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The failure of the polls in 1997

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The 1992 election was universally regarded as a disaster for the polls. The 1997 election, in contrast, was widely hailed as a success. The polls had consistently pointed to the possibility of a Labour landslide, while that prospect was widely dismissed by many a pundit and politician. In the event Labour duly secured a record overall majority of 179. No better vindication could possibly be imagined (see for example, Worcester, 1997).

Yet whether the polls really were that successful in 1997 is open to question. No less than three of the six final polls overestimated Labour's vote by more than the conventional sampling error of three per cent. The average error in the final polls' estimate of each party's share was, at 2.0%, the third worst since 1945, and as bad as in 1970, the other occasion apart from 1992 when the polls suffered a major embarrassment. And there was a greater difference between the polls in their final estimate of the outcome than ever before; in a closer election (as in 1970 and 1992) some of the polls could easily have picked the wrong winner, with the results that all would have been damned again (Crewe, 1997; Curtice, 1997b)

Indeed the variation between them is the most important characteristic of the polls in 1997. For it coincided with a greater variation in poll methodology than had existed for some considerable time (Curtice, 1997a). In particular whereas in 1992 all of the polls were based on face-to-face quota samples, by 1997 two companies, Gallup and ICM, had switched to using random or quasi-random telephone samples. And in terms of estimating Labour's lead over the Conservatives, at least, it was these two polls which came closest to the final outcome.

This outcome appears to confirm the suggestion we made in papers written just before the 1997 election that in fact those polls which continued to conduct face-to-face quota samples were continuing to recruit samples which were biased towards Labour, just as they had apparently done in 1992 (Curtice and Sparrow, 1997; Curtice, Sparrow and Turner, 1997). Indeed if the results of the final quota 1997 polls are reported in exactly the same way as they were in 1992, they would have overestimated Labour's lead by nine points, just as serious as the error in the estimates actually reported in 1992 (Curtice, 1997b).

However, this picture is also an oversimplification. For although the two companies, Gallup and ICM, which used random or quasi-random telephone sampling methods were closest in their estimate of the Labour lead, for most of the campaign these two companies' polls were very different from each other. As Table 1 shows, Gallup's poll figures were on average much closer to those of the three companies undertaking quota sampling than to those of ICM. If methodology accounts for the differences between the polls in 1997, the methodology that matters cannot simply be sampling method and mode.

Table 1. Average 1997 Campaign Poll Ratings by Company

| | Con | Lab | Lib | Other | Lead |
|---------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------|-------------|
| | % | % | % | % | % |
| Harris (6) | 30 | 51 | 13 | 6 | 21 |
| Mori (8) | 30 | 51 | 13 | 6 | 21 |
| NOP (6) | 29 | 49 | 15 | 7 | 20 |
| Gallup (15) | 31 | 50 | 13 | 6 | 19 |
| ICM (6) | 33 | 45 | 16 | 6 | 12 |
| Result | 31 | 44 | 17 | 7 | 13 |

All polls undertaken 20th March to 30th April. Excluding second and further waves of panel/recall studies. Figures in brackets indicate total number of surveys undertaken

Source: Curtice, 1997b.

In this paper we present new evidence which illuminates three aspects of the debate about the performance of the polls in 1997. First, we consider the efficacy of some of the techniques that were developed after 1992 to overcome the apparent reluctance of Conservative supporters to say how they would vote. Second, by analysing the figures obtained by the polls for how people voted in 1992, we will argue that the samples obtained by most 1997 election polls contained too many Labour voters. Third, we will argue that the solution to overcoming this pro-Labour bias may not simply lie in the adoption of any particular method of recruiting samples. Special attention must also be paid to the way in which respondents are approached by interviewers.

What happened to the shy Tories?

One of the key conclusions to emerge from the various post-mortems into why the polls went astray in 1992 was that those who refused or would not say how they would vote in the event proved to be more likely to be Conservative voters than those who would declare their intentions (MRS, 1994; Sparrow and Turner, 1995). In any individual survey the number of such people is small. Nevertheless, the exacting standard of measurement that any election poll is required to meet meant that in 1997, most pollsters attempted to make some allowance for their likely behaviour (Curtice, 1997a). Thus, for example, ICM assumed that 60% of those who would not declare how they would vote in fact supported the party they said they voted for at the previous election. This percentage was deduced from the post 1992 ICM recall poll and the 1992 British Election Panel Survey. Other companies used responses to such questions as who would make the best Prime Minister, which party could best run the economy, or 'party identification'.

Does the evidence of the 1997 election suggest that it was sensible to adopt such a procedure? And what might be the best way of estimating the behaviour of the "Don't Knows" and "Won't Says"? In order to answer such questions we need access to panel surveys which interview the same respondents both before polling day and again afterwards. With the BEPS and ICM panels we now have the benefit of hindsight. We can now see what those who did not indicate beforehand what they would do in the polling booth subsequently report actually having done on election day itself. And we can establish how well their behaviour could be predicted from other answers they originally gave.

We have two such panel surveys available to us. First, on polling day ICM recontacted as many as possible of those who had been interviewed for its final prediction poll published in *The Guardian* on the morning of election day. Second, as part of the 1997 British Election Campaign Study as many as possible of 2,277 respondents were interviewed in the fortnight preceding polling day and again after the election. On both the ICM study and the 1997 BECS panel we can examine the reported 1997 votes of all those who, prior to the election, did not indicate how they would vote. And we also have access not only to reported 1992 votes of this group, but also to their party identification, their views on who would make the best Prime Minister and which party could run the economy best.

ICM's survey certainly suggests that those who did not declare a voting intention before polling day but went to the polls did indeed behave rather differently than those who did, therefore efforts to account for their likely behaviour were justified. Only 32% said

they had voted Labour, 34% opted for the Conservatives while 24% backed the Liberal Democrats and 10% other parties. In contrast amongst who did declare what they would do (declarations which in the event were fulfilled on polling day), as many as 46% backed Labour, 30% the Conservatives, 19% the Liberal Democrats and 5% other parties. These figures suggest that ICM were right not to assume that those who would not say what they would do would behave like those who would. The one interesting difference from 1992 is that there appear to have been as many closet Liberal Democrats as shy Conservatives.

This pattern is confirmed by the British Election Campaign Study. Those who did not say beforehand how they would vote, divided their votes almost equally between the three main parties (Conservative 30%; Labour 33%; Liberal Democrat 28%), while 9% backed other parties. In contrast amongst the sample as a whole, 45% backed Labour, 30% the Conservatives, and just under 20% the Liberal Democrats. Here the evidence of closet Liberal Democrats is even stronger.

But how effective were the methods used in 1997 to estimate the behaviour of those not declaring a vote intention? Reported past vote certainly was not a bad guide. In ICM's survey, no less than 55% of those who did not declare a voting intention before polling day but went to the polls in the event voted for the party they said they had supported in 1992 (ICM, 1997). This was only a little lower than the figure of 60% assumed by ICM. In the campaign panel the equivalent figure was even closer to ICM's assumption, viz. 59%.

However, rather less successful was the assumption, gained from the 1992 BEPS and ICM panel data, that the behaviour of the remaining 40% would have no net impact on the outcome. Rather, this group exhibited a marked reluctance to support the Conservatives. As a result in knocking three points off Labour's lead, ICM's estimation procedure mildly overestimated the impact of the behaviour of this group on the outcome by one point. Equally, the British Election Campaign Study found that few people switched to the Conservatives who had not voted for them in 1992, while a large proportion switched to the Liberal Democrats.

So we can see with hindsight that ascribing where possible people who won't say what they will do in the election on the basis of their vote in the previous election worked somewhat less successfully in 1997 than it would have done in 1992. Part of the reason could be the contrast between an election where there was little swing and one where the swing was record-breaking. Where a party suffers a large swing against it, it is likely to be the case that it picks up relatively few votes from those who had not previously supported it. This suggests that it would be worthwhile experimenting with alternative ways of modelling the relationship between past vote and the behaviour of those stating a vote intention. One possibility might be to use the current transition matrix of recall vote and vote intention for those answering the vote intention question and applying it to those who do not. Such a procedure might well be more sensitive to changing political circumstances.

But what of other measures that could be used to estimate the likely behaviour of those who will not or cannot say how they will vote? As table 2 shows, party identification, best party on the economy and best Prime Minister are clearly potential alternatives for estimating their behaviour in that, like past vote, they are reasonably well correlated with eventual behaviour amongst this group. But on almost all the potential alternative proxy measures as well, a higher proportion gave a pro-Conservative answer than actually voted Conservative. In other words once again relatively few of those not giving a Conservative answer to the proxy measure actually supported the Conservatives. It is thus clear that what the industry needs to develop is a modelling procedure which allows for such a possibility. It is not necessarily safe to assume, as

has hitherto commonly been the case, that the relationship between any proxy measure and vote is constant across both time and party.

Table 2 Proxy Measures of Voting Intention

| Proxy Measure | % of 'non declarers' voting in line with proxy measure | | % giving Con answer on proxy measure- % voting Conservative | |
|---------------------|--|------|---|------|
| | ICM | BECS | ICM | BECS |
| 1992 Vote | 55 | 59 | +20 | +15 |
| Best on Economy | 62 | na | +16 | na |
| Best PM | 58 | 54 | -3 | +4 |
| Part Identification | 66 | 64 | +7 | +7 |

Non-Declarers: Respondents who did not declare how they would vote before the election but who reported afterwards having voted.

ICM: ICM Survey. BECS British Election Campaign Study

Our research thus confirms that those who don't know how they will vote or who refuse to answer the question cannot safely be ignored. ICM's procedure was more successful than the table above would indicate because it was assumed that only a proportion of such people would vote in accordance with past votes. Past votes and other proxy measures could potentially be made more successful at predicting the voting behaviour of those who will not declare their intentions. However, more sophisticated methods are required to model behaviour from proxy variables and therefore further research is evidently required.

Past Vote: Faulty Memories or Faulty Samples?

Using reported past vote to help estimate the likely behaviour of those who fail to declare how they will vote is just one of the uses to which this information was put after 1992. More controversially, ICM also began using this information as part of their weighting strategy. After all, we know that 43% of voters backed the Conservatives in 1992, so we might anticipate that if a survey is representative that it should find close to that proportion of its sample reporting having voted that way. Trouble is, previous research has indicated that voters do not always accurately remember how they voted at a previous election (Himmelweit et al, 1977; MRS 1994). In particular, they have a tendency to say they voted previously for the party they support now. As a result if a party's current support is higher than at the previous election, as Labour's was throughout the period from September 1992 to May 1997, we can expect to find a higher proportion of people saying they backed that party at the last election than did so. Such a finding would reflect faulty memory, not faulty sampling, and as a result any attempt to weight a sample back to the actual election result last time would distort rather than improve the poll.

However it was possible during the course of the last parliament to measure the extent to which faulty memories might distort past votes. (Curtice and Sparrow, 1997; Curtice, Sparrow and Turner, 1997). The British Election Panel Study (BEPS) followed a sample of around 2,000 respondents regularly during the last parliament, and in the course of so doing not only asked them in 1992 how they had voted in the election, but did so again in the spring of 1994 and 1995. The results indeed confirmed the existence of faulty memories. But at the same time, they also suggested that this phenomenon could not account for the difference between the distribution of past vote commonly

being found in face-to-face quota polls in the middle of the last parliament and the actual outcome. The quota polls were commonly securing Labour leads of 5% or more in reported 1992 vote whereas BEPS suggested that even after allowing for faulty memory, they should still have been securing Conservative leads of around 2%.

Not least of the reasons for this appeared to be that the impact of faulty memory on the distribution of recalled vote was rather less than might have been anticipated from previous research. That earlier research had found that those who had actually voted Liberal Democrat at the last election were particularly likely to have forgotten having done so, while at the same time those who had switched to the Liberal Democrats were less likely than those switching to other parties to move their memory of their past behaviour in line with their current preference. As a result, a perfectly representative survey was always likely to secure an under-report of previous Liberal Democrat voting. However the data from the 1994 and 1995 waves of BEPS suggested switching to or from the Liberal Democrats had an effect on voters' memory more similar to that of switching to or from the Conservatives or Labour than had previously been the case.

We are now in a position to examine whether this picture continued to be true at the time of the 1997 election, and thus to evaluate whether the recalled 1992 vote being obtained by the polls was in line with what we might have anticipated. Certainly, as Table 3 shows, most of the polls continued to show rather more Labour voters than one would have anticipated given the actual election result. They were also apparently somewhat short of Liberal Democrat voters. The one company of whom, however, this pattern was least true was ICM, the company whose polls proved to be closest to the eventual outcome.

Table 3 Average Achieved Recalled 1992 Vote in Election Campaign Polls

| | Conservative | Lab | LibDem | Other |
|--------|--------------|-----|--------|-------|
| | % | % | % | % |
| Gallup | 40 | 39 | 11 | 3 |
| Harris | 41 | 44 | 12 | 4 |
| ICM | 45 | 38 | 15 | 2 |
| Mori | 42 | 41 | 14 | 4 |
| NOP | 39 | 42 | 19* | |

*LibDems and others combined

Note: Those saying they did not vote in 1992 or failed to indicate how they voted have been excluded.

But how does this compare with the evidence of the British Election Panel Study? That indeed shows once again evidence of false memory. Of those whose report of their 1992 vote was different in 1997 from what it had been five years earlier, 54% were aligning their past behaviour in line with their current preference, a figure virtually identical to those of 53% in 1992 and 55% in 1970 (MRS, 1994). Moreover, there was a rather greater difference in 1997 between Liberal Democrat voters and Conservative or Labour voters in the consistency of their reports than there had been in 1992. As Table 4 shows, only 61% of those who said in 1992 that they had voted Liberal Democrat gave the same response in 1997, compared with 88% of Labour voters and 87% of Conservatives.

Table 4 Consistency of Recall Vote

| Original Reported Vote | Percent correctly recalling past vote | | | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | 1966 vote in 1970 | 1987 vote in 1992 | 1992 vote in 1994 | 1992 vote in 1995 | 1992 vote in 1997 |
| | % | % | % | % | % |
| Conservative | 92 | 93 | 90 | 85 | 87 |
| Labour | 87 | 89 | 89 | 89 | 88 |
| Lib/Alln/LibDem | 45 | 54 | 76 | 73 | 61 |
| Abstain | 45 | 26 | 63 | 59 | 50 |

Equally, we also find that those who switched to the Liberal Democrats are less likely to align their past behaviour in line with their current preference. Only 46% of 1997 Liberal Democrat voters who misremember their 1992 vote claimed in 1997 to have voted Liberal Democrat in 1992. In contrast amongst 1997 Conservative or Labour voters misremembering their 1992 vote, no less than 64% did so by bringing the past into line with the present. At first sight it looks as though, contrary to the claims in our pre-1997 election work, recalled vote is as unreliable an instrument as ever.

This, however, is not the case. For example, as Table 4 shows, although the difference between Liberal Democrat voters and Conservative or Labour voters in the consistency of their recall of their 1992 vote was greater by the time of the 1997 election than it had been during the middle of the last parliament, the difference was still lower than it had been at previous elections. The same is also true of the difference in the parties' supporters' tendency to misremember by aligning their past behaviour in line with their current preference^[1]. Thus while a perfectly representative sample conducted at the time of the 1997 election could well have been expected to find some underestimate of 1992 Liberal Democrat support, that tendency should be less strong than in the past.

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