

Election Polls Regnant in Britain

By Robert M. Worcester

Politicians and pundits alike failed to believe the British polls during the 1997 election campaign. (Former) Prime Minister John Major, a widely reported skeptic, described poll results as “absolute rubbish.” Of course, they weren’t, and the size of Labour’s overall majority (179) in the House of Commons is now larger than the total number of Conservative members (165). The Conservative loss wasn’t a “Canadian-style wipe-out” but there are now no Conservative Members of Parliament in either Scotland or Wales, and none in many of the major conurbations in England.

“ For the 1992 predictions, British pollsters endured five years of BBC censorship...and wise words—after the event— from mostly well-meaning academics and other ‘experts,’ with some being scathingly critical about methodology and questioning techniques, and one or two even suggesting mendacity on the part of pollsters. ”

The Aftermath of 1992

“The error in the polls at the 1992 general election said more about the British people than the polls,” a perceptive American academic told me. Prior to 1992 and after a run of five elections in which predictions were within 1% of each party’s share of House of Commons seats, MORI’s forecast was 4% off the Tory’s share and 5% off Labour’s in 1992. Other poll results were comparable.

The ITN and BBC national exit polls in 1992 fared somewhat better, having shown a 4% and a 5% lead for the Tories, respectively. The ITN broadcast its vote share results once but did not release the data for months thereafter, and the BBC results were never broadcast and only partially released weeks after the election. Both channels concentrated on exit poll seat forecasts in marginal districts. Translating vote share into seats was more faulty than the exit poll data on which projections were based; as a result, for months after the election pollsters were taunted with “The polls forecast a Labour victory, and the exit polls did no better.”

For the 1992 predictions, British pollsters endured five years of BBC censorship, literally hundreds of press, radio, and television interviews began with “The polls got it horribly wrong at the last election,” and wise words—after the event— from mostly well-meaning academics and other “experts,” with some being scathingly critical about methodology and questioning techniques, and one or two even suggesting mendacity on the part of pollsters.

Myths about the polls in the 1992 election still exist despite the findings from the exhaustive analysis done by the Market Research Society’s Inquiry team. Among those myths are the following:

Myth 1: The polls forecast a Labour win. In reality, the average gap between the Tories and Labour amounted to 9% with a 3% margin of error. It is crucial to watch the vote share, not the size of the gap between the parties; the margin of error for the gap is twice that for the share.

Myth 2: In-street interviews caused the problem. The Market Research Society’s Inquiry team found no difference between the results of polls carried out in the street, in the home, or a combination of the two.

Myth 3: Quota sampling was to blame. No difference existed between the findings of the polls using a quota sample and those randomly conducted by telephone.

Myth 4: People lied to the pollsters, ashamed to admit they were going to vote Tory. The Inquiry team found no evidence for this assertion, yet the myth is repeated ad nauseam.

Controversy Renewed

In the face of so much data to the contrary (see Table 1), the survey results that got the most attention during the ‘97 campaign were from ICM’s April 20-21 poll suggesting a narrowing Labour lead. Front-page headlines included the *Daily Express* (“Labour’s Lead in Freefall—Stunning New Poll Backs Major’s Claim That Tories Are Closing the Gap”), the *Daily Mail* (“Labour Lead Crashes in the Polls”), and even the *Daily Telegraph*, which buried its own Gallup poll with the headline “Labour Lead Collapses in New Poll.”

The *Telegraph* even reported that ICM findings were “in line with the Tories’ own polling...” They did not mention that ICM was the Tory’s private pollster or that canvassers routinely overestimate their own party’s support. For all of that, ICM’s findings were quickly proved to be rogue.

The Final Forecasts

From the outset I warned about concentrating on the size of the lead instead of the vote share. In 1992 the Tories got 43% of the vote and if they didn’t get that in 1997, they would lose. Furthermore, if they didn’t obtain 39% of the vote, Labour would

win. The Tories began the election with 29%, struggled up to 34% and then fell back to 31% on Election Day.

Forty-seven national polls were conducted in the 1997 election by the five full members of the Association of Professional Opinion Polling Organizations, which was a decrease from 50 and 54 in the shorter 1992 and 1987 elections. The average predicted share throughout the campaign was 31% for the Tories; they got 31.4%.

In 1997, MORI conducted three “final” polls. One survey was conducted in-home for the *Times* two days before the election using a sample of 2,304 adults with 388 respondents answering “won’t say,” “undecided,” and “might change” re-interviewed the day before the election to measure any fluctuation. This poll led to the *Times*’ Election Day headline: “MORI points to 180-plus majority.” The second poll was a panel survey for the *London Evening Standard*, in which MORI re-contacted respondents the day prior to the election who had been first interviewed six weeks earlier. The resulting headline was “Last Poll Puts Blair on Brink of Landslide,” and led its pundit, Peter Kellner, to forecast a 129-seat majority, even though the MORI figures projected 183. The third, an exit poll for ITN of over 15,000 voters as they left polling booths led to our estimate of a 157-seat Labour majority and ITN’s prediction of 159.

For the record, MORI’s “last word” was based on 14,888 exit poll interviews in marginal constituencies. This exit poll data suggested a 12% swing in key marginal seats, thus implying a national vote share—actual in parentheses—of Conservative 30% (31.4%), Labour 46% (44.4%), Liberal Democrats 18% (17.2%), and others 6% (7.0%). In fact, the marginal constituencies swung more than the country as a whole, and utilizing the complete exit poll findings, the prediction of change in the vote share was closer still: Conservative -12.9% (-12.1%), Labour +10.7% (+10.6%), Liberal Democrats -0.6% (-1.5%). I’ll settle for that.

When the marginal data was used to estimate a seat count, the result was that Conservatives would win 180 seats (they won 165), Labour 410 (419), Liberal Democrats 43 (46), and others 8 (10) for an overall Labour majority of 157 (179). We experimented briefly with weighting the data to account for

postal and proxy votes and for the legendary “shy Tories,” who by our reckoning would have accounted for just 0.85% of our estimate. Weighting would have improved our marginal estimate further producing a forecast of Conservative 31% (31.4%), Labour 45% (44.4%), Liberal Democrats 18% (17.2%). Next time we’ll try harder.

One cannot conclude that nothing happened during the campaign. Panel studies reveal that many people changed their voting intentions and their decision whether or not to vote. Our best measure of change comes from the telephone re-call conducted for the *Evening Standard*. From those results we projected that 11.5 million people changed their minds during the campaign. But this sample may actually have underestimated the “churn” because it did not detect people who had doubts during the six-week period (from the first interview to the last) but returned to their original choice on the eve of the election.

Reaction to the Polls Themselves

Just over six in ten, 63%, said they were aware of national opinion polls in the election, down sharply from 89% at the last election when there were more polls over a shorter period and more BBC coverage than in this election. Nearly all, 94%, of those aware of polls recalled that the Labour Party was the predicted leader.

Banning polls during elections got scant support from the British public. Only 16% believe that polls should be banned during elections. Those opposing a ban (78%) are more likely to be middle-class (82%) than working class (75%). This compares with one person in five who would ban party election broadcasts, 15% who would ban all coverage of the election on radio and television, and one in ten who would ban coverage of the election in newspapers!

But when asked who they trust to tell the truth, 55% said they trust pollsters; only 12% trust government ministers (somewhat fewer than the 15% who say they trust journalists). Perhaps these numbers put in perspective the former Prime Minister’s remark that the *Times*’ MORI poll was “absolute rubbish” and that the Tories’ private polls showed the election much closer. Maybe they were; maybe not.



*Robert M. Worcester is chairman,
MORI International, and visiting professor of
government, London School of Economics*

Table 1: Pre-Election Poll Results in the 1997 British General Election

Partisan distributions							
Polling Organization	Polling dates	Paper/TV	Cons.	Lab.	L.D.	Other	Swing
General Election 1992			43%	35%	18%	1%	
Election announced 3/17/97							
Gallup	3/19-3/21	S. Tel.	29%	55%	11%	6%	-16.8%
Harris	3/20-3/24	Indy	30	54	11	6	-16
MORI	3/21-3/24	Times	29	50	14	7	-14.5
Harris	3/27-3/31	Indy	28	52	14	6	-16
Gallup	3/26-4/2	D. Tel.	31	52	11	6	-14.5
ICM	3/29-3/31	Gdn	32	46	17	5	-11
MORI	4/1/97	Times	28	55	11	6	-17.5
Gallup	4/1-3/4	C4 News	30	54	11	5	-16
MORI	4/2-4/3	IoS/SMi	30	55	9	6	-16.5
ICM	4/2-4/4	Obsvr	33	48	14	5	-11.5
NOP	4/3/97	S. Times	28	52	12	8	-16
NOP	4/4/97	Rueters	30	51	11	8	-14.5
Gallup	4/4-4/6	D. Tel	32	53	10	5	-14.5
Harris	4/4-4/7	Indy	28	52	14	6	-16
ICM	4/6-4/7	Gdn	34	46	15	5	-10
Gallup	4/7-4/9	D. Tel	30	53	11	6	-15.5
MORI	4/8/97	Times	34	49	12	5	-11.5
ICM	4/9-4/11	Obs	32	48	15	5	-12
Gallup	4/9-4/12	S. Tel	32	49	12	5	-12
NOP	4/11/97	S. Times	28	48	17	7	-14
MORI	4/11-4/14	E Std	29	50	15	6	-14.5
Harris	4/11-4/14	Indy	31	49	13	6	-13
Gallup	4/12-4/15	D. Tel	30	51	12	7	-14.5
ICM	4/13-4/14	Obsvr	31	45	19	5	-11
MORI	4/15/97	Times	32	49	13	6	12.5
Gallup	4/18-4/22	C4 News	31	50	13	6	-13.5
Gallup	4/15-4/18	D. Tel	32	50	13	5	-13
ICM	4/16-4/18	Obsvr	32	47	16	5	-11.5
NOP	4/18/97	S. Times	31	45	17	7	-11
Harris	4/17-4/21	Indy	30	48	15	7	-13
Gallup	4/18-4/21	D. Tel	32	48	12	8	-12

British Pre-Election Polls Continued

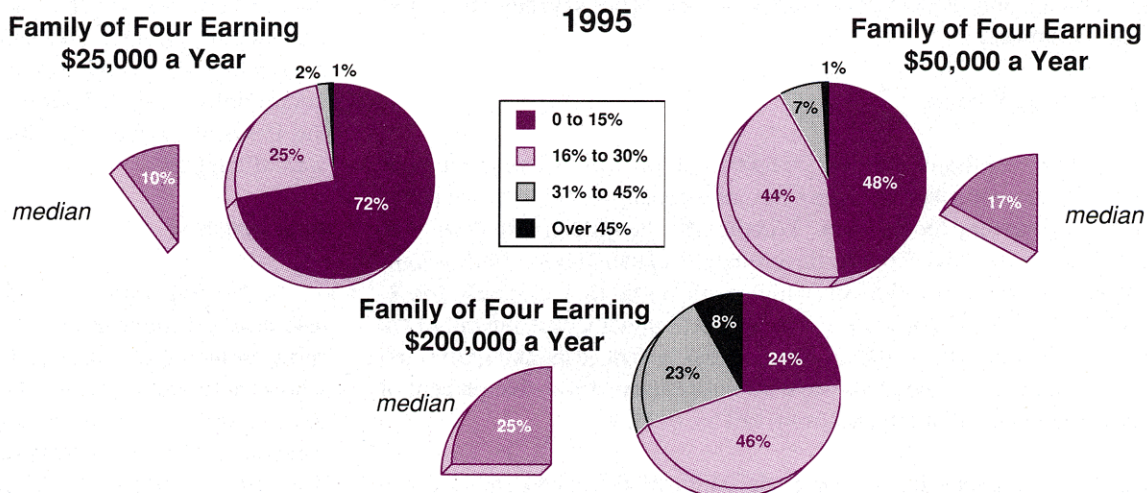
Partisan distributions

Polling Organization	Polling dates	Paper/TV	Cons.	Lab.	L.D.	Other	Swing
ICM	4/20-4/21	Gdn	37%	42%	14%	6%	-6.5%
MORI	4/22/97	Times	27	48	17	8	-14.5
Gallup	4/21-4/23	D. Tel	30	50	12	8	-14
MORI	4/23-4/24	loS/SMi	29	53	12	6	-16
Gallup	4/23-4/25	D. Tel	32	48	14	6	-12
ICM	4/23-4/25	Obsvr	32	47	16	5	-11.5
NOP	4/25/97	S. Times	29	47	16	9	-13
Gallup	4/24-4/28	C4 News	31	49	14	6	-13
Gallup	4/25-4/27	D. Tel	30	49	14	6	-13.5
Harris	4/27-4/29	Indy	31	48	15	6	-12.5
Gallup	4/28-4/29	D. Tel	31	51	13	6	-14
NOP	4/29/97	Reuters	28	50	14	8	-15
MORI	4/29-4/30	Times	28	48	16	8	-14
ICM	4/29-4/30	Gdn	33	43	18	6	-9
Gallup	4/30/97	D. Tel	33	47	14	6	-11
MORI	4/30/97	E Std	29	47	19	5	-13
MORI*	5/1/97	ITN	30	46	18	6	-12
NOP*	5/1/97	BBC	29	47	18	6	-13
Vote	5/1/97		31.4%	44.4%	17.2%	7.0%	-10.5%

*Exit polls

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On p. 44 of the June/July 1997 issue of *Public Perspective*, the data for two pie charts were transposed. The correct data are printed here.



Question: What is the highest percentage of income that would be fair for a family of four making \$25,000 [\$50,000/\$200,000] to pay in **all taxes combined**?