The Politics of Polling: an update

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Evidence is published online at https://committees.parliament.uk/work/702/political-polling-followup/publications/ and available for inspection at the Parliamentary Archives (020 7219 3074).

Q in footnotes refers to a question in oral evidence

The Politics of Polling: an update

Introduction

1. This report is the second using the new procedure which allows the Liaison Committee to be joined by members of a former special inquiry committee to hear oral evidence to follow up the implementation of that committee's recommendations. In this report we examine what progress has been made since the Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media reported in April 2018: *The politics of polling.*[1]

2. When that Select Committee was set up in 2017, included in its remit was "the influence of social and digital media on political debate". At an early stage in its inquiry, the Committee decided that this was too broad a topic to cover in the tine available, and the inquiry therefore concentrated on polling methods and accuracy and the regulation of political opinion polling. Digital media was made the subject of a further inquiry by a Select Committee chaired by Lord Puttnam. Their report "*Digital Technology and the Resurrection of Trust*" was published on 29 June 2020.[2]

3. The Chair of the Political Polling Select Committee, Lord Lipsey, suggested that it would be timely to follow up the recommendations of that Committee, not least because the general election in 2019 had given polling companies a further opportunity to show whether they had taken on board the lessons of the earlier elections in 2015 and 2017, and the Brexit referendum in 2016. At a meeting on 26 February 2020 the Liaison Committee accepted this. Evidence sessions arranged for earlier in the year had to be postponed, but they eventually took place on 28 October 2020, when four members of the Select Committee joined the Liaison Committee for two evidence sessions.[3] These sessions therefore took place just before another important test of polling: the American presidential election, when, as discussed below, national polling proved seriously inaccurate.

4. Apart from a statutory prohibition against publishing the results of polls during voting, there is no formal regulation of political polling. As a result, and unusually, none of the most important recommendations of the Committee were addressed to the Government. We did not therefore invite Ministers to give evidence. The most important recommendations were addressed to the British Polling Council (BPC), and we heard evidence from their President, Professor Sir John Curtice, Professor of Politics at the University of Strathclyde, together with Jane Frost CBE, the CEO of the Market Research Society (MRS). At our first evidence session, looking at developments on the political polling front in the two and a half years since the Committee's report, we heard evidence from Professor Stephen Fisher, Associate Professor in Political Sociology at Oxford University and a Fellow of Trinity College Oxford, and Professor Patrick Sturgis, Professor of Quantitative Social Science at the Department of Methodology, LSE.[4] We are most grateful to all four witnesses.

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1   Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, *The Politics of Polling* (Report of Session 2017–19, HL Paper 106)
2   Select Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies, *Digital Technology and the Resurrection of Trust* (Report of Session 2019–21, HL Paper 77)
3   The members are listed in Appendix 1, and the witnesses in Appendix 2.
4   Professor Sturgis had been specialist adviser to the Select Committee for its inquiry.

The quality of polls in the United Kingdom

5.   The Select Committee's inquiry began shortly after the 2017 general election. The Committee were therefore able to consider the accuracy of the polls in that election. On average they underestimated the Labour vote by 5.2 points, which was no improvement on the previous election in 2015, when the polls underestimated the Conservative vote by 4.2 points and overestimated the Labour vote by 2.4 points. The polls had also been inaccurate in forecasting the result of the 2016 Brexit referendum.

6.   The 2019 general election, when the forecast was the most accurate since 2005, was therefore a welcome improvement. We were accordingly able to ask our witnesses why, unlike the earlier elections, the polls had forecast the result of the 2019 election with such accuracy. Professor Fisher explained: "On the day after the election, quite a lot of people were surprised by the comfortable majority that the Conservatives got. That should not have been a terrible surprise to people. The vote share was well within the margins of error, and that kind of result was easily anticipatable from simple uniform swing projections from the average of the polls."[5]

7.   We asked the witnesses for their views on the causes of fluctuating accuracy. They agreed that, while in earlier years there has been a correlation between class and party allegiance, education and age are now more significant. Professor Fisher told us:

> "To the questions about class and education, yes, class has become very weak, particularly as pollsters measure it, through social grade. It was already very weak by 2015. I would still say it is good to weight by social grade, if only to ensure that, if something changes with respect to social grade, you still have some balance there. Equally, you still want the views of people of different social grades fairly and proportionately represented in your opinion poll, not least because there are lots of other opinion questions; it is not all about vote intention. You are quite right that education is an extremely powerful predictor, along with age, which pollsters should be using to weight variables these days."[6]

8.   Professor Curtice told us that another main cause of this change was the Brexit referendum. "If you knew how people voted in the 2016 EU referendum, which of course is correlated with education and age, you had a pretty high chance of forecasting accurately what people were going to vote for [in 2019]. In fact, our politics at the moment is more heavily structured by a couple of demographics, age and education, and by one political issue, Brexit, than it has been for much of the last 20 or 25 years."[7]

9.   Jane Frost stressed the danger of assuming that political polling is the only kind of polling, or even the main kind: "… vast amounts of money in this country are spent on wider research of both public and commercial kinds. All those feed into the knowledge of the big pollsters that are also doing research."[8]

10. We asked about "shy" voters who were reluctant to admit to pollsters which way they intended to vote; it had been suggested that some people would

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5   Q 3 (Professor Fisher)
6   Q 2 (Professor Fisher)
7   Q 10 (Professor Curtice)
8   Q 11 (Jane Frost)

not admit that they intended to vote for President Trump. Professor Sturgis' view was:

> "… the attention that the shy phenomenon gets vastly outweighs its actual contribution to polling errors. For some reason, it is a very appealing explanation to people. The actual empirical evidence for it in any context is very light. Particularly now the vast majority of polls are completed by people on a webpage and there is no other human involved, it is not at all obvious why you would agree to do a survey about who you are going to vote for in an election and then lie to a webpage."[9]

11.   However the crucial words in this are: "why you would agree." There remains a question which is often confused with that about "shy" voters: are voters supporting one party more reluctant to participate in polls than those of another party? The Select Committee drew attention to low response rates in its report.[10] The 2020 inaccuracy of the polls in the US Presidential elections has been widely attributed to this phenomenon.[11]

Functions of the British Polling Council

12.   The British Polling Council describes itself as "an association of polling organisations that publish polls".[12] Membership of the BPC is voluntary and "open to organisations that conduct published opinion polls using sampling methods and/or weighting procedures likely, in the view of the BPC, to provide an adequate distribution of the opinions of all people in designated groups (such as all adults, or all voters etc)."[13] There are currently 23 members, including most of the major polling companies in the UK.

13.   In order to improve best practice within the polling industry the Committee recommended an expanded oversight role for the BPC on a number of fronts, of which training of journalists was only one. The Committee recommended that the functions of the BPC be expanded to include:

- issuing guidance on best practice for the methodologies used in polling;

- providing an advisory service for reviewing poll design, a service intended to give companies the assurance that their questions and survey design had been evaluated independently, which could provide a degree of cover when dealing with sensitive or controversial issues;

- ensuring that its members declare not just the client commissioning the poll, but the full details of all sources of funding for polling (excluding actual costs);

- conducting a post-election review of the conduct of the polling industry after every general election and referendum, and publishing its findings;

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9   Q 8 (Professor Sturgis)

10   Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, *The Politics of Polling* (Report of Session 2017–19, HL Paper 106) paras 56–57

11   See for example 'Polling error redux', *The Economist* (7 November 2020) available at: https://www.economist.com/united-states/2020/11/05/polls-and-our-forecast-model-overestimated-support-for-joe-biden, p 40 [accessed 24 November 2020].

12   British Polling Council, 'About the BPC': http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/ [accessed 25 November 2020]

13   British Polling Council, 'Objects and rules', rule 3.1.1: http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/objects-and-rules/ [accessed 25 November 2020]

- co-ordinating a programme of training opportunities for journalists on how to read, interpret and report on polling data;

- developing its guidance for journalists on best practice for the reporting of political polls;

- providing specific advice to the media on how to report on particular polls which could be made public in certain cases;

- proactively reviewing selected samples of media coverage of polls on an annual basis, in order to monitor standards of media reporting, which should include analysis of print media, broadcaster coverage and digital media, and analysis of polls in general, not just those conducted by its members;

- continuing to run an effective complaints procedure, with speedy investigations of complaints.[14]

14. In his letter of 30 March 2020[15] Professor Curtice thought most of these changes would result in an unjustified expansion of the role of the BPC. In his view it should not become an advice centre, because membership did not confer a seal of approval, and there was often honest and reasonable disagreement about what methodological approaches were best. He did not agree that the BPC should require its members to declare the full details of all sources of funding for its polls, and commented: "This recommendation seems to have arisen out of an unsubstantiated and unspecific claim from one witness … the answer to the question "who funded this poll?" is often the polling company itself using its own resources (including, of course, profits made from private polls)."[16]

15. However, Professor Curtice's letter concluded:

"All of this said, we have decided that the BPC should become a more active and actively managed body, albeit within the terms of its existing remit. During the last year, for example, it has advised its members on the implications of the Financial Conduct Authority guidance on polls and market abuse, and issued advice on the reporting of the responses to polls after excluding 'Don't Knows'. It has also revised its transparency regulations to take account of the increased use of modelling, most notably multi-level regression and post-stratification. Meanwhile, rather than, as hitherto, simply responding to relevant business as it arises, the officers of the council are now meeting on a regular basis to review and progress its business."[17]

16. When Professor Curtice gave us oral evidence, we put to him again the suggestion that the BPC should broaden its remit. We think his reply deserves to be quoted at length:

"As I understand it, a lot of the Committee's concern was to do with the reporting of opinion polls. There are a couple of reasons why the BPC is

14   Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, *The Politics of Polling* (Report of Session 2017–19, HL Paper 106) paras 56–57

15   Letter from the President of the British Polling Council to the Senior Deputy Speaker on the Select Committee on Political Polling, 30 March 2020: https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/608/documents/2553/default/

16   *Ibid.*

17   *Ibid.*

not equipped to deal with getting involved in challenging the reporting of polls that heavily. First, at the end of the day, we are not professional journalists. Although I have personally dabbled in journalism, none of us in the polling industry has training in journalism. We do not necessarily have particular expertise in that area. There is an obvious question of the extent to which we therefore have standing.

Secondly, and this is true more broadly, the BPC is a small organisation that punches well above its weight in terms of its influence. We basically do that by providing moral leadership to the industry. We are in a slightly different position from the MRS here … …

In the light of the Committee's report, et cetera, we try on our website to make it clear to people what selections of British civil society are responsible for various aspects of the reporting of opinion polls. If you think a company has not been honest or transparent about what it has done, and has not published what it should have about what it has done, you come to us. If you think the company has been unethical and unprofessional as a polling organisation in conducting a poll, you go to the MRS. The MRS has ethics procedures. If you think the BBC has misreported an opinion poll, the first port of call is to go to the BBC, which then goes to Ofcom. If it is any other broadcaster, you go to Ofcom. If it is a newspaper, you go to IMPRESS or IPSO.

There are organisations out there that are responsible for the regulation of the media. They are the professional bodies that are responsible for that. Frankly, I do not think the BPC can do it."[18]

17.   The question still arises as to the appropriate organisation to decide that a poll has been misreported. Professor Curtice's reply was: "The organisation that gets closest to that is Full Fact. We have been in correspondence with them recently and we are probably going to do one or two things in light of what they said. Full Fact tries to call out what it thinks is misrepresentation, but that is not just misrepresentation by a newspaper reporter. It might be by a politician. It might even be by the Government. Dare I say it, it might even be by members of the House of Lords. It might also be the organisation that I am now representing. We are all potentially subject to Full Fact's rigours."[19]

18.   We have not taken evidence for this report from Full Fact. Nevertheless, they are known for their meticulous research into statements which are economical with the truth, or bear little or no relation to the truth, and we believe they would be well placed to look into reports of polling which appear to be misleading. But they would of course not be under any obligation to do so. For now the Committee's recommendations on the role of the BPC must remain a matter for active debate.

Reporting by the media

19.   The Select Committee devoted a chapter of their report to the media reporting of polls, which between 2015 and 2017 had sometimes been problematic. There was often little attention to margins of error, so that small changes which were not statistically significant were reported as indicating real changes of support. There seemed to have been some improvement

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18   Q 13 (Professor Curtice)
19   *Ibid.*

in reporting between 2015 and 2017, and we asked whether this trend had continued in 2019.

20.   Professor Sturgis said anecdotal evidence suggested there had been an improvement in reporting: "… there was nothing that sticks in my mind as an egregiously bad case of reporting. A lot of journalists who report on polls are more statistically aware these days. They are aware of the problematic practices of the past, and they are wary of being held up as a bad example of reporting. I see evidence of positive moves in that direction."[20]

21.   The Select Committee had explained that at the time of their report (April 2018) there was already a certain amount of guidance to journalists on the reporting of polls, but that this could be improved. We asked what steps had been taken in that direction. Jane Frost replied on behalf of the Market Research Society:

> "We took your Committee's commentary to heart. … This time round, we did two new things. First, we produced a hub on the website with a lot of resource about polling on it. It was one of the most viewed things on our website over the period of the election with 1,600 unique views. That was brilliant. Secondly, we worked hard with the regulator IMPRESS to produce a usable and friendly guide to how to report polls.[21] … Obviously it went online. We had an interview that went online with Professor Curtice as well. We also had a webinar to support it. We had 400 views of Professor Curtice's interview. We had 570 complete downloads of the guidance from the site. IMPRESS itself had 178 downloads from the site. It also proactively sent the guidance out to all its members, so that was a further 160. We had 106 registrations to the webinar."[22]

22.   On 31 January 2020, Lord McFall of Alcluith, Chair of the Liaison Committee, wrote to Professor Curtice asking him what progress the British Polling Council had made in connection with some of the Select Committee's recommendations.[23] One of these recommendations was that the BPC should make some additions to its existing *Journalist's Guide to Opinion Polls* in order to improve media coverage of opinion polls. In his reply of 30 March 2020 Professor Curtice wrote that the BPC had drafted "a shorter guide that can be read in five minutes and is aimed at a journalist who is unfamiliar with polling but who is now faced with the task of writing a poll-based story."[24] This *Quick Guide for Journalists to the Use and Reporting of Opinion Polls* was issued by the BPC on 12 October 2020.[25] The press notice states that the Guide forms part of the British Polling Council's response

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20   Q 3 (Professor Sturgis)

21   Market Research Society and IMPRESS, *Using surveys and polling data in your journalism* (November 2019): https://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/IMPRESS%20MRS%20Guidance%20FINAL1.pdf [accessed 24 November 2020]

22   Q 11 (Jane Frost)

23   Letter to the British Polling Council from the Senior Deputy Speaker on the Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/65/documents/707/default/

24   Letter from the President of the British Polling Council to the Senior Deputy Speaker on the Select Committee on Political Polling, 30 March 2020: https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/608/documents/2553/default/

25   British Polling Council, *A quick guide for Journalists to the Use and Reporting of Opinion Polls* (2020): http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/bpc-guide-for-journalists.pdf [accessed 24 November 2020]

to the recommendations of the Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media.[26]

23.   At the launch of the Guide Professor Curtice said:

"In its report, the House of Lords committee expressed a number of concerns about how the media report polls. Our guide is intended to help address some of these concerns by providing a quick five-minute accessible introduction to polls. It describes both the strengths and the limits of polls, outlines five key questions that should be asked of any poll, and identifies the major potential pitfalls to avoid in writing a poll story. We hope that it will help journalists in newsdesks up and down the country report polls in a way that their audience finds both interesting and informative."[27]

24.   The Guides issued by the MRS and the BPC are both excellent. They are concise enough for even the busiest journalists to find time to read them. If they do so, this should further improve reporting of polling by the media.

25.   The Select Committee also recommended that the BPC co-ordinate training for journalists on how to read, interpret and report on polling data, and we asked Professor Curtice what steps they had taken. He replied:

"The direction in which we are going as part of the suite of accredited courses that the NCTJ [National Council for the Training of Journalists] evaluates is that there should be something on the reporting of opinion polls. We have now also agreed that they should be done in collaboration with the MRS. We have submitted to NCTJ what we thought such a module should cover. They promised to come back to me next week with an indication of their proposal for what it should cover. They have also launched an e-learning site, I think last week. Yes, this is in progress. We are working with them in the hope that they will become the organisation that will effectively say, 'We should provide training'.

It is undoubtedly true that journalism has historically been a profession in which the skill that is valued is the ability to weave words. That is still true, but data journalism is now also a strain within the journalism industry. Some value is now being placed by a number of news organisations on having at least somebody on the staff whose principal ability is to understand statistics, take a narrative out of them, and work with the journalists whose skill is to weave words to come up with something that is both statistically literate and literate in its expression. The impression I have, therefore, is that the profession has moved on to that degree."[28]

26.   We accept that it is not for the BPC to carry out this training itself, and we are grateful for what they and the MRS have done to facilitate training by others.

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26   British Polling Council, *A guide for journalists to the Reporting of Opinion Polls?* (12 October 2020): http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/a-quick-guide-for-journalists-to-the-use-and-reporting-of-opinion-polls/ [accessed 25 October 2020]

27   *Ibid.*

28   Q 12 (Professor Curtice)

The US Presidential Election

27. Given that our evidence session was just six days prior to the US election, we asked our witnesses for their views on whether the US polls were doing better than they were seen to have done in 2016. Unlike our witnesses, we now have the benefit of hindsight.

28. Professor Curtice stressed that, despite the public perception, the US-wide polls had not been wrong in 2016; the Clinton lead, predicted on average by the final national polls as 3%, was in fact 2%, which Professor Curtice said was "as good as you can get". He added: "The difficulty was that the state polling, particularly in Midwest states such as Michigan and Wisconsin, was light and patchy in quality, not least because these states were not thought to be up for grabs … somebody needs to be at least six points ahead in the final state polls before you can be 95% sure that they are going to win that state."[29]

29. Turning to the 2020 election, Professor Curtice said:

    "You can still now see a pathway to Trump. It certainly means winning Pennsylvania. It probably means winning Wisconsin and Minnesota, but it also means winning Florida, Texas, Georgia, Arizona and a whole load of other states, many of which at least have Biden narrowly ahead. In other words, yes, you can see how Trump could still win, but many more cookies have to crumble in the right direction for him than had to do so in 2016 before the pathway works. It only needs one or two of those states not to fall in that direction and Biden should be home and dry."[30]

    Professor Curtice was proved right in this analysis.

30. As in 2016, in 2020 the US national polls consistently underestimated the Trump vote, and did no better than in 2016; the main errors four years ago were limited to just a few states, which happened to be the ones that delivered victory to Trump. This time, although the polls predicted the correct winner, Trump beat the polling predictions both nationally and in most battleground states. Nationally, on 2 November the authoritative organisation FiveThirtyEight predicted a Biden victory by 8.4 percentage points;[31] the final figure was 3.9. The average error of the presidential polls released during the final weeks of the campaign was 5.5 percentage points, approaching double the figure of 3.1 registered in 2016.[32] At state level, the polls predicted the right winner in 48 of the 50 states (the exceptions being Florida and North Carolina); but in most states, including all the vital swing states, the results were very much closer than predicted.[33]

31. We asked our witnesses whether the sophistication of the US polls had changed since 2016, and what we had to learn from them. Professor Fisher replied: "One of the key findings from the American Association for Public Opinion

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29   Q 15 (Professor Curtice)

30   *Ibid.*

31   FiveThirtyEight, 'Latest Polls': https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-general/national/ [accessed 24 November 2020]

32   'Déjà vu all over again', *The Economist* (14 November 2020), available at: https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/11/11/once-again-less-educated-whites-spurned-americas-democratic-nominee [accessed 24 November 2020]

33   FiveThirtyEight, '2020 election forecast': https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2020-election-forecast/ [accessed 24 November 2020]. In Michigan and Wisconsin Biden was forecast to win by over 8 percentage points; he won Michigan by 2.6 points and Wisconsin by 0.7 points.

Research (AAPOR) report was that some state-level polls, particularly Wisconsin, failed [in 2016] because they did not weight by education, which we discussed earlier. That is a very powerful predictor of voting behaviour on both sides of the Atlantic now."[34] Professor Curtice agreed: "… the polls in the US are now factoring education into their weighting and filtering. That is for much the same reason we have already been doing so here, as I explained earlier. That is because education was an important correlate with how people voted in 2016 in exactly the same way as it is an important correlate now here."[35]

32.   In view of the improvements in technique, the American polls' inaccuracy in 2020 was disappointing. We expect that the AAPOR will investigate these failings, as it did after 2016, and we expect the British polling industry to consider in depth the implications of this failure for British polling.

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34   Q 7 (Professor Fisher)
35   Q 15 (Professor Curtice)

APPENDIX 1: LIST OF MEMBERS AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members

Lord Bradley
Lord Davies of Oldham
Baroness Hayter of Kentish Town
Earl Howe
Lord Lang of Monkton
Lord Low of Dalston
Lord Judge
Lord McFall of Alcluith (Chair)
Lord Smith of Hindhead[36]
Lord Tyler
Baroness Walmsley

The following members of the former Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media participated in the evidence sessions:

Lord Hayward
Lord Lipsey (Chair)
Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve
Lord Rennard

Declarations of interest

Lord Bradley
  No relevant interests to declare
Lord Davies of Oldham
  No relevant interests to declare
Baroness Hayter of Kentish Town
  No relevant interests to declare
Lord Hayward
  No relevant interests to declare
Earl Howe
  No relevant interests to declare
Lord Judge
  No relevant interests to declare
Lord Lang of Monkton
  No relevant interests to declare
Lord Lipsey
  No relevant interests to declare
Lord Low of Dalston
  No relevant interests to declare
Lord McFall of Alcluith
  No relevant interests to declare

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36   Lord Smith of Hindhead was also a member the former Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve

I write and publish regularly on the ethics of digital communication. Most of what I publish is unremunerated. Any remuneration amounts to a small honorarium—typically a couple of hundred pounds or a selection of books from a publishing house. I am writing a short book on these themes for Cambridge University Press, and when published it will probably earn me rather more (but not spectacularly more …). It will not be published before the middle of 2021.

Lord Rennard

Receives occasional small payments from polling companies for completing surveys.

Lord Smith of Hindhead

No relevant interests to declare

Lord Tyler

No relevant interests to declare

Baroness Walmsley

No relevant interests to declare

APPENDIX 2: LIST OF WITNESSES

Evidence is published online at https://committees.parliament.uk/work/702/political-polling-followup/publications/ and available for inspection at the Parliamentary Archives (020 7219 3074)

Evidence received by the Committee is listed below in alphabetical order.

Alphabetical list of witnesses

Professor Sir John Curtice, President, British Polling Council	QQ 9–15
Professor Stephen Fisher, Associate Professor in Political Sociology, University of Oxford	QQ 1–8
Jane Frost CBE, CEO, Market Research Society	QQ 9–15
Professor Patrick Sturgis, Professor of Quantitative Social Science, Department of Methodology, London School of Economics	QQ 1–8