

The
Debating
Group



A Parliamentary forum for Media and Marketing Debate

The real problem with polling is the way it is reported

On March 26th, 2024, the Debating Group met at the House of Commons with the debate being chaired by Seema Malhotra, MP.

Proposing the motion, **Simon Atkinson, Chief Knowledge Officer for the Ipsos Group**, noted that this was not a new question. Looking back to 1974, we'd faced similar questions such as: overcooking small percentage point changes as something remarkable; overegging one 'amazing' poll result that may be wrong or an outlier; watching the lead rather than the share of the vote; needing to remember that polls are not predictions but snapshots. But to these 'hardy perennials' Atkinson added new concerns, highlighting examples from just the last three months.

First, there was the 'volunteer respondent', Atkinson questioning whether an 80,000 strong Telegraph reader's poll posted as an 'exclusive survey' was truly representative of Telegraph readers. He also reflected on 'size is everything', citing media emphasis on the British Board of Film Classification surveying 12,000 people as a badge of honour or quality, when sample size was not everything. Then there were reporters not looking at the detail, citing a dramatic Tees Valley poll that journalists excitedly reported as a received truth despite investigation proving that the sampling wasn't well weighted.

Atkinson moved on to over-dramatic headlines such as 'Rural Right-wing Voters Abandon Tories in Huge Shift,' which was based on a sample of just 202 people. Next, he discussed differential analysis, citing two different write-ups of a YouGov MRP poll: the Telegraph's front page suggesting a Tory wipe out was all because of reform contrasted with YouGov's own clarification pointing out that their analysis would be different because only one-third of reform voters would be Tory supporters. Finally, his favourite was the seemingly endemic reporting of findings from a single focus group at a particular point in time, that he acknowledges gives great sound bites to illustrate a particular point, but was not actually a poll and was not worthy of coverage.

However, it wasn't solely a media issue with Atkinson acknowledging that pollsters had a responsibility to educate people about a poll's limitations and dynamics. Similarly, questionnaire designers, whether journalists, academics or pollsters, needed to be very careful about assuming public knowledge. The average person only knows a handful of politicians well at any time – citing fake politician Stuart Lewis polling higher in familiarity among younger people than Richard Trice. Atkinson urged us all to be careful about those questionnaires and what we do with their findings, whether talking, tweeting, writing or reporting about them, because information is more easily disseminated and accepted.

Atkinson hoped that opinion polls still have a lot to bring, especially in an election run up. They should offer independent insights into what people think and feel, providing a vital service by telling the story of what's happening and speaking truth to politicians about public opinions and priorities. But when it comes to how they're reported, it was important to be conscious of misleading cheerleader headlines, the need for boring but important caveats, and the irrelevance of a focus group masquerading as a poll.

Opposing the motion, **Maria Sobolewska FRSA, Professor of Political Science, University of Manchester** argued that in the polling pipeline there were three more serious problems before you arrived at the issue of reporting. The first, and possibly most severe, important and socially consequential was representation; the second was the lack of regulation and enforcement; the third was the complex issue of responsibility.

Starting with an issue close to her heart, Sobolewska argued that the British polling industry is unrepresentative of ethnic minorities which was a huge problem. Despite recent acknowledgements that there are issues with representation, such transparency doesn't solve the problem. According to calculations by Professor Jennings for Sky News in 2021, only about 211 respondents from a standard British poll would be of ethnic minority origin. Considering the dozens of ethnic minorities and diverse religions, she felt this number would not reflect what ethnic minorities think. This has very real and practical consequences for these communities, and Sobolewska argued that with the increasing influence of polling on politics, this lack of voice is one of the most unappreciated forms of ethnic inequality in the UK today.

As an example, Sobolewska explained that we rightly have policies that are based on data and evidence. But one example of where this goes wrong in relation to the impact on ethnic minority voters was the recent changes in how we register to vote and our duty to bring photo ID. Despite widespread protests from ethnic minority representatives that this would impact differentially on different ethnic minority groups, the government did not have the data to consider it at the time and even today does not have the data to know what impact these reforms have had on ethnic minority voters.

With polling how political parties formulate policies and manifestos, lack of representation means they don't know what ethnic minority voters want or their position on key issues. In her research for the electoral commission, Sobolewska discovered that political parties delegated their appeal to local minority community leaders. While this might sound sensible, it originated in a time when Britain had small, geographically concentrated, and homogenous minorities made up predominantly of immigrants lacking local networks and language abilities. This was emphatically not the case for Britain's ethnic minorities today, so the methods could and should be updated. Sobolewska noted that the existing system often remains patriarchal, excluding ethnic minority women and younger people, especially those with alternative lifestyle choices.

Sobolewska added that rogue polls, bad polling practises, and focus groups masquerading as polls were a direct consequence of the data vacuum that exists around ethnic minority polling. If we don't know what ethnic minorities think, she argued, somebody less qualified would enter that space to tell us. Sobolewska cited a 2015 poll claiming that a vast number of ethnic minorities would vote conservative, when under scrutiny, it was shown that the respondents to the online poll were not representative of broader ethnic minority communities. Such misrepresentations could be harmful to public perceptions: the Black British Voice Project conducted a very unrepresentative survey in 2023 that announced black people were less proud to be British. And, in 2015, Ofcom forced newspapers to retract headlines about support for terrorism amongst British Muslim communities because the poll they were based on was confusing and unrepresentative.

These examples reinforced Sobolewska's second point, that in Britain we do not have proper statutory regulation: we do not regulate what a poll is, who can conduct them, and the consequences of publishing misleading findings. Instead, the industry is regulated mostly by voluntary organisations that do excellent work but are not properly resourced. Sobolewska pointed to other countries that regulate properly, for example France that has statutory regulation of polling enforced by a statutory body.

This led to Sobolewska's third point about responsibility, highlighting that the media itself was a huge commissioner of polling, especially around elections. For Sobolewska, responsibility lies with the polling industry more than they admit: first, because they could enforce correct standards with media organisations much more strongly; and second because they can take responsibility for educating a public that they bemoan is not educated enough to understand their pulse. Drawing similarities with the academic community's efforts to better communicate their findings, she suggested positive improvements in polling were possible. In conclusion, Sobolewska opposed the motion on the grounds that there were at least three far more consequential problems with polling earlier than the stage of reporting.

Seconding for the proposal, **Ben Shimshon, CEO, Thinks Insight & Strategy**, stressed the problem of unrepresentative surveys being reported as representative. He made three points: firstly, the relationship between pollsters and the media that reports on those polls had changed; secondly, that change had not been reflected by media outlets in how they treat polling data; thirdly, that no matter how variable the quality of data and interpretation of that data, it was for journalists and editors to apply the tools of their trade and take responsibility for the information they publish or amplify.

Starting with the changed relationship, Shimshon cited a database of voting intention surveys. Between 1945-1950, there were 50 Westminster vote intention surveys, almost all conducted by Gallup. Between 2001-2005 there were 300, conducted by nine different companies, but with 90% by Mori, ICM, YouGov and Populus (usually with a strong link between a pollster and particular outlet, notably ICM and The Guardian, Populus and The Times, YouGov and the Mail or Mail on Sunday).

Between 2010-2015, there were 2,090 separate vote intention polls from 17 different companies, and the relationship between pollsters and media outlets had broken down with many pollsters self-publishing their surveys and many engaging with multiple media outlets. From 2019-to present there had been 1,565 vote intention surveys – a reduced number but by 20 different polling companies, more than two-thirds connected to no specific publisher.

For Shimshon this indicated a changed relationship, from media outlets and pollsters being engaged in something like a client-agency relationship with an associated sense of responsibility, to a relationship more like a corporation's PR department and a media outlet, where the pollsters were trying to land stories and get coverage. This, Shimshon argued, changed the incentives. Online surveys were a relatively small investment for a polling company, but mainstream news coverage was really hard to get. Truly balanced surveys were often boring, but surveys that fuel a story or offer a sensational are easy for pollsters to contrive.

Shimshon felt we should expect better from pollsters, demanding better samples, better questions, and greater transparency. Organisations like the British Polling Council (BPC) and MRS did a good job of creating consequences for the most egregious pollsters and the fear of experts picking a poll apart on social media helped pollsters to self-regulate. Nonetheless, he claimed political polling was a shop window for research agencies, pointing to 20 vote intention surveys over the last four years.

Ultimately, getting coverage still depended to some extent on offering surprising or noteworthy findings – and that wasn't hard to do even within BPC and MRS boundaries.

Despite the incentives for sensational, newsworthy results being stronger than ever, media outlets continued to engage with pollsters as if the relationship was the same as 2001-2005. Despite a proliferation of companies vying for their coverage, media outlets didn't apply the same scepticism and alertness to their agendas that they would to a press release from a corporation seeking coverage. In an ideal world, they wouldn't have to because all pollsters would be truly unbiased, all samples truly representative, and all interpretation beyond reapproach. But the truth was that there are good pollsters and bad ones, and even the great ones sometimes get an outlier result, field a biased question, or over-egg a finding.

Ultimately, media companies were responsible for the content they publish and the data they give credence to. Those who cover surveys needed to have the tools to assess a question for inherent bias, examine a sample and weighting scheme for representation, and set aside their own deep engagement with politics to sniff out where a result seemed incongruous – in the same way they do for almost any other source for any other story. Fortunately, the BPC and the MRS offer training for journalists which, together with the will to expose bad pollsters, would raise the game for everyone.

Seconding for the opposition, **Lexie Kirkconnell-Kawana, CEO, Impress**, raised two points about the proposition's arguments: first that the examples of poor reporting actually highlighted problems with the reliability of the polls or the research itself. She reminded us that the motion was whether reporting was *the* problem for the polling industry. Turning to the argument about a changing relationship, Kirkconnell-Kawana suggested it was the pollster's incentivisation to get coverage that led to poor reporting downstream. With the media under pressure to produce a 24-hour news cycle, she felt they couldn't be responsible for defining whether a poll was valid, noting that there were many upstream problems with polling, including significant issues with inclusivity and diversity and how that's represented in research. These needed to be dealt with before tackling reporting.

Kirkconnell-Kawana acknowledged lapses in the accuracy and transparency of reporting on polls, as well as genuine mistakes and deliberate misreporting to further editorial and commercial interests. But she believed that the market-research industry had to own and determine how its work be communicated, taking leadership and ownership of how the polls were recorded. Journalists and the wider public did not have the level of literacy necessary to interpret the many nuances of polling methodology, data and outputs, so we could not blame them for misattribution and misrepresentation of polls. Kirkconnell-Kawana suggested that the industry had a responsibility to communicate, educate, and engage everyone in the UK so that we can all recognise a bad poll, badly reported on. If the market-research industry wanted to gatekeep their practises and make the news media the only way to hero their work, they must take a more proactive role in holding polling to account when it's misrepresented in the media.

Kirkconnell-Kawana linked this to the opposition's point that if the relationship between pollsters and the media was too close and dependent, bringing a risk of alienation, that may be *the* problem with polling. On the final point about responsibility, Kirkconnell-Kawana acknowledged this was a significant challenge. She noted that where standards were created by an industry you usually get high compliance, but without backstops the self-regulatory systems that underpin industries can fall short, particularly if a regulated news publisher or market research body disregards the regulator's standards. She emphasised the need to explore how law and co-regulatory models could support how polling was communicated, and to consider statutory incentives to ensure that market research and the news industry were better regulated by appropriate back stops when things went wrong. By addressing these shortcomings, Kirkconnell-Kawana felt there would be more robust accountability.

The chair thanked the speakers and opened the debate to contributions from the floor.

Discussion from the Floor

The first Speaker highlighted the importance of knowing who paid for a poll and who wrote the questions.

Simon, Market Research Society, noted that the word 'poll' was specific to politics, not market research, and was used more broadly by the media because it was a concept people would understand.

Anthony Gould, RTR Worldwide, noted that the media was notorious for presenting evidence that aligned with their own(ers) views. The real problem was how polling was undertaken, being subject to inevitable unconscious bias. Because he regularly completed polls, he was more frequently asked to participate in them, creating a bias towards his opinions right or wrong. Citing the inaccurate Brexit polling, he felt the problem was with polling not the way it was reported.

The next speaker was persuaded by the arguments on ethnic diversity and changed their view to be against the motion.

The next speaker was also against the motion, feeling a real focus was needed on making sure that we have the right representation beyond gender or race or ethnicity. This could be achieved through certification.

Rob Hogan from Team Search Field Work, reluctantly opposed the motion. The key issue was the way polls were conducted, and the data collection methodologies used, which ultimately boiled down to the funding of those polls. Reaching minority ethnics, young people, and vulnerable audiences was possible, but difficult and too expensive for most research projects.

The next speaker from the London School of Economics, agreed there was a problem with reporting but felt it was not the main problem asserting that the research industry was in crisis. He contrasted previously having a randomly selected 20,000 strong panel of enthusiastic and engaged respondents with today's challenge of getting anyone to engage with a survey

Jonathan Fingerhut - Strategic Marketing for Schools addressed the elephant in the room that the polls exist for the media to turn them into stories: polls don't create the stories, the media do.

Adam Phillips, the Market Research Society, explained that after the 1992 polls consistently mis-predicted the election result, an investigation prompted the BBC to provide media training and advise the MRS on improving the reporting of the polls. It also shamed newspaper publishers, making it easier for polling companies to do good polls. Even so, newspapers would argue their sensationalistic polls were scientifically valid. Tighter press regulations were needed.

Neil Mortensen from ITV, felt it was a close debate. Bad polls could be reported honestly, and good polls reported badly. Journalists didn't have time to question the numbers as much as they might like.

Jane Bain, a retired market researcher, supported the motion being persuaded by the arguments about sampling. These needed to improve, but there would always be errors in sampling. Whatever results you gave a client, you couldn't control how they would interpret your results and actually report them.

The next speaker was in favour of the motion because he felt researchers must take responsibility for how their research was used. They should retain and assert control over the use of their research. It was important to strive to get a representative survey that captures the nuances of a diverse population, especially with policy decision making polls. It was crucial to ask the right questions in the right way to get the most meaningful response.

Mark from TCS Interactive, had shifted to support the motion because the reporting of polls was ultimately determined by who paid for the poll. The pollsters were simply facilitators, the issue clearly lay with the reporting of polls that were designed to grab headlines.

The chair thanked the speakers from the floor before calling for final contributions from the lead opposer and then the proposer.

Summing Up

For the opposition, **Maria Sobolewska**, agreed there were serious issues with reporting for which the media was responsible. However, the motion was '*the problem with polling*' which she argued lay with three bigger upstream problems. The ethnicity gap in data and polling couldn't be dismissed simply as difficult sampling: ethnic minorities make up one-fifth of our population, about half being British born. This was not an inconsequential number that could be omitted from samplings because they were difficult or expensive to reach. Without them, bad faith polls would fill the data vacuum. Further, she believed there was a market for this data, with investment being financially rewarding for pollsters giving access to sampling of ethnic minority Britain for commercial use.

Another real problem was reliance on a soft form of self-regulation. Introducing a statutory backstop, such as a co-regulation model, was needed. And finally, Sobolewska considered the issue of responsibility. If, as the proposition had argued, a pollster no longer relied on a single media outlet for funding, then pollsters could reject egregious media and insist on in-depth writeups for their polls, especially political polls where she proposed they be supplied with a carefully written preliminary analysis for media use. However, for Sobolewska the real problem was the lack of representation, which had been reinforced by persuasive contributions from the floor. This extended beyond ethnicity and should consider the way people were reached, with online polls being unrepresentative. Sobolewska concluded by saying that being recognised as representative was very good business for pollsters.

For the proposition, **Simon Atkinson** reiterated that the debate was about the problem with *the polls* - national measurements of what was happening in the country. He stressed that our polling industry was good and had responded well to the mispredictions of 1992 and 2015. Regarding representation, he noted that 211/1000 was one-fifth, the correct average of ethnic minority backgrounds for a poll. While never perfect, good polls would have this good representation of the country, but bad reporting would take it to extremes. He added that the Brexit polling wasn't a disaster as represented: 17 of 31 polls put Brexit ahead, but it was bad reporting that suggested the outcome would be different.

Atkinson stressed there was already good transparency and regulation in the polling industry: questions were published online, and regulation provided by the MRS who ensured good standards were followed. He stressed that the examples of bad reporting he had given were all based on well-executed polls that had been conducted responsibly: YouGov's correction to the Daily Telegraph's coverage showed their willingness to take criticism and take action. For Atkinson, the pollsters acknowledged that they're not perfect, but the real problem with polls was the way they were reported.

Result

After a count, the motion was narrowly carried by 30 votes for, to 28 against.

Next Debate: The next debate will take place at the House of Commons on the 21st May 2024 and will be sponsored by the Data & Marketing Association (DMA).

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