

Opinion Polling

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Many a wintry blast

Pitfalls of prediction and why this particular art may never become a science.

Why do people want to know what the future holds before it happens?

In the first place of course, there is a lot of money in it, betting and investing only on certainties, for example, is a sure-fire path to riches. More importantly perhaps, if you knew a bullet was coming your way you would be better able to deflect it, dodge it, or leave town and avoid it altogether. Over the past 100 years, or so, this underlying wisdom has been developed and refined for political and marketing purposes under the name of opinion polling, with a great deal of success. Fortunes have been made by correctly predicting what people are going to do, and the prediction business has multiplied to the point where today there are thousands of polling companies beavering away night and day all over the known world trying to work out what people think and will do next. The field they cover is vast – everything from who you will vote for, down to your next choice of paint stripper or alcoholic beverage.

Lately, however, the political wing of this busy industry has met with several spectacular failures, and important people are asking why. In Britain the question has gone all the way to the House of Lords, which immediately set up a Commission of Inquiry to investigate. Surely an excellent subject for a latter-day Gilbert and Sullivan operetta?

The science (if it may be so called) of predicting outcomes from opinion polling is founded on the idea that a sample can represent the whole; if you know what ten people think, you can more or less say, for more or less certain, what 100 like-minded people think, and so on. When someone like George Gallup first proposed this idea in the 1930s, and then quickly proved his point, polling as a way of commercial and political fortune telling became a sensation. It soon developed into a handy little torch to reach for if you were unsure of your next political or commercial move.

Gallup polling is nearly a hundred years old now, and as it closes in on its first century it is such an established part of our lives that scarcely a day goes by without the news media telling us what people's opinions are, and what their intentions mean for everyone's future. It has become an obsession. Politicians and producers of consumer goods have got used to moulding their policies and plans to accord with what people think, and thus, presumably, want from them.

And so, it was no great surprise that when polling began posting bum predictions it was like the sky falling in for Chicken Licken. The four recent catastrophes of note included a US Presidential Election, two UK General Elections, and a UK referendum on membership of the European Union.

You would need a long memory to recall any previous failure of such magnitude. Back in 1936, the highly respected Literary Digest polled almost a million readers and was confidently able to predict that Alf Landon would beat Franklin Roosevelt 57% - 43% in the coming presidential election. Roosevelt won 62% - 37%. Then in the 1948 presidential race several major polling organisations, including Mr. Gallup's own outfit, forecast a landslide victory for Thomas Dewey. Anyone remember that name/ Of course not, he was whipped into oblivion by Harry Truman.

The industry itself is worried and looking for answers. They have come up with an interesting admission, mysteriously dubbed polling's dirty little secret. The 'secret' is why it is getting harder to find people willing to be polled. In the past, a session with a pollster could be quick and easy, sometimes taking only seconds to answer only one question. Now, in an attempt to make sure that whoever is being asked is truly a representative sample, you may have to answer more questions

about yourself than about the subject of the survey. But 'dirty'? That's a hard one to fathom. Unless you accept the additional secret that sometimes polls and poll results are 'spun' or even deliberately falsified, which can and does happen because the rewards are huge. Here, the 'sheep factor' is partly to blame – the tendency to want to follow the flock. If you can fool them into believing that all the others are voting for Gertrude, then they will too.

The real villain in the story, however, is a little chap called Margin of Error.

While it is a fact that a part can be a mirror image of the whole, there are lots of ifs, buts and maybe's. The more complex the whole, the more complex must be a representative sample. In current political polls today the margin of error is usually quoted as plus or minus 3%, which means 19 times out of 20, the figures predicted will be within 3% of the answer you'd get if you had been able to interview the entire population involved. But everyone knows it's much bigger than that when you factor in the difficulty of getting respondents. Calculations assume that the sample is random, that every member of the 'whole' involved would have had an equal chance of being selected to be questioned.

There is another secret though, and this one no one wants to talk about. It is the increasingly pervasive untraceable error of deliberate fudging. Confronted by political questioning, many people simply make up their answers as they go along. Some even deliberately say the opposite of what they think and plan. How big a factor this is no one can yet say, but it is there, and it hangs over all predictions based on polling.

As Leo Burnett, an advertising guru of the Madison Avenue era told his clients, you can find out many things about people, except what they want or what they are going to do.

"The public does not know what it wants. There is no sure way of finding out until the idea is exposed under normal conditions. If people could tell you in advance what they want, there would never have been a wheel, a lever, much less an automobile, an airplane or a TV set."

Or Horace: "Do not ask, for you cannot know, what the future, what tomorrow will bring. Full many a wintry blast may yet await you, or this could be your last"

South African sportsman. At that event in San Jose I felt even prouder to celebrate a very special and little known South African innovator and entrepreneur. Another gem for your trivia collection!