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OPINION POLLS AND ELECTION RESULTS

By RICHARD ROSE

DURING each election campaign the media prominently feature public opinion poll reports about support for the parties. Immediately after the election, critics are ready to declare 'The polls have got it wrong'; the harshest critics add 'again'. It is not considered news (that is, something novel) when the forecasts of the polls are highly accurate. Opinion polling has grown greatly in Britain since the early 1960s. Moreover, the polls can legitimately claim a very high degree of accuracy – as they assess their work. The following article sets out systematically the record of the polls in forecasting general election results since 1945 and concludes that criticisms of the polls result from misunderstandings between pollsters and readers, and are not intrinsic weaknesses of social scientific methods.

> One of the most refreshing things about the last two general elections was the proof they gave that the actual process of voting was necessary.
>
> JAMES D. SPENCE
> *National Opinion Polls, 1974*

ANY judgement about the performance of opinion polls in forecasting general election results must examine two things: what the polls do, and what they are expected to do. During the 1960s, the reports of opinion polls were increasingly accepted as accurate foretokens of election outcomes. Since the upset victory of the Conservatives in June 1970 opinion poll forecasts of election outcomes have increasingly been treated with scepticism. Yet the same organisations and the same techniques have been used for election polls in both periods. The ap-

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This article, written specially for the reader, incorporates materials drawn from three of the author's studies of polling in individual election campaigns: Richard Rose, *The Polls and the 1970 Election* (Glasgow: Occasional Paper no. 7, Survey Research Centre, University of Strathclyde, 1970; 2nd ed., 1975); 'The Polls and Election Forecasting in February 1974' and 'The Polls and Public Opinion in October 1974', in Howard Penniman (ed.) ***Britain at the Polls,*** 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1975) pp. 109–30, 223–39.

parent difficulties of the polls in the 1970s may not reflect technical shortcomings of the polls but rather misunderstandings of their limitations, or a fundamental change in public opinion and the process by which elections are won and lost.

The first section of this paper describes the degree of accuracy that the polls can expect to achieve when estimating voter preferences, and the second reviews what they have achieved. The third section considers what the polls are expected to achieve, and examines three elections where their work has been much criticised – the ballots of June 1970, February 1974 and October 1974. The concluding section considers what polls ought to be valued for between as well as during election campaigns.

I. The Methods

Because opinion polls are creatures of humankind, they are fallible institutions; in this, they are no different from any other organisation, whether a government, a university, a church or a newspaper. The potential sources of error in a report of popular preferences are many, ranging from a respondent or an interviewer wilfully misreporting voting intentions through mechanical errors in feeding data in and out of a computer. Polling organisations do not need critics to tell them to be as accurate as possible when processing information; they know that accuracy is important in maintaining their reputation. They also know that to be as accurate as possible does not mean that they will be as accurate as they would wish. This is because their reports of voter preferences are not based upon interviews with every elector in Britain on election day, but rather, are estimates based upon a sample of the electorate beforehand.

The crux of the difficulty is that opinion polls can only report the *appearance of change*, since findings are only estimates of the state of opinion at the moment. While qualifications are out of place in a newspaper headline, polling organisations normally include a qualification in their textual discussions of findings about how sampling error can affect the accuracy of reported changes. Sampling theory provides statistical formulae to estimate the probability of any given figure of party preferences differing by a given amount from the 'true' figure that would be obtained if the whole electorate were interviewed, rather than just a portion of it. Pollsters and social scientists conventionally regard a finding as significant if there are nineteen chances out of twenty that it is not likely to be the result of sampling fluctuations that must inevitably occur when a part stands for the whole. Such a statement assumes that

there is no other source of error in the figures reported than sampling error.[1]

Unfortunately, the use of polls in election campaigns presents peculiar problems not allowed for in textbook illustrations of sampling theory. The first limitation is that sampling variations can best be estimated with a near infinity of observations. For example, a quality control team in a large factory taking a sample of goods from a production line three times a day will be able to reckon that their data conform to the standard pattern of sampling error nineteen times in twenty, because annually they draw 365 × 3 observations. By contrast, a polling organisation would have to be in business for more than half a century before it could conduct twenty general election surveys. Even then, if it was wrong the first time, it might find this held against it for the next nineteen surveys!

A second difference between ideal sampling conditions and election conditions arises from the fact that sampling error is calculated without regard to the order in which the most accurate and least accurate observations occur. In a series of hundreds of samples by a quality control team, it would make no difference whether the first observation was the most accurate and the second the least accurate, whether the first fifty were high and the next fifty low in relation to the true value, or whether high and low estimates alternated. In an election campaign, by contrast, sequence is of great importance, since the consumers of the polls are sophisticated enough to look at the trend, even if it is not certain whether the trend is apparent or real.

A third difference arises from the fact that readers of polls are much more interested in measuring the distance between the Conservative and Labour parties than they are in the strength of either party. In a two-party system, the error thus made in estimating the vote for one party will tend to have as its reciprocal an equivalent error *in the opposite direction* for the other party. In short, if the two parties were 'truly' divided 51 to 49 per cent, then a 2 per cent sampling error in favour of the first party would turn a 2 per cent lead into a 6 per cent lead; a 2 per cent error in the other direction would reverse the order of the competitors. To speak of the latter as a small error in degree is statistically correct, but politically the error is absolute, for it identifies the winner as the loser and vice versa.

In such circumstances, it would be reasonable to conclude that the *ideal* pre-election poll is *not difficult but merely impossible*. Thus, the question becomes: In less than ideal conditions, what can we expect

[1] For a full introduction to survey techniques, including sampling, see Sir Claus Moser and Graham Kalton, *Survey Methods in Social Investigation*, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann, 1971).

polls to show in the way of short-term changes during an election campaign?

The question can be answered by showing what is the best that can be done in ideal conditions, and setting this as a standard that real-life polls can approach but cannot consistently exceed. The maximum extent of the accuracy of the polls can be illustrated by elementary simulation techniques. Simulation provides a better test than field work. Not only is it much cheaper, but also, all problems of measurement error can be eliminated.[2]

1. Let us assume that during the election campaign in question *no* change in party preference occurs in the electorate. For the sake of simplicity – and to emphasise the importance of critical thresholds – let us assume that 50 per cent of the electorate continuously favour the Red party, and 50 per cent favour the Blues. In such circumstances, any changes reported by our polls will be the product of sampling error.
2. Let us assume that five opinion polls each conduct five weekly surveys of the electorate during a campaign. The interviewing is done at the same time and the results are published on the same day, but different persons are interviewed by each poll.
3. Those who read the poll reports of this simulated election campaign will firstly notice the strength of the two parties, and the gap between the two. They will also give attention to the weekly trend shown by each polling organisation.
4. Two alternative assumptions might be made about the sample: the sponsor is prepared to pay a lot more money for a little more accuracy, or the sponsor will want to spend as little as possible yet still have a poll that is reasonably accurate. Both assumptions are realistic, in a situation where the cost of a little more accuracy will run to several thousand pounds weekly. A high quality random sample consistent with realistic economic considerations would have 3000 respondents dispersed in 120 constituencies. A good economy size random sample would involve the selection of 1200 names from fifty constituencies.

With this information, it is then a straightforward statistical exercise to calculate an expected range of sampling error.[3] There are nineteen

[2] The original suggestion for a simulation came from Donald E. Stokes, then of the University of Michigan. The formula was prepared and applied by Keith Wilson-Davis, Lecturer in Computer Applications in the Social Sciences at the University of Strathclyde.

[3] For a full description of the simulation procedure and results, see Richard Rose, *The Polls and the 1970 Election*, 2nd ed. (Glasgow: Occasional Paper no. 7, Survey Research Centre, University of Strathclude, 1975) pp. 55 ff.

chances in twenty that any particular sample will show a vote of between 46·7 and 53·3 per cent for the Red party, if the more expensive sample is used, and between 45·3 and 54·7 per cent with the economy sample. One can also say that about half the reports from polls using sample A will estimate Red's vote at between 48·9 per cent and 51·1 per cent; from sample B, half the estimates would lie between 48·4 per cent and 51·6 per cent. Such is the fine balance between the parties in marginal constituencies that a difference of 1 per cent in the estimated vote of the two parties would represent a difference of about thirty-six seats in a parliamentary majority.

There are four possible interpretations that can be placed on any report of aggregate changes in party preference during an election campaign: (i) The change or absence of change reported is apparent, not real, only reflecting sampling error. (ii) The reported change is real, with sampling error virtually nil. (iii) The reported change sums up the net effect of real change and sampling error, with each occurring in the same direction, i.e. the direction of the change is accurate, but the degree is different from that reported or (iv) The reported change sums up the net effect of real change and sampling error with each working in opposite directions, but not necessarily cancelling out.

The simulation demonstrates how fluctuations and final forecasts can vary around a known value – in this case, a 50–50 division of the vote – solely because of sampling error. One can draw random numbers from 1 to 100, and relate the numbers drawn to normal distribution points of the sampling error, adding or subtracting it from the true value, as appropriate. Repeating this exercise five times for each of five separate polls, with two different assumptions about sample sizes, gives a clear picture of what could reasonably be expected to happen in a general election in which polling organisations had *only sampling error* to worry about.

The nearest the simulated result came was an estimate of the gap between the parties at 0·2 per cent. This occurred twice in twenty-five times with the superior sample. In the economy sample, the polls were accurate to within 0·3 per cent with the same frequency. The worst result, placing the gap between the parties at 10·4 per cent when it was actually nil, occurred three times in the superior sample. As the same distribution points were used in the economy sample, it too hit bottom three times with the distance between the parties 15·0 per cent. Most of the simulated results were close to the true figures. Fourteen of the twenty-five simulated results were accurate to within 2·0 per cent with the superior sample, and ten within 2·0 per cent with the economy sample.

The estimates given by these statistically pure polls depict a lively,

TABLE 1

Sample fluctuations in a simulated election

Point of distribution (random numbers)	SUPERIOR SAMPLE *Red* %	*Blue* %	*Gap* %	*Weekly change* %	ECONOMY SAMPLE *Red* %	*Blue* %	*Gap* %	*Weekly change* %
POLL A					*POLL Ae*			
0·42	49·7	50·3	−0·6	–	49·5	50·5	−1·0	–
0·61	50·5	49·4	1·1	1·7	50·8	49·2	1·6	2·6
0·74	51·0	49·0	2·0	0·9	51·5	48·5	3·0	1·4
0·54	50·1	49·9	0·2	1·8	50·1	49·8	0·3	2·7
0·29	49·0	51·0	−2·0	2·2	48·5	51·5	−3·0	3·3
Final error	−1·0	1·0	2·0		−1·5	1·5	3·0	
POLL B					*POLL Be*			
0·56	50·3	49·7	0·6	–	50·5	49·5	1·0	–
0·87	52·0	48·0	4·0	4·5	52·9	47·1	5·8	4·8
0·07	47·4	52·6	−5·2	9·2	46·2	53·8	−7·6	13·4
0·99	55·2	44·8	10·4	15·6	57·5	42·5	15·0	22·6
0·17	48·3	51·6	−3·3	13·7	47·6	52·4	−4·8	19·8
Final error	−1·7	1·6	3·3		−2·4	2·4	4·8	
POLL C					*POLL Ce*			
0·37	49·4	50·5	−1·1	–	49·2	50·8	−1·6	–
0·91	52·6	47·4	5·2	6·3	53·8	46·2	7·6	9·2
0·65	50·7	49·3	1·4	3·8	50·9	49·1	1·8	5·8
0·02	44·8	55·2	−10·4	11·8	42·5	57·5	−15·0	16·8
0·43	49·7	50·3	−0·6	9·8	49·5	50·5	−7·0	14·0
Final error	−0·3	0·3	0·6		−0·5	0·5	1·0	
POLL D					*POLL De*			
0·82	51·6	48·3	3·3	–	52·4	47·6	4·8	–
0·31	49·2	50·8	−1·6	4·9	48·9	51·1	−2·2	7·0
0·67	50·8	49·2	1·6	3·2	51·1	48·9	2·2	4·4
0·43	49·7	50·3	−0·6	2·2	49·5	50·5	−1·0	3·2
0·14	48·0	52·0	−4·0	3·4	47·1	52·9	−5·8	4·8
Final error	−2·0	2·0	4·0		−2·9	2·9	5·8	
POLL E					*POLL Ee*			
0·01	44·8	55·2	−10·4	–	42·5	57·5	−15·0	–
0·36	49·4	50·5	−1·1	9·5	49·2	50·8	−1·6	13·4
0·12	48·0	52·0	−4·0	2·9	47·1	52·9	−5·8	4·2
0·47	49·9	50·1	−0·2	3·8	49·8	50·1	−0·3	5·5
0·30	49·1	50·9	−1·8	1·6	48·7	51·3	−2·6	2·3
Final error	−0·9	0·9	1·8		−1·3	1·3	2·6	

somewhat confusing, but entirely plausible election campaign. The polls show a considerable amount of movement from week to week, and the changes are specially important, because the lead moves back and forth between the Reds and the Blues. The chief source of confusion in the eyes of many consumers would be the divergencies between the polls at different points in the campaign. For instance, in week three of this simulated election, Poll B's superior sample puts the Blues ahead by 5·2 per cent, while Poll C puts the Reds ahead by 1·4 per cent. Yet the following week, the former poll puts the Reds ahead by 10·4 per cent, and the latter poll now puts the Blues ahead by 10·4 per cent, a complete reversal of the fortunes of the parties and of the forecasts of the polls. Because we are dealing with a simulated electorate, the confusion can be easily explained; it is a function of sampling fluctuations and nothing else. At all times the true state of the parties is an exact tie.

The weekly change solely attributable to sampling error averages 10·9 per cent for all five polls. The average random fluctuation varies from a high of 14·2 per cent for Poll B to a low of 3·0 per cent for Poll A. The anxious politician or reader, puzzled by the diversity between these simulated polls, would gain great assurance from the final forecasts of the polls. All five point to a Blue victory, by margins ranging from 0·6 to 4·0 per cent. The mean forecast for the five is the Blues ahead by 2·35 per cent, and the median forecast favours the Blues by 3·0 per cent. If say, Polls B and D were economy polls, then the mean value of the Blue lead would be 3·0 per cent. The more numerate reader would note that the reports all contained the standard caveat about sampling error. But he could calculate that the probability of all five polls erring in the same direction would be as low as that of parents of five children producing five girls.

A fair evaluation of the degree of error in the simulated prediction is to compare the extent to which each of the five polls' final forecasts differed from the true result. On average, the simulated polls were within 4·1 per cent of the true difference between the parties. While the 1970 British general election polls had an average error of 6·6 per cent, in the three previous British elections, the real polls were *more* accurate than the simulated result. In 1966, the average error on the gap was 3·9 per cent, in 1964, 1·8 per cent, and in 1959, 1·0 per cent (see Table 2). This too is explicable, inasmuch as successive sets of samples – whether real or simulated – will produce results of varying degrees of accuracy.

II. The Record

At every one of the ten general elections since 1945, opinion polls have published forecasts of how the electorate will vote. Seven different organisations have issued election day forecasts of the nation-wide dis-

tribution of the vote. They are, in the order in which polling commenced: the Gallup Poll, the *Daily Express* poll (now discontinued), Research Services, National Opinion Polls, Opinion Research Centre, Louis Harris International and Marplan.[4] The polls are very similar in the methods by which they obtain their data. The chief difference arises from the fact that some organisations now employ random rather than quota samples; National Opinion Polls was the first to use the more expensive method of sampling for the 1964 election. Polls also differ in whether or not they make adjustments for the expected differences in turnout among supporters of different parties; some do, and some don't. Overall, the similiarities – reinforced by the fact that many individuals have worked for more than one polling organisation – are greater than the differences.

There is no consistent pattern in the performance of the polls, whether individual organisations are considered, or particular elections. For example, the Gallup Poll, the one organisation working at every election since 1945, was almost as accurate in its first two forecasts as in its most recent forecasts, nearly a quarter-century later; the group's worst forecast was in 1970; this came only two elections after it had come within 0·4 per cent of forecasting the gap between the two major parties. The evidence of the simulation analysis emphasises that the performance of any poll is likely to fluctuate because of random measurement error. Hence, organisations are more likely to settle into a pattern, the more forecasts they have conducted. This assumes, of course, that neither the electorate, nor the polling organisation changes meanwhile.

Judged by the crudest of measures, each of the nineteen polls from 1945 to 1966 successfully picked the party that would win the election. The polls' accuracy in 1951 was fortuitous, however, for the Conservatives, picked to win by all three polls, took a majority of seats in the House of Commons, but won fewer votes than Labour. In 1970, only one of five polls – Opinion Research Centre – correctly forecast the winner. In February, 1974, every election day poll gave the Conservatives more votes than Labour – but Labour won more seats than the Conservatives. In October, 1974, the polls all agreed that Labour would win more votes than the Conservatives; events were consistent with this forecast (Table 2).

The degree of error shown by the polls can be measured in two interrelated ways. One can simply calculate the average of the error in the estimate of support for the Conservative, Labour and Liberal parties;

[4] Because some polls are published in more than one place during an election, only one final forecast, wherever published, has been attributed to each organisation. Forecasts published before polling day, e.g. in Sunday newspapers, have been excluded, because not comparable in their dates of interviewing.

from 1974 until voting patterns change again, the estimated support for Nationalists should be added as a fourth party category. In addition, one must examine the single figure that most concerns headline writers: the estimated gap between the Conservative and Labour parties in the final pre-election poll. The error here can be substantially greater than that in estimating support for a single party, if the errors in estimating each party's share of the vote reinforce each other, rather than cancel out.

TABLE 2

The margin of error in final Opinion Poll forecasts, 1945–1974

Year	*Mean error gap* %	*Average error per party* %	*Number of polls*
1945	3·5	1·6	1
1950	3·2	1·5	2
1951	6·0	2·6	3
1955	1·1	0·7	2
1959	1·0	1·1	3
1964	1·8	1·3	4
1966	3·9	1·7	4
1970	6·6	2·6	5
1974 Feb	2·4	1·6	5
1974 Oct	4·2	1·3	4
Average	3·2	1·6	33

The figures in Table 2 summarise the extent to which the polls have been accurate in their election forecasts since 1945. In estimating the gap between the parties, the polls overall have been accurate to within 3·2 per cent in their forecasts. The best year for the polls was 1959, when they averaged within 1·0 per cent of the final figure, and the worst year, 1970, when the polls were on average 6·6 per cent wide of the mark. In all, thirteen polls have been accurate to within better than 2·0 per cent in their final campaign forecast, and six polls have been more than 6·0 per cent off.

The polls show a higher degree of accuracy in forecasting each party's share of the vote; the average estimate is 1·6 per cent wide of the mark. Only in 1951 and 1970 were the polls on average more than 1·7 per cent wide of the mark, when forecasting results for individual parties. Only twice since 1945 have polls averaged an error of more than 4·0 per cent in forecasting each party's share of the vote.

Pollsters would argue that the only way to assess their accuracy is in terms of the degree to which they forecast each party's share of the vote

correctly. But journalists might argue that the only way to assess accuracy is to see whether a poll correctly picks the election winner. Taken together, these statements emphasise that the record of the polls can only be properly assessed in relation to what one expects the polls to do.

III. Expectations of the Polls

The outcome of the February 1974 British general election raised fundamental questions about the use of public opinion polls to forecast election results. Following the unexpected victory of the Conservatives in June 1970, pollsters could and did say publicly, 'We made a mistake'. They carefully analysed the sources of errors and announced steps that would be taken to improve the accuracy of their final forecasts next time. In February 1974, the correct procedures were followed. Yet once again the election did not turn out as expected. Each of the polls correctly forecast that the Conservatives would get more votes than Labour – but each was incorrectly interpreted as showing that the Conservatives would also win more seats than Labour. Since the Labour Party failed to win sufficient seats to gain an absolute majority in Parliament, the polls cannot be said to have been completely wrong. Yet since Labour won enough seats to take office, at a minimum one must conclude that the forecasts were 'not quite right'. The confusion of the result was compounded by the contrasting reactions of pollsters after the event. Some confessed error, whereas others pointed to the high degree of accuracy in their pre-election forecasts. The October 1974 election outcome showed both the polls and the electoral system producing the same winner; Labour. Yet before one can pronounce that the organisations that were wrong in February were right in October, one must consider carefully the standards by which their performance is to be judged.

The opinion polls, with the exception of Opinion Research Centre, undoubtedly got the 1970 general election forecast wrong. This is true whether one judges by absolute standards of naming the winner, or by relative standards, a worse performance in 1970 than at previous or subsequent elections. The polls gave Labour a clear margin of victory in their final forecast – and the Conservatives won. What happened?

The record of polling organisations active for a decade or more make clear that the 1970 forecast was not the result of some secular decline in polling standards. It is more reasonable to conclude that in 1970 the polls suffered, collectively, from random fluctuations in the wrong direction – as in the simulation example cited earlier. The fact that polls often are more accurate than sampling error would lead one to expect implies that, occasionally, the polls will be less accurate than sampling statistics would predict.

A second reason for the polls' poor showing in 1970 was that most organisations failed to continue interviewing as late as possible during the campaign, and there was a last minute swing to the Conservatives giving that party a general election victory. The thesis of 'late swing' is consistent with the available evidence.

Whether the fluctuations of voters' preferences between the 1966 election and the start of the 1970 election campaign are measured by reference to by-election results, local elections or opinion poll reports, the conclusion is the same. A massive swing to the Conservatives occurred in the middle of the period, and a swing back to Labour occurred near the end of the period. The Gallup Poll showed Labour's lead during the campaign was of very recent origin and was exceptionally vulnerable to a reversal in re-establishing a dominant Conservative pattern.

The Opinion Research Centre forecast of a Conservative victory was based upon two calculations. The first arose from interviewing again forty-eight hours before election day 300 voters already interviewed in an earlier poll, and finding that there was a swing to the Conservatives within this group. The second calculation was that those favouring the Conservatives were more likely to vote on 18 June 1970, than were Labour supporters. Applying these two assumptions to interviews undertaken the weekend before polling day led ORC to reverse its previous forecast of a 4·5 per cent Labour lead, instead forecasting a 1 per cent Conservative lead. Post-election interviews by the Gallup Poll, Marplan, National Opinion Polls and ORC confirmed that there had, in fact, been a last-minute swing to the Conservatives.[5]

The June 1970 general election forced polling organisations to give critical scrutiny to their methods and consider ways of improving their performance – in so far as polls can be made more accurate. The chief conclusion drawn was that polling should not terminate the weekend before a Thursday election, but rather carry on as near to the voting as possible. Pollsters were uncertain about the weight to give evidence of differential propensity to vote among supporters of different parties. I wrote at the time:

> There is no firm evidence that propensity to vote is a constant from election to election, and substantial suggestion, both in gross turnout figures and in survey data, that readiness to vote varies with the character of the election itself. In other words, the way that ORC classified the most difficult to measure respondents in 1970 might be less accurate in 1974 than that employed by other groups in 1970.[6]

[5] For full details of their studies, see articles reprinted in Rose, *The Polls and the 1970 Election*.

[6] Ibid., pp. 54 ff.

Within twenty-four hours of the publication of the final polling figures of the February 1974 election, it was very clear that something had gone wrong with the polls. There is still no agreement about what it was. In a story of 2 March, *The Times* reported that three organisations said the polls had been wrong, while two were inclined to claim success. In a story in the *Daily Express* on 2 March, Louis Harris confessed, 'We of the Harris Poll could not have been more mistaken.' Humphrey Taylor told *The Times*, 'We very much regret that we misled a great many people into believing the Conservatives would win by a comfortable majority.' T. F. Thompson, chairman of ORC, wrote on 4 March in *The Times*, 'Once again the opinion polls as a whole appear to have misled commentators, the public and the politicians themselves.' The polls' failure was said to be a failure to note and interpret properly the assumed last-minute movements within the electorate. This point of view was also endorsed by John Barter, the managing director of National Opinion Polls.

The Gallup Poll was most prominent in rejecting the charge that the polls were wrong. Norman Webb, the managing director, emphasised the organisation's achievement in forecasting each party's share of the vote to an accuracy within 1 per cent. The February 1974 issue of the *Gallup Political Index* carried an opening editorial arguing 'The opinion polls did *not* "come a cropper" in the 1974 general election'; it printed its final forecast of a Conservative lead in votes over Labour in support of its view. A spokesman for Marplan stated that its final poll was not wrong, for Marplan had registered the way in which people were changing their minds at the last minute.

All the polls produced a *correct* forecast, in that they forecast a Conservative plurality in the popular vote in Great Britain – and the Conservatives achieved just that. By winning 38·8 per cent of the vote in Britain, the Conservatives came out 0·8 percentage points ahead of Labour in the popular vote. The polls were accurate – as far as they went. But their accuracy did not extend as far as the public, the politicians, or the pollsters believed it would go. Expectations were frustrated because the pollsters had data to forecast voting behaviour, whereas their readers were interested in election results.

The decisions of voters, important as they are, represent only one step in determining how an election is won or lost. Two further steps must occur after the votes are cast.[7] Votes cast must be converted into seats in the House of Commons (or, in America, into votes in the Electoral College). Then, a political leader must be entrusted by the Queen with a commission to form a government, and must successfully sustain the confidence of the House of Commons. Only if the national popular

[7] See Richard Rose, *Electoral Behavior* (New York: Free Press, 1974) pp. 8 ff.

vote automatically determines the winner can a poll be used to forecast an election outcome without making further assumptions about electoral systems and parliamentary procedures. These conditions, which are atypical, are met by the second round of the French presidential election. In that ballot, with only two finalists, one must receive at least half the popular vote, and the candidate receiving the larger vote is declared elected without the intervention of an electoral college. This simplifies the task of the pollsters. Thus, when the polls correctly predict the popular vote, as did all three published French polls in the May 1974 French presidential election, they must also correctly predict the winner.

Customarily, little attention is paid to the distinction between winning votes and winning seats in a British general election. Although no party has won as much as half the vote since 1935, one party captured at least half the seats at every election from 1931 to February 1974. The logic of converting votes into seats and seats into victory for one side or another is assumed to follow mechanically from a statement of popular preferences. Yet there is nothing inevitable in the process.

The polls were incorrect in that they did not forecast that a Labour government would result from the February election. But in so far as the polls were misleading, it was because the vote was misleading. The party with the largest vote, the Conservatives, did not win the most seats in the House of Commons. Instead of blaming the polls for doing accurately what they were trying to do – to forecast the behaviour of voters – one might instead blame the electoral system for awarding a party with 0·8 percentage points less of the vote 0·8 percentage points more seats! If the consumers of the polls were more sophisticated, then the polls would be considered right in 1974 – just as retrospectively they would be deemed to have been wrong in 1951, the last election in which the party with fewer votes won more seats. In a less critical era, the polls were not blamed for their error, because fortuitously they favoured the winning party.

The futility of blaming the polls for failing to forecast the distribution of seats in the 1974 House of Commons is made clear by considering the peculiar effect of Northern Ireland upon the election result. In February 1974, as at every previous election, the major polls did not interview in Ulster, even though Northern Ireland has twelve MPs in the United Kingdom House of Commons. No interviews are done in Ulster because its party system differs from that of the rest of the United Kingdom, and its small size would not justify a separate survey there. None of the twelve Ulster MPs elected in February 1974 was aligned with a major British party. But in every previous general election of this century, the bulk of Ulster MPs were Unionists aligned with the Conservatives, and their seats were counted as part of the Conservative total in

the House of Commons. Had this occurred in February 1974 as well, then the election outcome would have been: Conservatives – 305, Labour – 301, Liberals – 14, and others – 15. In such an event, the same logic that says Labour won the election would lead to the conclusion that the Conservatives had won the election, in terms of both seats and votes. The polls would therefore have been correct – even though the determining factor was outside the universe of their surveys!

Similarly, had the Conservatives been able to form a coalition government with the Liberals, as Edward Heath considered, the polls would also have been proved right, for Labour would have lost the election by exclusion from office – again for a reason outside the domain of opinion surveys: the politics of coalition-building in the House of Commons.

It would be more reasonable to criticise the polls for doing only half a job, i.e. for forecasting correctly the total votes of each party, but not devoting the same rigour to converting their estimates of votes into estimates of seats. Yet there are considerable difficulties and some dangers in doing this. First of all, the desire of the polls to achieve nationwide representation in their samples leads them to take a small number of interviews (anything from ten to forty) in each of a large number of constituencies. Hence, their data cannot be used to predict individual constituency outcomes. Nor do the numbers of interviews provide sufficiently reliable figures for regional breakdowns, especially when the regions most likely to be deviant, e.g. Wales (fifty respondents in 1000) and Scotland (100 in 1000), are relatively small and heterogeneous. The pollsters confine themselves to forecasting shares of the vote on a nationwide basis, reckoning that sampling fluctuations within regions and across constituencies will tend to cancel out. The judgement is reasonable – as far as votes are concerned.

To ask the opinion polls to convert estimates of votes into estimates of seats won by each party is to ask them to step outside the formal boundaries of their expertise, which is concerned exclusively with the behaviour of the mass electorate, not with the working of the electoral system. Before the October 1974 election campaign commenced, the directors of British opinion polls agreed upon one thing: they would not make election predictions about the distribution of seats in the House of Commons, or about which party would form the next government. The pollsters decided to concentrate exclusively upon the behaviour of voters, and not pronounce upon the behaviour of the electoral system. The February election had been a cautionary experience. The decision of the pollsters to keep a lower profile was defended by T. F. Thompson, chairman of one of the most active polling organisations, the Opinion Research Centre (ORC), in blunt terms:

> We may come under criticism from the media, because they have been relying upon us to give them their election morning news, and then kicking us in the teeth afterwards if we go wrong. But we are not going to fall into the trap of converting votes into seats. That's where we went wrong before.[8]

Because the polls correctly named the winner in the October election, the degree of accuracy shown provides retrospective evidence for judging how well or badly the same organisations performed in the confusing and unusual circumstances of the February election.

The greatest advantage that the polls had in October was that the party winning the largest share of the vote also won the largest number of seats in the House of Commons. This outcome was by no means certain before the results were known. Labour wasted fewer votes than its opponents in February, and it could afford to lose hundreds of thousands of votes in October in more than 150 constituencies where Labour had finished third in February, usually trailing a Conservative MP and a Liberal challenger. If a substantial fraction of Labour supporters had voted tactically in October, swinging to the Liberals to put the Conservatives out, Labour would have lost about 6 per cent of the total national vote without losing a single MP. In Scotland, the prospect of a collapse in the vote of either the Labour or Conservative candidates due to SNP challenges afforded another possibility of a party losing votes without seats. In the event, tactical voting did not occur on a significant scale.

While the polls got the October result right by the simplest criterion of the mass media – picking the party that formed the government – they did less well than in February in forecasting the gap in votes between the two major parties. The polls overestimated a Conservative lead in February by anything from 1·2 to 4·2 per cent. In October, the over-estimates of a Labour lead ranged from 2·0 to 6·2 per cent. Each of the four polls publishing election-day scores in both elections was less accurate in October than in February; the average margin of error was 4·2 percentage points against 2·2 percentage points, in the earlier contest.

By comparison with the February election, the opinion polls in October were accurate, as accuracy is usually judged by the public and the politicians. They were more accurate because the electoral system this time gave the party with the largest share of the popular vote the most seats in the House of Commons, and, by a margin of two, an absolute majority in the House of Commons.

IV. The Implications

The February 1974 election called into question many assumptions

[8] Quoted in 'Polls will not turn votes into seats', *The Times*, 23 Sep 1974.

about British politics, as well as many assumptions about opinion polls. Unlike the situation in 1970, the shortcomings of the polls were not technical but substantive, and the implications concern the relationship of social science to political behaviour generally. Social scientists have once again seen demonstrated the truth of the adage that behaviour is probabilistic, rather than mechanical. And non-social scientists have reacted by vacillating between a hope of foreknowledge with mechanical certitude and delight in evidence of unpredictability in human affairs.

In any scientific, scholarly, or public activity, there is always a high premium on accuracy. Yet the foregoing has demonstrated that total accuracy in opinion surveys is a chimera. Polls are not unique in their fallibility. Many things that affect our lives are based upon samples or estimates. The census, for example, may be considered a sample of the population of a country, drawn once every ten years. The diagnosis that a physician makes of a patient who complains of a pain in the chest or the head is also but an estimate of the most likely cause of the disturbance to his health. Because these estimates cannot be unvaryingly and eternally accurate, there is no reason to avoid doctors, or abandon the census and return to the eighteenth-century habit of settling by parliamentary debate the question of whether the population is increasing or decreasing.

In political surveys, as in many other forms of human endeavour, the choice is not between total knowledge and total ignorance, but rather between more or less knowledge and more or less accuracy. People who wish for a sure thing, whether in a general election forecast, a stock market share, or a doctor's diagnosis, should not consult professionally qualified men but rather soothsayers, astrologers or others who make a living by taking money from those who believe that perfect foreknowledge is possible. Meanwhile, those who can conceive of degrees of accuracy can consider whether the degree of accuracy obtainable in pre-election polls is sufficient to the purpose at hand.

The evidence of the 1970 and 1974 British general elections makes clear that the degree of error to be expected in polls used for election forecasting is greater than that which might decide the general election. A general election can be won or lost by a margin of 1 per cent or less. No sample survey of opinion can ever claim so high a degree of accuracy. While the polls should be able to select the leading party much more often than chance alone would anticipate, they cannot be expected to be right every time. But consumers are not interested in forecasts that will be correct in three out of four or nine out of ten elections. They want a forecast that will be right this time, for it is the current election, rather than a contest five years in the future or in the past, that fills their minds at the moment.

The obvious but often neglected feature of election polls is that they exist as a branch of journalism, and not as a branch of social science. The authors of a standard work on the subject, Frank Teer and J. D. Spence, note: 'The polls came into being and continue in being to provide news stories for newspaper readers. By their use the sponsoring journals can play back public opinion to the public as an item of genuine news value and interest.'[9] The 1974 election demonstrated that newspapers are not interested in using the polls to do anything more than give a forecast about which party is winning or will win the election. The *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* consistently gave the scantiest of details about what was in the minds of the voters: one question and one question only, voting intention, concerned these newspapers. The scanty coverage is particularly striking in that although the *Mail* and the *Express* spent more money on high quality samples than any other paper, they neglected to publicise in detail what their money bought, or even to give briefly the technical facts documenting the quality of their samples. The serious papers, with smaller type and much more lineage, gave more space to reporting the opinions of voters. But first priority was always given to opinions that would tend to corroborate or qualify the replies about voting intentions – e.g. attitudes about party leaders or about which party would handle best the most important questions of the day.

The single-mindedness of the press is striking because the British press was embarrassed in 1970 by publicising election forecasts that were wrong by any standard. This single-mindedness is also surprising because the 1974 elections occurred at a time when the issues facing the country were very serious and popular attitudes uncertain. Yet no paper during the campaign used opinion poll data to explore in depth the reaction of the British people to a domestic crisis as grave as any in a generation.

The chief conclusion that this writer would draw from the performance of the polls and the press is that there is need for fundamental rethinking about polls by those who sponsor them. Ironically, the press could provide more political information for its readers if it returned to the original concept of the polls as a device for assessing opinion, rather than forecasting behaviour. It is technically simple and economically attractive to take the results of a single poll and use them in several different stories reporting popular attitudes about issues of the day. In fact, before the surge of interest in forecasting polls, the now defunct *News-Chronicle* published brief stories several times a week giving Gallup Poll reports of popular opinions about issues, without regard to

[9] Frank Teer and J. D. Spence, *Political Opinion Polls* (London: Hutchinson, 1973) p. 21.

voting intentions. This continues to be the practice of the American Gallup Poll and of the Louis Harris organisation in America.

In so far as opinion polls are not regarded as useful for prediction, then what other uses can they have? The political strategist, concerned with influencing voters, may find that polls can help him find ways to communicate better with those whom he seeks to influence. In so far as polls help campaigners influence voters, then they will contribute to the falsification of their previous estimates of party strength. In such circumstances, one test of the value of opinion surveys is that they should register, as the campaign proceeds, a continuing and true rise in support for their client candidate, assuming all other conditions remain equal. In practice, opinion surveys are only intermittently and indifferently used by campaigners.[10]

Surveys are much used by academic students of politics in two related ways. Firstly, surveys can give profiles of social characteristics and attitudes to a much higher degree of accuracy than could ever be obtained by 'guesstimate' or the subjective projection of personal views onto national populations. Secondly, by collecting information about a number of characteristics of individuals, it is then possible to study the interrelationship of characteristics with a far greater degree of accuracy than would otherwise be possible, answering such questions as: What kind of middle-class people vote Labour? How many working-class people have deferential attitudes toward the aristocracy? What do people of different levels of education think about capital punishment?

Governments too can use survey research to gain information about the conditions and attitudes of the people being governed. It is ironic that a general election, while important, is also a blunt instrument. It can only result in a choice between parties: it cannot be a clearly expressed choice between issues. Whatever the colouration of the party in office, it will inevitably face questions about the conditions of its subjects which cannot be answered reliably or validly by the men who sit around the Cabinet table. These questions are often partly matters of fact and partly matters of opinion: Who are the poor today? Why are deviants and malcontents different from the majority? What are the things that people in need feel they lack? In seeking information about such important questions concerning 'the condition of the people', those who govern today will find sample survey techniques as relevant as did the early promoters of the original Welfare State.[11] After all, as elections themselves demonstrate, counting people helps make people count.

[10] See Richard Rose, *Influencing Voters* (London: Faber, 1967).
[11] See 'First: the Facts', *New Society*, 12 July 1973.