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**Who's to blame for inaccurate
polls?**

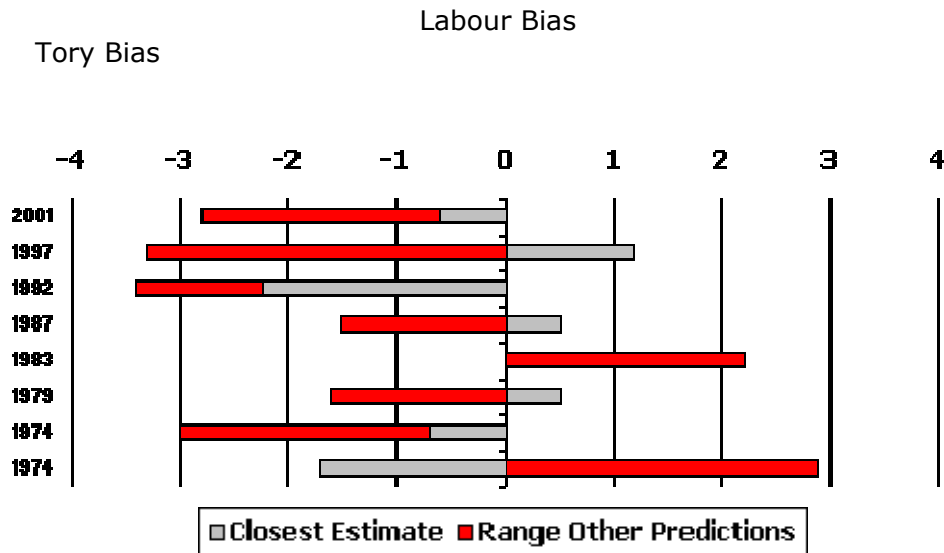
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Published in The Guardian

A round table discussion at the big post election conference at Sussex University today will discuss the record of the opinion polls in the 2001 election. Can we expect Gallup Mori and NOP to repeat their own congratulatory message? On the Friday following election day they said they had “confounded their critics who had poured scorn on them throughout the campaign”. The final campaign polls had been “the most accurate since 1987”.

More objective analysis suggests the polling industry as a whole has little to crow about. The table compares the final polls with the outcome of each of the last eight elections, showing the closest estimate in each case and the range of other poll predictions. The closest in 2001 (ICM/Guardian) was 0.6% adrift, the most inaccurate estimate askew by 2.8% in Labours’ favour. 2001 fits the pattern of the previous two general elections and six out of the last eight in that the polls have mostly overstated Labour’s advantage. If the problem were sampling error we should be able to observe a range of predictions around the correct result, instead we see errors mostly in the same direction indicating not error but bias!

Table 1. Average Errors* In Final Polls 1974 To 2001



*Average error is the average of the differences between the estimated percentage for each party and the actual result

In 2001, criticism of the polls reflected their performance throughout the campaign, and on this basis the polls were even further adrift. The final polls suggested that Labour would win by 15%, but over the course of the whole campaign the polls had suggested on average that Labours advantage was 17%, almost double what they actually achieved. Indeed three put Labour ahead by 25% or more.

Critics could also pull out all the regular monthly polls going back to 1992. Except for a brief spell before Black Wednesday and a couple of months during the petrol crisis most of the national polls have suggested Labour would do better than they have actually achieved in any election held over that period. The only hope for the pollsters is to blame the voters for not acting as they say they intended; the worry must be that their methods are crooked.

One excuse offered was that there was late swing which mainly benefited the Liberal Democrats. Another was that there were substantial numbers of late decisions by

traditional Labour supporters not to turn out. Data from polls conducted on behalf of the Guardian and the BBC allows us to examine whether these factors could have upset the polls. ICM recontacted 1,533 people on election day who had previously been asked how they intended to vote in polls originally conducted between Thursday and Monday preceding polling day. The sum of the differences between what these people said they intended to do before polling day and what they reported having done on election day shows that Labour lost a maximum of 1% over the course of the last few days to late swing and non turnout by its own supporters. This explains only a small fraction of the error in the estimates made by most pollsters.

Are the pollsters methods therefore wrong? Pollsters hope that by getting the demographic profile of their samples to match the whole population, polls will give an accurate picture of voting intentions. Trouble is the days when all the toffs voted Tory and the flat capped working classes supported Labour have long gone. A demographically representative poll is no longer necessarily politically balanced. Added to which, response rates are low and falling. Some groups within the population are difficult to interview and some don't want to reveal their voting intentions. But at present the pollsters simply replace refusers with others who share the same demographic profile, ignoring the possibility that, in doing so, it may be easier to find Labour voters willing to reveal that they will support a party they perceive is popular than get Conservatives to admit supporting a much less fashionable alternative.

You would have thought that most people could remember how they voted in the last election. Yet according to one poll conducted just three weeks after the 2001 election only 26% remembered having voted Conservative (7% too low) while 48% said they had voted Labour (6% too high). On the face of it, such polls simply contain too many Labour voters and too few Tories.

So why not use past voting behaviour to ensure the polls are demographically and politically representative? Some say you can't trust past votes because some people forget how they voted and others align past votes to present intentions, but it's the only candidate in town. Of course pollsters have to make some allowance for faulty recall, but the indications are that if the pollsters were to target recall votes closer to the outcome last time they will also get more accurate predictions.

Over the whole 2001 campaign Gallup, Mori and NOP suggested the Liberal Democrats would obtain 14% of the popular vote while their final polls predicted they would get 17%, 2 points short of the actual score. The LibDems appear to have had a sparkling campaign. But there is another explanation. In the penultimate week of the election Mori suddenly changed its methodology and showed its respondents a list of candidates and the parties fighting the election in the relevant constituency. From an average score of 13% for the LibDems before the change, their final two polls for the Times had them on 16 and 17%. ICM had been prompting throughout with the names of the parties as a standard procedure. The ICM average score for the Liberals over the whole campaign was 17% and 19% on the final Guardian poll, exactly what they achieved. It seems as simple as this; that people need to be reminded of all the alternatives if some are not to select from the most obvious options. This difference in response patterns between prompted and unprompted questions is well known throughout research.

So are the people or the pollsters to blame for the fact that most overstated Labour's advantage in the run-up to the 2001 election? The evidence suggests the polls are themselves mainly to blame, both because of a tendency for Conservatives to be under-represented in poll samples and because unprompted voting questions fail to remind people of the Liberal Democrat alternative. In the debate so far some pollsters have lobbed grenades at fickle voters and/or chastised their critics. Whoops!



Nick Sparrow is managing director of ICM Research. He has been conducting political opinion polls for The Guardian and other media organisations since 1984 and is an industry acknowledged expert on political opinion research. He won the Market Research Society Silver Medal for his work on the development of accurate opinion research, and was pollster for the Conservative Party from 1996 to 2003.

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