

WHAT FUTURE FOR THE OPINION POLLS? THE LESSONS OF THE MRS INQUIRY

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The 1992 general election was a disaster for the opinion poll industry. Four British polls published on the morning of polling day on average put Labour ahead of the Conservatives, albeit only by one percentage point. In the event the Conservatives were a comfortable seven and a half points ahead. The error was even worse than the last time the polls were seen to have got it 'wrong' in 1970; then the final polls on average put Labour four points ahead whereas the result showed a two and a half point Conservative lead. Further, at least on that occasion one company, ORC, was within a point and a half of the result. In 1992 the company which came closest, Gallup, was still seven points adrift in its estimate of the Conservatives' lead.

The record in Scotland was hardly any better. The last poll of each of the four main companies which conducted Scottish polls underestimated the Conservative vote on average by five points, and overestimated Labour's and the SNP's support by three and three and a half points respectively. True, none of the companies polled as late as the final British polls did, so there is a greater chance that last minute changes of opinion could have occurred. And the final British polls themselves did detect a small (though statistically insignificant) shift towards the Conservatives in the final week of the campaign, viz. a one point increase in the Conservative vote. But the underestimation of the eventual Conservative vote in the last Scottish polls is uncannily similar to that found in the final British polls. And given that their methodology was also largely similar to that deployed by the British polls, it

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The final British polls in 1992

	Fieldwork dates	Sample	Con %	Lab %	LDem %	Oth %	C lead %
NOP	7-8/4	1,746	39	42	17	2	-3
ICM	8/4	2,186	38	38	20	4	0
MORI	7-8/4	1,731	38	39	20	3	-1
Gallup	7-8/4	2,478	38.5	38	20	3.5	+0.5
Average			38	39	19	3	-1
Election (GB)			42.8	35.2	18.3	3.7	+7.6

The last Scottish polls in 1992

	Fieldwork dates	Sample	Con %	Lab %	LDem %	SNP %	Oth %
MORI	2/4	1,060	21	44	12	23	0
MR Scotland	2-3/4	1,133	18	43	11	27	1
System 3	4-5/4	1,087	21	40	12	25	2
ICM	5-6/4	1,056	22	41	11	25	1
Average			20.5	42	11.5	25	1
Election			25.6	39.0	13.1	21.5	0.8

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is likely that what wrong in Scotland was largely the same as what went wrong in Britain as a whole.

Not surprisingly this record attracted plenty of criticism and questions from the press. Within the market research industry it aroused horror. Political polling is a relatively small part of that industry, but it is by far the most visible. The pollsters' own polls revealed that public confidence in their work was severely dented by the election result (Gallup 1992). The wider industry was concerned that it had also damaged confidence in the results of commercial market research more generally.

The Market Research Society, the professional association for all market researchers, had already been active in the 1987 election in trying to uphold standards in the conduct of opinion polls. It acted swiftly to try and find out what had gone wrong in 1992. Within hours of the outcome it had established a working party (see Appendix). It was hoped it would be able to make a statement within a week! In the event it published an interim report after two months (MRS 1992) and its final report has taken some two years to prepare (MRS 1994). But now that their lengthy deliberations have borne fruit what can we say about what went wrong, and what are the implications for the future of opinion polls both north and south of the border?

LATE SWING?

One possible reason why the polls could have got it wrong is that there was a sudden late swing to the Conservatives. After all, the polls had detected the possibility that a late swing was going on in their final polls and perhaps this had continued more rapidly in the final hours before polling took place. Many an anecdote was told of voters who entered the polling booth intending to vote Labour but who, when faced with the possibility they might be voting for tax cuts in their hands, were moved to place their cross against the Conservatives. Others, including Neil Kinnock himself, felt that the last minute attacks on the Labour leader in the Tory tabloid press had dissuaded people from voting Labour. And many Liberal Democrats, disappointed at their failure to secure the balance of power, argued that some of their supporters had been frightened into the Conservative camp by the prospect of a Labour government and/or the chaos of a hung parliament (Bullmore 1992; King, 1992; Lipsey 1992; MacArthur 1992; Worcester 1992).

In Scotland there was an additional twist to these stories. Here it was argued that John Major's outspoken defence of the union and his warning of the

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dangers of devolution had persuaded voters to switch to the Conservatives, producing not just a late swing but also an increase in Conservative support since 1987.

The working party was not concerned to establish why there might have been a late swing but simply whether or not it occurred and, if so, how large it was (but for an analysis which takes a sceptical view of many of the reasons offered see Heath et al 1993). This task however was crucial. For if there had been a substantial late swing, then it could be argued that the polls were in fact correct at the time that they were taken and their methods could be given a clean bill of health. No poll can ever claim to do more than measure opinion at the time it is taken and they all already poll as late as they possibly can before polling day. Late swing may be inconvenient for those who expect the polls to forecast the outcome of the election but perhaps it cannot be avoided.

But how can one ascertain the existence of a late swing? Ideally one would reinterview those who had been interviewed by the polling companies in their final polls to see how they had actually voted. We could then examine whether or not they actually voted the same way as they said they would before polling day, and if so who benefited.

Unfortunately this exercise was only undertaken for one of the four final polls. ICM succeeded in recontacting just over half of those who they interviewed in their final poll. This revealed that voters' last minute decisions did benefit the Conservatives. Not though simply through voters switching parties which is the only kind of switching that can unambiguously be described as a 'late swing'. Those who had failed to indicate how they would vote before polling day also ended up being more likely to vote Conservative. Some of these had said they wouldn't vote, others had said they did not know how they would vote. Whether either represents late swing rather than simply a greater reluctance in the part of Conservative voters to declare their voting intention is a moot point. However, even if we leave that aside, according to ICM's figures the difference between what people said they would do and what they actually did could only account for two of the Conservatives' seven and a half points lead - that is a swing of 1% to the Conservatives. This is no more than one-quarter of the error in the polls.

ICM's evidence is however hardly definitive. Because they only succeeded in recontacting just over half of their original respondents we cannot be sure that those who were recontacted were typical of the rest of the sample.

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Perhaps they were less - or more - inclined to switch at the last minute than those who were not recontacted.

The lessons of ICM's recall

	Con	Lab	Con lead
	%	%	%
Original poll result	38	38	0
Result after allowing for:-			
Differential turnout	39	39	0
Switching between parties	40	39	+1
Late deciders	40	38	+2

Differential turnout: *The net impact of those who decided not to vote when they said they would when interviewed before polling day and of those who decided to vote when they said they would not.*

Switching between parties: *The net impact of those who said when interviewed beforehand they would vote for one party but who reported after polling day they actually voted for a different party.*

Late deciders: *The net impact of the votes of those who said beforehand they did not know how they would vote or that they would not vote.*

Although none of the other surveys (including those conducted in Scotland) went back to those who they interviewed in their final polls, fortunately we do have a range of other evidence from which we can attempt to corroborate ICM's estimate of the size of the last minute swing. Two panel studies which had interviewed respondents regularly during the course of the election campaign also reinterviewed their respondents after polling day. One was undertaken by MORI, the other by NOP. In both cases their last pre-polling day interview was conducted as much as a week before polling day - and as we have already noted, there was some sign of a movement towards the Conservatives during the few days before the final polls were taken. Both panels indeed show a rather larger swing to the Conservatives than ICM - 2.5% in the case of MORI and as much as 4% in the NOP panel.

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But both these exercises also have their methodological limitations; MORI's recall was undertaken by telephone and only recontacted 60% of their original sample, while NOP recontacted less than a third. Further, other evidence points towards a more conservative estimate of the late swing. Although Gallup did not reinterview the respondents in their final poll, they did conduct a fresh cross-section survey on the two days after polling day; this only showed a half point increase in the reported Conservative vote compared with their final poll. Meanwhile, the British Election Study, a non-commercial survey undertaken using a different sampling strategy from most opinion polls, also interviewed a panel of respondents before and after polling day. The pre-polling day interviews were spread out over the campaign (and were confined to voters who has also been eligible to vote in 1987), so the panel certainly does not simply measure late swing. But in any event it shows no net increase in the Conservative vote and just a two point drop in Labour's vote, well below what we would expect to see if there had been a substantial late swing (Heath et al 1993; Jowell et al 1993).

In short there is no single reliable estimate of how much late swing there was. All of the sources of evidence have their limitations, and in this as in other aspects of its work, the working party could do no more than collate and reanalyse the data that had been collected by others. But the limitations of each source are different and collectively they point in a clear direction. They all suggest there was some late swing from Labour to the Conservatives, but equally that it was nothing like enough to account for the difference between the final polls and the eventual outcome.

Reported vote in post-election cross-section samples

	Fieldwork dates	Con	Lab	LDem	Oth	C lead
		%	%	%	%	%
Gallup	10-11/4	39	38	19	4	+1
ICM/Rowntree	10-11/4	40	38	19	4	+2
MORI	25-28/4	39	37	18	6	+2
ICM	8-9/5	44	37	15	4	+7
Average		40.5	37.5	18	4.5	+3

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Election (GB)	42.8	35.2	18.3	3.7	+7.6
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Indeed, the clearest evidence that late swing could not be the whole explanation comes from a handful of cross-section polls undertaken immediately after polling day. These polls asked their respondents how they had voted in the general election. And they recruited those respondents using sampling methods similar to those used in the final campaign polls. So if late swing were the whole explanation and the methodology of the polls not at fault then we should find that on average the reported vote of the respondents in these polls faithfully replicates the election result. (Indeed, if there should be any error then we might expect it to be in the direction of overestimating the Conservative vote as previous elections suggest that people tend to overreport voting for the winning party (Crewe 1983)). But in fact on average these polls only produced a Conservative lead of three points and none of them overestimated the Conservative lead. Clearly, something was wrong with the polls during the election campaign.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

Just as commentators provided a variety of explanations as to why there was a late swing to the Conservatives, so equally there was no shortage of accounts as to why the polls had got it wrong. It was suggested that people were ashamed to admit they were going to vote Conservative for fear of being thought selfish, and so lied to the pollsters about their true intentions (Harris 1992). It was argued that the polls had interviewed Labour supporters who had taken themselves off the electoral roll because of the poll tax. Meanwhile, others pointed out that British citizens who had been resident abroad for up to 20 years were now entitled to vote (and were much more likely to be Conservative than Labour sympathisers) and none of these could have been interviewed by the pollsters.

However, none of these are important explanations of what happened. To start with lying. Of course, proving whether or not people deliberately lied about how they had voted is very difficult. But we do have one, albeit imperfect, indicator of the level of dishonesty in people's answers to interviewers. The 1992 British Election Study compared respondents' own reports of whether they had actually voted or not with the marked-up electoral registers. These registers are the electoral registers which are used at

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each polling station to record who has been issued with a ballot paper; they are available for inspection at the Lord Chancellor's Office for twelve months after each general election.

This exercise does indeed reveal that more people 'lied' in 1992 than previously about whether or not they had voted. As many as 10% of those who said they had not voted in fact had done so; in 1987 the equivalent figure was only just over 5%. By answering as they did, these respondents ensured they were not asked to say how they had voted. But these reluctant voters are far from being closet Conservatives. For although they were not asked how they had voted, they were asked to say how much they supported or opposed each of the parties. And they gave their highest marks to Labour rather than the Conservatives. So on this evidence if any group had a particular propensity to lie in order to hide their true preferences, it seems to have been Labour rather than Conservative voters.

The impact of the poll tax on electoral registration has been the subject of some controversy (see especially Smith and McLean 1994). Certainly, the number of people on the electoral register stopped growing in the late 1980s around the time the tax was introduced, even though the Registrar General's estimate of the adult population continued to increase. However, no-one has produced any reliable evidence that those who did remove themselves from the register in this period were mostly Labour voters; indeed such evidence as there is suggests they were not (Crewe 1992; ICM 1992). (And in Scotland even a priori reasoning would suggest they would be as likely to be SNP as Labour supporters.) But even if they were disproportionately Labour, a little mental arithmetic is sufficient to see that the impact of the poll tax on the accuracy of the polls could only have been small. The difference between the number of people on the register and the adult population grew by 850,000 between 1987 and 1992. Assume that all of this additional deregistration was caused by the poll tax, that 65% of these would have voted if they had been on the register and that 75% of them would have voted Labour. On these assumptions we find that the Conservative lead over Labour would have been just 1% lower. So even if the polls did regularly include in their samples people who were ineligible to vote because they were not on the register (and many of them did in fact ask whether their respondents were on the register or not), this could have accounted for no more than a small part of their error.

Assessing the precise impact of the poll tax may be difficult, but ascertaining the irrelevance of overseas voters is not. The extension of the franchise to expatriate Britons has been greeted with far less enthusiasm than some had anticipated. There were just 31,942 overseas voters on the register in 1992.

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Even if they had all voted Conservative, they would have been worth just 0.1% of the vote.

However, although these popular explanations for the inaccuracy of the polls prove to be misguided, there lies a grain of truth behind them. The claim that the polls were led astray by the poll tax or overseas voters are in essence claims that the polls failed to interview a representative sample of the electorate. And while these specific explanations may be wrong, there is evidence that the samples interviewed by the polls were in fact biased in a direction that favoured Labour. Equally, while Tory voters may not have lied, they do seem to have been more reluctant to declare their preference than Labour voters. These are the two crucial findings which have emerged from the MRS inquiry.

SAMPLE BIAS

In recent elections, virtually all opinion polls have been undertaken using quota sampling. Under this method, interviewers are told to interview (in a given location) a specific number of persons of a given type, such as so many men and so many women, so many under 25, over 65, etc. But interviewers are free to interview whomsoever they like within those constraints. This is in stark contrast to random or probability sampling in which interviewers are instructed to interview a specific person (or a person at a specific address) who has been chosen (using a random selection method) in the office.

The great virtue of quota sampling is that it enables surveys to be undertaken quickly. So long as the interviewer finds the correct number of males, the correct number of females, etc., the method assumes it does not matter who those males or females are. The quota can be filled by interviewing those whom the interviewers can find on a given day or couple of days. Random surveys, in contrast, typically require weeks if not months if they are to achieve the high response rate that ensures that they are adequately representative. And given the shortness and intensity of British campaigns that is far too long a period to satisfy the news values of the pollsters' media clients.

But if they are to work quota samples have to fulfil two requirements. The first is that the proportion of persons of a given type whom the interviewers are asked to interview is indeed the same as the proportion of such persons in the population as a whole. The second is that the variables used to set quotas sufficiently circumscribe the freedom available to interviewers about whom

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to interview to ensure that the samples are representative. Given too much freedom, interviewers are liable to choose to interview the kinds of people whom they like to interview, people who may well be socially and politically atypical (see also Marsh and Scarbrough 1991). The MRS inquiry found evidence that the polls failed to satisfy both requirements in 1992.

In order to determine the proportions of persons of each type that should be interviewed, all of the polls conducted during the election campaign relied in whole or in part upon the results of the National Readership Survey. (Some press reports that the polls relied upon the out-of-date 1981 Census were wholly erroneous.) This survey is undertaken on a continuous basis using random rather than quota sampling, and thus appears to provide a convenient up-to-date source of information on the social profile of the country. However the principal aim of the survey is to provide a measure of newspaper and magazine readership, information which is vital to the determination of advertising strategies and rates, and not to provide an accurate social profile of the nation. Its response rates are typically lower than commonly found on major government surveys which do attempt to measure social profile such as the General Household Survey.

And comparison of the results of the 1991 National Readership Survey (NRS) with those of the 1991 Census (see Table on page 74) indicate that the survey may indeed not be the most accurate source of information on the social profile of the country. Most crucially, the NRS appears to be short of professional and managerial occupations, while it contains too many skilled manual workers. All of the companies used information from the NRS on social class as part of their quota controls. As a result all of them probably interviewed too few middle class voters, who are of course more likely to vote Conservative than Labour.

Equally, the NRS also appears to contain too many people living in council houses - 21.5% rather than 19.5%. However, none of the companies used housing tenure in order to set their quotas. But two, MORI and NOP, did subsequently weight their results so that the proportion of council tenants matched what they thought was an accurate profile of the population. Alas, they weighted not to 21.5%, let alone 19.5%, but to 24%. The reason is simple. In setting their target they used the most recently available figure from the NRS for the proportion of households which are council houses rather than the proportion of persons (aged 18+) living in council houses. But it is the latter which matters in acquiring an accurate social profile of the nation. The proportion of households living in council houses is larger than

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the proportion of persons because the average number of adults living in a council house is below the average for all households.

The unrepresentativeness which seems to have been produced in the polls by the use of incorrect quotas can be seen in a couple of demographic measures. First, the polls interviewed too many council tenants (even before any weighting was applied). No less than 22 campaign polls collected details of their respondents' housing tenure. Of these only three interviewed fewer council tenants than the 19.5% which appeared in the census. No less than ten interviewed 22% or more. Second, none of the polls included more than 27% of their respondents living in households with two or more cars; the census found there were as many as 30%.

The Class Profile of the NRS and of the 1991 Census

Registrar General's Social Class	NRS 1991	Census 1991
	%	%
I Professional etc.	3.1	4.7
II Managerial and technical	21.6	27.3
IIINM Skilled Non-manual	22.4	22.8
IIIM Skilled Manual	24.5	21.3
IV Partly skilled	16.4	15.9
V Unskilled	6.5	6.0
Unclassified	4.7	2.0

Based on economically active persons. Those not classified were respondents for whom social class could not be ascertained or who were members of the armed forces.

These biases in housing tenure and in car ownership may not however simply be a consequence of setting quotas which contained too few middle class people. They could also indicate that the quota controls used by the polls were insufficient to circumscribe interviewer choice about whom to interview. More direct evidence that the latter was also the case can be found by looking at the variation between the polls in the proportions of respondents who were found in various socio-economic groups. These proportions did not change during the short period of a three-week election

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campaign so the proportions recorded in the polls should vary by no more than might be explained by sampling error. In practice there was more variation than sampling error alone would lead us to expect. The proportion of council tenants found by the polls varied from 17.5% to 27%. Similarly, the proportion of trade unionists varied from 15% to 21%.

In short, even if they were accurate, it is by no means clear that the quota controls used by the polling companies were adequate to ensure that their samples were representative, either socially or politically. This is perhaps hardly surprising when we look at those characteristics on which quotas were actually set. These were age, sex, social class and, in some polls only, employment status. Two of these, age and sex, are only very weakly associated with voting behaviour. They are in fact amongst the least important social characteristics which an opinion poll has to get right to be sure of acquiring an accurate measure of the balance of voting intentions. Far too much of the burden of ensuring that the sample is politically representative in fact falls upon social class. And to make matters worse the particular class schema used by the opinion polls, the social grade schema, is highly unreliable and heavily dependent on the coding and probing skills of the interviewer (O'Brien and Ford 1988).

DIFFERENTIAL REFUSAL

Approaching a representative sample is one thing. Securing a successful interview with that sample can be quite another. Some respondents will refuse to say how they will vote while others will say they don't know what they are going to do. Together these two groups can constitute a significant proportion of all those interviewed. Across all of their election campaign polls, the lowest proportion of refusals and 'don't knows' recorded by any company was 6% (NOP), while the highest was 16% (Harris).

Traditionally in reporting their results the polls have effectively assumed that those who do not say how they will vote will in fact divide their support in the same way as those who do declare their voting intention. This they do by reporting the percentage support recorded for each party amongst those who do declare a vote intention. The evidence of the 1992 election suggest that this practice is no longer viable.

A number of different sources of evidence all suggest that those who refused or said that they did not know how they would vote in fact were in the event more likely to vote Conservative than the general population. For example, in

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ICM's recall of those whom it had interviewed in its final poll, as many as 58% of those who had refused to say before polling day how they would vote but were prepared to say after polling day how they had actually voted declared they had voted Conservative. In the British Election Study panel the equivalent figure was 59%. And while, the imbalance amongst the 'don't knows' appears not to have been quite so strong as this, again a number of different sources suggest they were more likely to vote Conservative than Labour (see also Moon 1993)

But this could only be the tip of the iceberg. If Conservative voters were less willing to declare their voting intention in an interview in which they were otherwise willing to participate, perhaps they were also less willing to participate in opinion polls at all. Refusal rates are not collected as a matter of course in quota surveys, and are impossible to calculate where such surveys are conducted in the street (on spotting a clipboard, the unwilling victim may well cross the street to avoid being approached in the first place). But three recent quota surveys reported refusal rates as high as 35% to 38% (MRS 1994). Potentially at least the impact of differential refusal to participate could be explosive.

Of course, if quota sampling works effectively, refusals to participate should not make any difference. Somebody who refuses to participate will be replaced by someone from a similar background, and thus presumably similar views. But if the criteria used for quota selection are only weakly related to vote then the less confident we can be that like is replaced with like. Thus here also the importance of good quota controls is again evident.

Unfortunately, the voting behaviour of those who refuse to participate in surveys is, like that of those who supposedly lie about their voting behaviour, very difficult to research. Two characteristics which interviewers can record about refusers are their gender and estimated age. Three recent experiments into refusers confirms the conventional wisdom that older women are more likely to refuse to participate, and older women are marginally more likely to vote Conservative (MRS 1994). But because age and gender are only weakly associated with vote, this approach can never measure differential refusal adequately. (See also Curtice and Payne, forthcoming).

Differential refusal can in fact be thought of as part of a more general potential problem for quota polls undertaken in a relatively short period of time. For quota polls are not only confined to those who are willing to be interviewed at short notice but also to those who can be contacted over a short-period of time in the first place. Jowell et al (1993) attempt to measure

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the impact of this 'availability bias' by looking at the voting behaviour of those who were interviewed on first contact on the British Election Study (which used probability rather than quota sampling) and comparing their voting behaviour with those who were only contacted subsequently. Of course those who were interviewed at first contact were not socially representative. To allow for this, they weighted this group so that their social profile matched that of the opinion polls on the characteristics used to set quota controls, thereby mimicking the quota control procedure.

At first sight their findings suggest that Labour voters are more readily available to be interviewed and that existing quota controls are unable to counteract availability bias adequately. They find that the Conservative lead over Labour is six points lower amongst the election study first contacts than amongst the whole sample. But unfortunately their evidence is not as robust as it seems. First in order to weight their first contacts they used the quota controls set by NOP which were atypical of those by other pollsters and which resulted in that company interviewing even fewer middle class respondents than the rest of the polls. This accounts for one of their six points. Second, the election study itself overestimated the Conservative lead over Labour by three points. Compared with the actual election result the (correctly) weighted first contacts only overestimate the Conservative lead by two points, suggestive but hardly definitive. But third, even that overestimate is not necessarily evidence of availability bias. It could just as easily reflect the inaccuracy of the quotas used.

Thus, we are left with one clear conclusion and much remaining uncertainty. Those who participated in polls but were reluctant to say how they would vote were more likely to vote Conservative. From this it seems likely but is far from certain that those who refused (or were unavailable) to participate at all were also more likely to be Conservative. It is even less clear whether or not existing quota controls were able to counteract any resulting bias that did exist.

THE WAY FORWARD?

As we have seen, finding out what went wrong in 1992 is itself a difficult enough task. But ascertaining how to do things better in future is even more so. Given the infrequency of nationwide elections in Britain, pollsters have little opportunity to experiment with alternative research designs. However, a number of remedies have been proposed, some radical, some more modest.

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Some indeed have already been adopted by some or all of the polling companies.

Perhaps the most straightforward problem for the pollsters is coping with those who fail to state a voting intention. One solution is to try and reduce the number who do so. It has been suggested that this could be done by implementing a 'secret ballot'. Instead of respondents being asked orally by an interviewer how they would vote, they are asked to complete a ballot paper and place it in an envelope, thereby increasing the anonymity of the procedure. ICM decided to adopt the secret ballot in its monthly polls soon after the 1992 election and initially at least it consistently recorded a lower vote share for the Conservatives than other polls. But more recently this has not been the case while experiments undertaken by other companies have failed to show that use of the secret ballot makes much difference.

Another solution is to find a better way of estimating how those who fail to declare how they would vote will actually do so. Evidence from both ICM's recall of the respondents to its final poll and the British Election Study panel survey indicates that around 60% of these respondents in fact voted the same way as they said they did in the 1987 general election. Thus rather than assuming that refusers and 'don't knows' will vote the same way as those who do declare a voting intention it is far preferable to collect information on respondent's past vote and to use this to infer how these respondents would vote. A procedure along these lines has already been adopted on a number of polls.

Rather more difficult is ensuring that the quota controls and weights used are accurate. True, some of the mistakes made in 1992 such as weighting by the proportion of households which are council tenants rather than the proportion of persons are easily remediable. But the industry is faced with a difficult decision over whether it should continue to rely on the NRS as its source of information on the social profile of the nation, and if not what the alternatives might be. One possibility would be to switch to a government source such as the General Household Survey. But government surveys do not use the social grade scheme for classifying occupations which is currently used by the polls, and so any change would require that that be abandoned also. The MRS inquiry report suggests this may be feasible and indeed desirable, but it would require a substantial investment by the industry in new procedures. An alternative route would be for the industry to initiate its own high quality random survey designed explicitly to measure the social profile of the nation - but this would require the expenditure of considerable resources.

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But this still leaves the potential problem of the adequacy of quota controls as a means of ensuring that availability bias or interviewer discretion do not hinder the selection of a representative sample. In truth it matters relatively little whether polls achieve a representative balance of the genders or the age groups, as compared with for example owner occupiers and council tenants, **Sun** readers and **Mirror** readers, or car owners and non-owners. Yet the polls continue to rely on age and gender as quota controls, partly because they are easy for interviewers to operationalise (especially in the street) and partly because they believe that their clients, using common sense rather than social science sense, would find it difficult to accept a poll that contained far too many men or far too many young people. The MRS inquiry however recommends that the pollsters identify new variables for use in quota controls.

Equally, it is striking just how little information is collected by the polls on one important aspect of availability bias, refusal rates. True, these are not always easy to collect, especially in polls that use in-street interviewing. But this hardly justifies giving up on the attempt to do so. The collection of refusal rates should be part of the quality control of any survey organisation, in order to evaluate the success both of individual interviewers and of individual surveys. And it will be essential if the industry is to succeed in improving response rates as urged by the MRS inquiry

But perhaps even if all these changes are adopted quota controls will still never be adequate. That leaves us with two possibilities. One is to use weighting strategies to correct for the potential unrepresentativeness of quota samples. The other is to abandon quota sampling altogether.

How could weighting possibly overcome the problems of the polls? Well there is one piece of information which if it could be measured accurately would seem to hold great promise - past vote. For how someone voted last time is the best single predictor of they how are likely to vote next time, and thus a poll which is weighted to ensure that reported past vote is in line with the results of the last election would seem unlikely to be in serious error.

Weighting by past voting is indeed common practice in a number of countries. But in Britain at least it has become conventional wisdom that past voting cannot be measured sufficiently accurately to be used as a weighting variable. It is argued that voters have a tendency to align their past behaviour with their current preference - and those who voted Liberal/the Alliance in the past are particularly prone to do so. (Himmelweit et al 1978). Indeed the British Election Study panel shows that this was still true in 1992. As a result

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polls tend to find a deficit of declared former Liberals in their samples - but if they then weight their samples to correct for this apparent deficit they run the danger of overestimating the current level of Liberal Democrat support. This is precisely what happened to the first telephone polls undertaken in an election campaign in Britain when they used past voting as a weighting variable in an attempt to overcome the biases of telephone samples (Clements 1986).

Despite this potential pitfall, weighting by past vote is receiving serious attention once more. Polls conducted since 1992 have not found a deficit of past Liberal Democrat voters, but they have (as they did during the 1992 campaign) found a deficit of past Conservative voters, fuelling concern that the pro-Labour bias apparent in the election polls are continuing to plague the polls. This has encouraged ICM in particular to institute past vote weighting as a means of overcoming this apparent bias. Indeed it now uses past vote weighting in its regular polls for **The Guardian** following its experience in the 1994 Euro-elections, when it undertook the fieldwork the day after the polling stations had closed in order to ascertain how the nation had voted before the ballots were counted three days later. Before weighting the poll was as inaccurate as the final polls in the 1992 election; after weighting by past vote it only overestimated Labour's lead by two points. But weighting also made its overestimation of the Liberal Democrat vote even worse, so there must continue to be uncertainty as to how far vote by past vote can be used successfully.

So, perhaps we are left with our last alternative, and should scrap the quota methodology altogether. The problem is that any alternative method will have to be capable of being implemented successfully within the time and cost constraints typically imposed upon the pollsters by their media clients. One alternative which can meet those constraints, and is indeed already commonly used in polls undertaken in individual constituencies, is random location sampling. Here control over whom interviewers interview is achieved by requiring them to interview within a relatively small area of 150 addresses or so. These areas are chosen at random, but only after they have been sorted according to detailed census data on their social and economic profile. Thus the areas in which interviewing takes place should be a microcosm of the nation, and, given the smallness of the areas within which interviewers are required to interview, only very limited quota controls should be needed to ensure that interviewers contact a representative sample.

But whether random location sampling can be any more successful than quota sampling is unclear. The method was used by RSL in five unpublished polls

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it undertook during the campaign. Their record was rather better than that of the quota polls - on average they put the Conservatives two points ahead of Labour - but their final poll (a one point Conservative lead) was no more accurate than the published quota polls. Further, constituency polls undertaken during the election campaign using random location sampling proved no more accurate than any of the other polls.

In contrast there seems little doubt that good random sampling could overcome the problems faced by the polls in 1992. This is quite apparent from the results of both the 1992 British Election Study and the 1992 wave of the British Household Panel Study (Brynin 1994). The latter only underestimated the Conservatives' lead by one point while the former actually over-estimated it. But the fieldwork for these studies was not only relatively expensive but was undertaken over a period of months. Where random surveys have been used in commercial polling in the past - with correspondingly low response rates - they have proven no more accurate than quota polls.

However, one possibility is that random sampling could be used successfully if it were made part of a panel design. A random sample of respondents would be interviewed over an extensive fieldwork period before the election was called. This sample could then be recontacted over short period(s) during the election campaign; the response rate will be low but any resulting biases could be measured and corrected for by comparing the characteristics of those who were successfully recontacted with those of the original sample (Jowell et al 1993). But the fieldwork would still be relatively expensive - and would require that the date of the next election should be guessed reasonably accurately in advance.

So what can we establish about the future of the opinion polls in the light of the MRS report? One thing is clear. Opinion polls will never be quite the same again. The inquiry has uncovered a number of deficiencies in the way in which the polls were conducted. And a number of changes have already been implemented to try and overcome these.

The real uncertainty is how far those changes will have to go. The inquiry suggests a number of remedies but it does not give any assurances that these will be effective or sufficient to put the polls back on track. Indeed, as well as calling for improvements in the current practice of quota sampling, it also suggests that work is required to establish whether alternative methods such as random sampling might be more successful.

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But this of course begs the question of what do we mean by 'successful'. Existing methods have been developed to satisfy a media which is primarily interested in getting as good a headline as possible as cheaply as possible. And, encouraged by the intensity of British election campaigns, a good headline is defined as the 'latest' information on who is going to win. Yet both speed and cheapness are enemies of good-quality survey research. And they may also be false gods. In 1992, one rather more expensive poll conducted gradually but accurately during the course of the 1992 campaign would have proved far more valuable to whoever had commissioned it than anything which was actually undertaken. The real lesson of 1992 is that not only do the polls need to change their methods, but that the media also need to change their expectations.

APPENDIX: MRS WORKING PARTY

The original members of the working party were John Barter (formerly of NOP), Prof. Martin Collins (City University Business School), John Curtice (University of Strathclyde), John O'Brien (British Market Research Bureau) and Sue Stoessl (Director General, Market Research Society), none of whom were currently responsible for the conduct of opinion polls but all of whom were closely acquainted with the industry. After the publication of the interim report two pollsters, Nick Sparrow (ICM) and Robert Worcester (MORI), joined the working party. Later John Barter resigned as the working party's chairman and his place was taken by David Butler (Nuffield College, Oxford). Similarly, following her resignation as Director General of the Market Research Society, Sue Stoessl was replaced by her successor in that post, Michael Warren.

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