



BACKGROUND PAPER ON POLITICAL MARKET RESEARCH AND POLITICAL POLLS

*“Opinion polls require professionalism and openness from the pollsters,
know-how and caution from journalists and political courage from our
policymakers.”*

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Introduction

In the run-up to new elections, a whole series of polls and opinion polls are usually unleashed on the unsuspecting voter. Questions that force themselves upon us are: What is the difference between all these polls? How reliable are they? How should the results be read and interpreted? Are opinion polls equivalent to political research?

This document aims to provide an overview of how opinion polls are used by the media and political parties, how useful they really are, and how voters can make a distinction between reliable and less reliable opinion polls and the associated results.

1.

Political research: a market shared by the academic world and market research agencies

Political analysis has long been the monopoly of the academic world: political scientists, sociologists and even communications scientists engage in studies on

voting behaviour, motivation, the impact of the media coverage, propaganda, etc. Their research is distinguished by sophisticated methods and thorough analyses, but is also often time-consuming, expensive and not always applicable in practice.

In the course of the last three decades, political parties have increasingly planned, defined and implemented their public appearances according to the rules of political marketing. This has led to increased media attention for the political stage, which, in line with the traditional marketing approach, has in turn resulted in the creation of a higher demand for readily applicable insights at affordable prices. Political parties quickly caught up, and, in this way, traditional market research agencies were and still are approached to provide a broad range of research services for political parties, media and social groups (the 'mainstream society'): this ranges from the pre-testing of campaigns, qualitative surveys into the needs and requirements of citizens, analysis of the level of prominence and image of parties and politicians, research into the opinions of the public on politically relevant issues and topics, up to post-electoral research with the aim of identifying shifts in the electorate.

Even the academic world now finds itself drawn more and more towards working with specialised market research agencies, and outsources the more complex field work to them. On the other hand, the fundamental research conducted by universities inspires the specialised market research agencies to refine their research methods and maintain the highest quality standards for data collection.

2.

The public has doubts about the reputation of opinion polls

Most of the political research takes place behind the scenes, within the confidentiality of the relationship between the client and the research company. Most of the results are not publicised. The concept of political market research is therefore all too often confused with the specific subarea that prominently seeks the spotlight, or, in other words, polls that are covered by the media. Whereas public opinion was once driven by more or less sporadic opinion polls that were mainly the specialised domain of reputed research agencies, the voter is now presented with the results of yet another survey on virtually a daily basis. People are asked for their opinion on numerous topics via the Internet and in papers and magazines. Many of the surveys that claim to represent 'the Flemish citizen' would never pass the test of scientific criticism, however. But this is often not the aim of those who initiate them. If their questionnaires yield remarkable or amazing results – which is no rare occurrence when unreliable methods are used – airplay is guaranteed, even in the serious media. This sometimes makes it quite difficult to distinguish between serious and less serious, or even downright manipulative, opinion polls. People are confronted with different messages – which are often contradictory – and are in danger of not seeing the wood for the trees. This does not contribute to the reputation of opinion polls, of course, let alone political research.

3. Banning opinion polls is meaningless

An opinion poll can be very useful and valuable: what a population is thinking and how it expresses its opinion are critical factors in determining how democratic a regime is.

Correctly conducted opinion polls allow the public to make its voice heard without having to be pulled into the voting booth. This provides a unique source of information for policymakers and opposition alike, helping them decide whether or not to amend their strategy, or whether to tighten it. In a regime that makes a mockery of the polling rules, it can be expected that the interests of the people will also be trampled on, because attempts will be made to broadcast wrong conclusions.

By the same reasoning, it could be said that polls can also be useful in the immediate run-up to the elections. Voices are often heard demanding that they should be banned, however, because the publication of poll results could encourage voters to change their opinions. Academic research indicates little support for this assertion. TNS Dimarso's own post-electoral research has indicated that a poll only has a limited impact on the final voting behaviour. Other political means of communication that have an impact, such as appearances in TV debates, are much more important in this context.

Opinion polls are likely to have more impact on the minds of the politicians and their staff, and on the campaigning conducted by the various parties. But this should also not be a reason for banning opinion polls, because there are so many other sources of political influence (political rhetoric, brochures, interviews, propaganda, etc.).

4. An opinion poll is not a crystal ball

The acrimony with which the debate on polls is conducted also often has a lot to do with the exaggerated expectations that people have with respect to these surveys. An opinion poll carried out during the run-up to the elections is not a crystal ball that can predict the outcome of the vote!

Polls are invariably judged by the extent to which they succeed - or fail to succeed - in predicting the election results, although this is explicitly not their intention. Even if we would like to make predictions based on the results of an opinion poll, there are still too many obstacles in our way. Some of the more obvious reasons are the following:

- A large portion of the voters decides late. Post-electoral research indicates that a quarter of the voters makes a decision in the final week before the elections, and that half of those only make up their mind when they are already in the voting booth.
- We often have several elections on the same day in Belgium, and it is

therefore quite likely that a person's political preference will fluctuate based on whether he/she is voting for a federal or regional parliament, or for the European Parliament.

- Most polls look for voting behaviour relating to a specific party, but this is sometimes in conflict with the preference for a particular politician, regardless of the party.

Summarizing, we can conclude that polls can never be election predictions, even though they are often judged on this. A poll is nothing more than a momentary snapshot. A 'correct' prediction is usually nothing more than a coincidence.

5.

It is easy to distinguish reliable polls from poor polls

In the same way as a shoemaker should not sell bread, polling public opinion should be left to the market researcher. For the unsuspecting voter, flooded with a tsunami of polls and surveys, it is often difficult to distinguish between surveys that are conducted in a qualitative manner, and those that provide a false - often sensational - result. It is, however, simply a matter of answering the right questions.

5.1. Which method was used to collect data?

There are several methods to gauge public opinion, each method having its weaknesses and strengths, and 'colouring' the results in its own specific way:

- Face-to-face → Academics are often in favour of this kind of research. It provides good representativeness and ensures a high level of cooperation. The downside of this type of research is that it is extremely time-consuming, tedious and slow – especially if one is aiming at a representative sample of at least 1,000 individuals.
- By telephone → A common way by which market research firms carry out a survey is still by phone. This is often less expensive, can be carried out quickly and provides a good geographical spread. In order to guarantee the representativeness of the sample, such surveys are not only conducted using landlines, but also using (exclusive) mobile phone numbers. The goodwill of the respondent to cooperate, however, is often lower than for other methods.
- Internet → Some agencies make use of the Internet nowadays. This results in additional obstacles that the pollster has to take into account: a quarter of the Belgian population is not online. Because there is no such thing as a complete register of e-mail addresses, only those people who are known by the agency can be addressed. The quality largely stands or fails with the representativeness of this 'panel', and how the respondents are selected from among them.

The main consequence of this is that it becomes impossible to compare different polls with one another. Methodologies may differ, the random sample may be composed differently, and questions that are worded differently usually also

provide different results.

5.2. Who recruited the respondents?

In general, the quality of an opinion poll is highly dependent on the representativeness of the panel and how the respondents are selected. In all cases, the pollster or the research team must remain in charge of the composition of the panel of respondents.

There are, however, plenty of examples in which this is not the case. For example, there are countless polls - either related to the elections or otherwise - circulating on the Internet that people can forward to friends or kindred spirits so that they can also give their opinion. The results generated by this type of poll cannot be taken seriously, however, because they are so easy to manipulate. Anyone who wants to can respond, and it's often exactly those with a very strong opinion who will actually do so. Even more critical for the credibility of such polls, however, is that unknown groups or parties can call on their fans to participate en masse, and in this way generate a totally distorted result. No matter how large the number of respondents of such polls is, this says nothing about the extent to which the respondents are representative.

5.3. What is the size of the random sample?

Smaller, high-quality samples are always more reliable than large samples of a poorer quality, regardless of the size of the population. From both a national and an international perspective, a random sample of 1,000 individuals is required and is sufficient to make statistically reliable statements. When a chef prepares a soup and wants to taste it, he doesn't have to spoon up the entire saucepan in order to be able to assess the taste. If the soup has been stirred into a homogeneous mass, one spoonful may be sufficient. For a soup that is not properly stirred, on the other hand, several attempts may produce different results.

5.4. Is the pollster transparent enough in terms of the methods that are used?

Generally speaking, the following guideline applies: the more transparent a poll is about the way it was conducted, the more reliable it will be. For the research agency, it is important to provide as much background information on the survey as possible: the client, the type of poll, the population polled, the sampling method, the size of the random sample, the data collection method, the exact period during which the data was collected, the exact phrasing of the questions, etc. The more responses there are to all these questions, the more the poll can be controlled, and the greater the chance that the responses are interpreted correctly.

In order to find out who carried out a public poll, and to obtain the associated fact

sheets, information is usually available on the Febelmar website, the Belgian federation of market research agencies (www.febelmar.be). As not all members apply the same level of transparency, it is often also useful to check for this type of information on the website of the research agency that carried out the poll.

6.

Conclusion: would a code of conduct be helpful?

Instead of a ban, it seems to us that the introduction of a code of conduct regarding the implementation, interpretation and publication of opinion polls could be a first step towards remedying the suspicion with which polls are viewed today.

Ideally, such a code of conduct should include the requirement that fact sheets be provided together with the results of surveys that are forwarded to the media. This would allow sensational results to be filtered out in advance, so that they are not given any undeserved attention.

The British BBC has once again played a pioneering role in this, and has developed a set of rules that their journalists should follow when presenting or interpreting research results. The VRT news channel has also developed guidelines for their journalists in this respect.

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