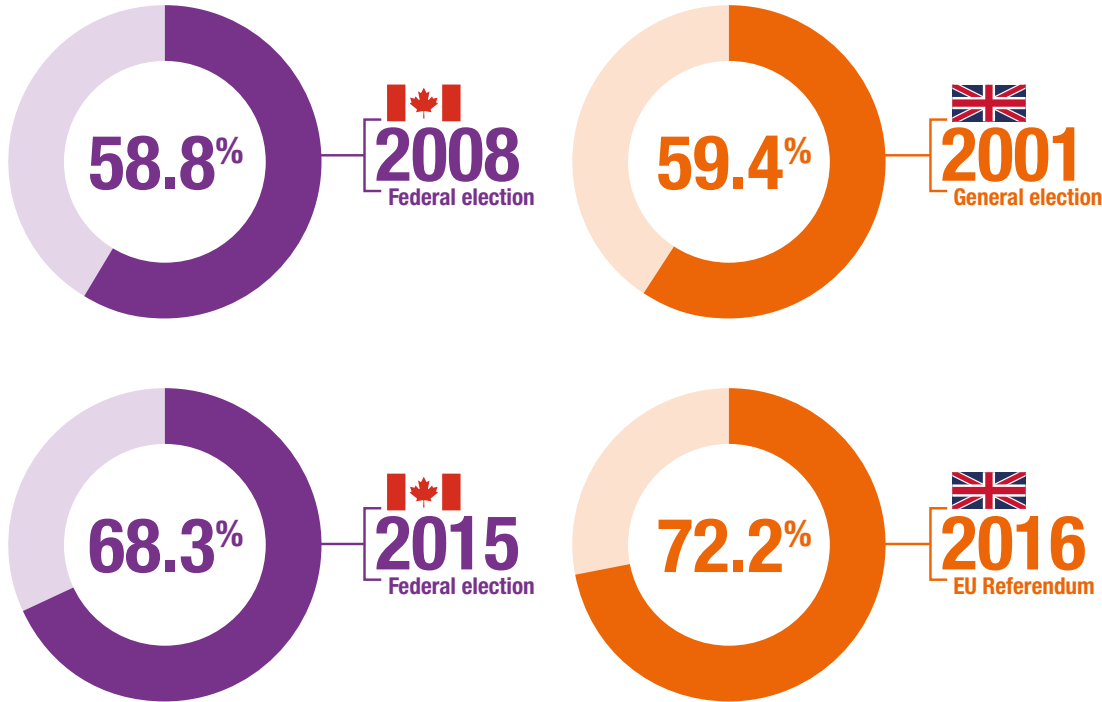
These are some of the methodological caveats that must be continually monitored and adapted on a case-by-case basis to uphold the highest levels of accuracy.

Empirically, various models have been developed to predict the turnout of the elections, derived from answers provided by respondents. Data must be collected as close as possible to election day to minimise the risk of missing last-minute switches in opinion.

Polling is becoming more complicated as vote-switching becomes more common. There is a great need for well-chosen samples and well-designed questions that enable us to understand the attitudes and patterns that lie behind voting intention.

And, as voters become more complicated, multiple data sources and modes are needed to reduce coverage error.

**Figure 1** Voter turnout variations





## “NEW” METHODOLOGIES AND INNOVATIONS

To estimate a national popular vote, you must accurately:

1. Poll the *total population* of eligible voters;
2. Estimate *how many* are going to show up;
3. Estimate *who* is going to show up, i.e. the demographic and political composition of the voting public.

Emerging methods, such as Computational Social Intelligence, can be promising due to the fact that individuals now generate numeric traces of virtually everything they do. This enables us to have a better understanding of the political situation which guides a better design of the polls.

But to pick up on an earlier observation, there is also the temptation to say that outcomes predicted correctly by social media methods provide proof of validity. This is where claims are again misleading. The real validation is not to have been right once, but to have enough cases where the validity of your method can be observed. It's certainly a useful tool, but alone it is not enough and more work and testing has to be done to establish the right approaches.

### INNOVATIONS IN POLLING

- **Combining sources of sampling:** Diversity in sampling sources enables us to improve respondent coverage in specific geographies, for example.
- **Behavioural science approach:** In a given election context, elements such as the uncertainty surrounding a specific election and the emotions felt about the act of voting are incorporated into Ipsos' turnout modelling.
- **New data streams and prediction models:** Social media and media coverage offer an invaluable wealth of information about campaign dynamics and can be used to enrich models. Lastly, final population estimates of vote-share (such as the proportion of individuals voting Democrat or Republican), can be generated using MRP (multilevel regression and poststratification) or Machine Learning techniques.

## CONCLUSION

What causes confusion for many people outside the research industry is the sheer proliferation of polls before an election and the huge variance in the quality of the polling. These polls (some of them simply bogus) can skew forecasts along with public sentiment. The result: pollsters get a bad rap, and people become even less likely to talk to professional pollsters.

But, if you want to make some sense of the state of opinion at any moment in time, you absolutely need polls. The industry certainly needs to be looking at the role that AI, social media listening and alternative approaches can play in pre-election research as it searches for more sophisticated solutions to assess people's voting intentions. There's a big responsibility to do this right.

This responsibility extends to taking a lead in encouraging good quality media reporting, particularly in today's era of "Fake News". However well produced and accurate polling may be, it is impossible to control the way it is presented via both official media outlets and via the millions of online commentators on social media. Pollsters need to ensure they are always open and transparent about their methods, including setting out the limitations in terms of what the poll is *not* able to do.

This paper has been developed very much in this spirit and we are very pleased to be involved in new initiatives, such as the #HighQualityReporting campaign recently launched in the UK, are dedicated to better reporting of opinion polls and election data in the media.<sup>6</sup>



**“The industry certainly needs to be looking at the role that AI, social media listening and alternative approaches can play in pre-election research”**



## REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

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