

The record of the final national polls, marginal polls and regional polls

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Introduction

This chapter seeks to set the scene by providing an overview of the record of the “final” general election polls. We compare these polls with the election outcome. And we look at how this compares with the record of the pollsters in previous election campaigns.

At the outset, we need to make a distinction between the different types of polls that were conducted during the campaign. These fall into a number of categories:

- *National polls*, conducted with samples of electors (who may or may not turn out to be voters), across Great Britain. These surveys cover England, Scotland and Wales, although they tend not to have sufficient sample size to look at the latter two countries’ voting intention in any robust way. Because of the very different political context in Northern Ireland, these “national” polls tend not to cover this part of the UK. Taking the campaign as a whole (as opposed to the “final” polls which we come to below), we have counted around 60 national polls conducted between 5 April and election day.
- *Scottish polls*. Because the national polls do not provide enough sample to give a meaningful picture of the state of play in Scotland, a number of specific polls of Scottish electors were commissioned and published. As far as we are aware, there were no separate polls of this kind in Wales during the 2005 campaign.
- Polls in *groups of marginal constituencies*. These are designed to give an indication of the state of the parties in these key constituencies where the election outcome is divided. They are typically conducted in a cross-section of constituencies, and the intention is to generate findings that will paint an accurate picture of what is happening in particular groups of constituencies. This marks it out from our final category....
- Polls in *specific marginal constituencies*. These polls are commissioned in “weathervane” constituencies where the results are viewed as particularly close or particularly interesting (or both). Finchley and Cardiff Central are two examples from the 2005 campaign.

What is common to all these polls is that they present voting intention figures for the main parties (or, in local surveys, independents or individual candidates).

We need to remember that each poll will include a range of other questions about the election – for example likelihood of voting, views on the party leaders, important issues in the election, ratings of the parties on various dimensions, etc.

Some of these questions are used in the calculation of the voting intention figures. Examples here would be those covering certainty of vote, or how the respondent voted in the 2001 election. These issues are covered in more detail by Andrew Cooper.

And other questions provide real insights into the “story” of the election – and the lessons from these results are discussed elsewhere in this document by Nick Moon and others.

In what follows, we are concentrating primarily on the voting intention figures, since that is the yardstick against which the polls tend to be judged.

We need to be careful about our use of the term “final poll” here. For the national polls, we are talking about interviews completed during the final week in the campaign. But for the “non-national” surveys, we tend to be referring to a fieldwork which was completed rather earlier, and we do therefore need to make an additional allowance for late swing and the impact of local campaigning when we think about their performance.

First, the national polls.

The National Polls

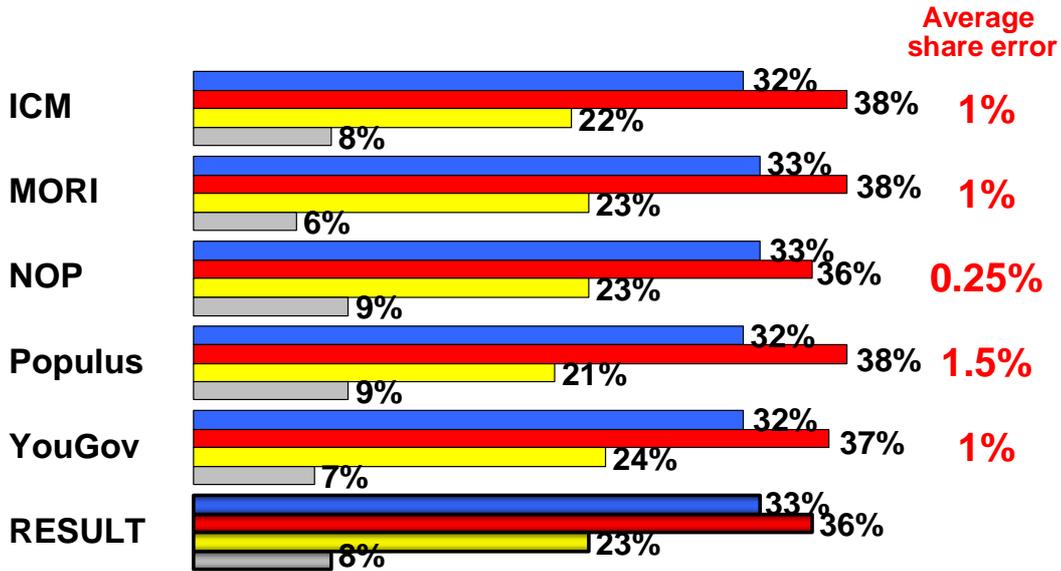
Five polling organisations produced “final” election polls on May 5th, setting out their prediction for the share of the vote.

By any standards, this can be seen – individually and collectively – as a very good performance.

NOP achieved a near-perfect poll, and are the winners of the first BPC *Golden Calculator* award.

But each of the pollsters produced results that were not only within the margin of error, but very close to the final outcome.

Final GB poll “predictions” MORI



Excludes polls completed before 2 May

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The “poll of polls”, which groups together all the polls into a simple average score for each party, is not everyone’s favourite way of looking at survey results. But is helpful here in providing an overview of the industry’s performance:

	Poll of “final” polls	Election outcome
Con	32	33
Lab	37	36
LD	23	23
Other	8	8

We need to spend a moment thinking about how this positive record fits in with the experience of previous elections. Here, the impact of the 1992 election polls looms large. These were described by the Market Research Society’s subsequent enquiry as “the most spectacular failure in the history of British election surveys.”¹

The 1992 experience was a salutary one for everyone involved in polling, and the period since has been one where pollsters have been very active in trying out new approaches in relation to sampling approach, survey methods and analysis techniques.

¹ The Opinion Polls and the 1992 General Election, Market Research Society, 1994

The result is an industry which is far more diverse than it was previously. But at the same time, it is one where there is now a considerable degree of agreement as to what are the main issues the pollsters face in their work, particularly at election time

The MRS report remains an important piece of work, and although the context has moved on somewhat, many of the issues raised in that document are those which concern pollsters today: *quotas* and *weighting techniques*, *response rates*, how to deal with *refusals*, understanding and diagnosing “*late swing*”, *Conservative supporters behaving differently* to Labour supporters, etc.

Perhaps its most lasting legacy, however, has been in the way pollsters look at the world. They acknowledge that they need to be ever vigilant about their methods and how they interpret the data they collect. And there is an understanding that the next general election will present a very different set of challenges.

Nick Sparrow’s paper discusses some of these issues in more detail. This includes the overarching question of what polls are for: to guide the observer through the ups and downs of the campaign, or to give a prediction of the final outcome several weeks out? And there are more practical questions, such as the extent to which Labour supporters or incliners will remain less likely to actually turn out and vote than their Conservative counterparts.

Looking ahead to the next general election, one of the key questions for both pollsters and their clients will be: to what extent do national polls need to be supplemented by specific pieces of research in marginal constituencies? The set of final national polls described above were clearly very good in predicting the national share of the vote. But, as we now know, they were not as helpful as a vehicle for translating share of vote into seats at the House of Commons. To have a better chance of doing this with any degree of accuracy, we need to know what is going on in the marginals, as well as to have a picture of the state of play in Scotland and Wales.

Our sense is that there were rather fewer “non-national” polls in this election than in previous campaigns. But there are enough to enable us to reflect on the experience, and draw some conclusions – conclusions which are generally positive.

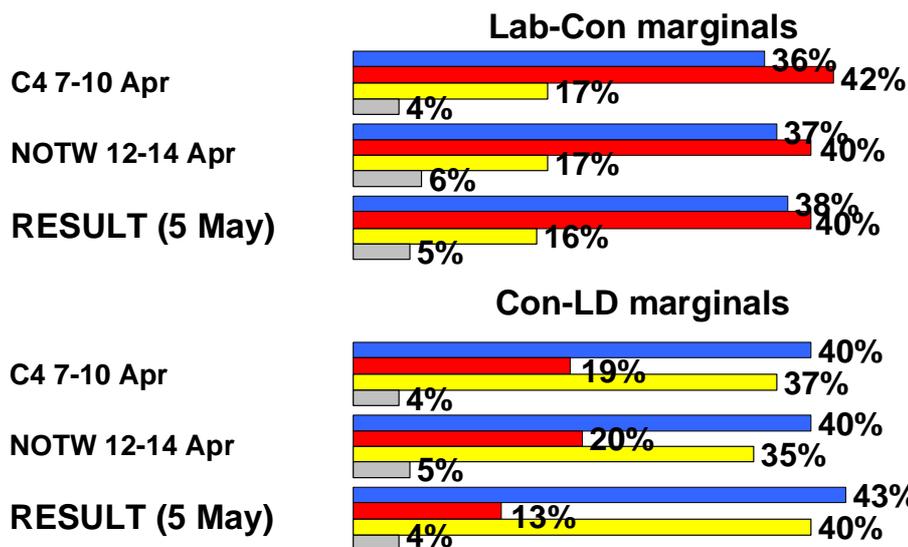
Non-national polls

First, we look at the polling that was conducted in groups of marginal constituencies. We are in slightly different territory to the national polls in that here we are not just looking at share of the vote: we are also looking at the swing from one party to another.

One of the things we now know is that the swing was by no means consistent within different groups of marginals. For example, within the group of Labour-Conservative marginals, we saw a very small swing of 0.6% from Lab to Con in Enfield North, and yet a much larger one of 8.7% in neighbouring Southgate. So one issue that the pollsters will need to think about is whether to structure the research so that it can answer questions, budget permitting, about a number of different types of constituencies.

For the moment, we have the ICM work for the Guardian, published mid-campaign, to reflect on. These should not be seen as “final” polls in the same way we look at the national polls. We do not know the exact nature of how the electorate behaved locally during the final two to three weeks of the campaign. That said, these polls appear to have given a very accurate picture of the state of play across this group of constituencies, whatever the variations at individual constituency level. MORI’s mid campaign analysis of voting intention in the marginals found similar results.

ICM polls in marginals MORI



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The second group of polls was conducted in individual constituencies. These are interesting from a number of fronts.

First, they act as a “raincheck” for the national polls. In 1997, on the eve of Labour’s landslide, they were used to provide confirmation that Labour really was on course to win. Will they hold Wirral South? Can they win Loughborough?

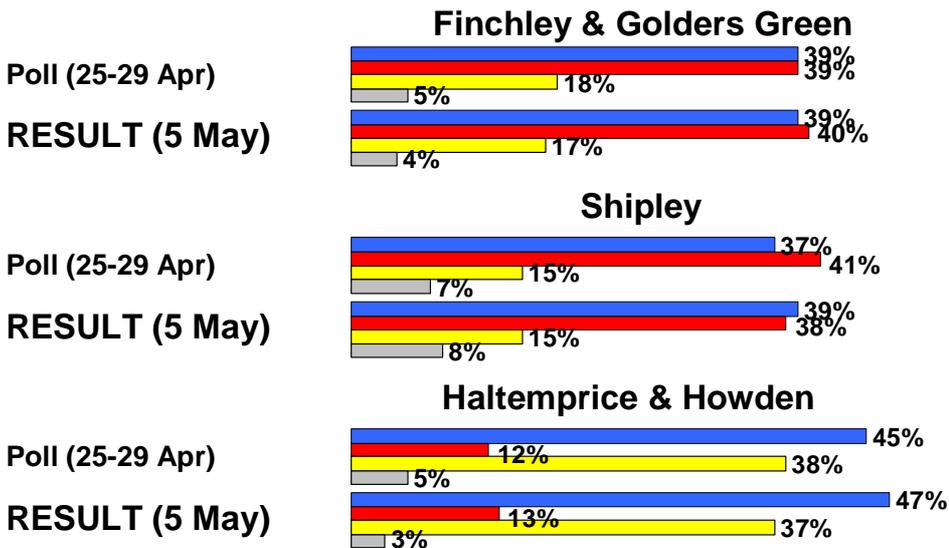
Second, the relationship between the client and the reader or viewer is different. Here at least part of the rationale for the poll is to provide people with information to help local electors make up their mind about which party to vote for.

Looking at these polls after the event we do need to remember that one entirely plausible scenario is that a very good mid-campaign poll in a marginal constituency will turn out to be wide of the mark in terms of *final vote share* for some of the parties. Many floating voters will be making up their mind during the course of the campaign, and information from the polls as to who is and who is not doing well is likely to be one of the factors that will help to make up their mind. For these local constituency polls – particularly those conducted early in the campaign – a reasonable target will be to identify the first and second place parties.

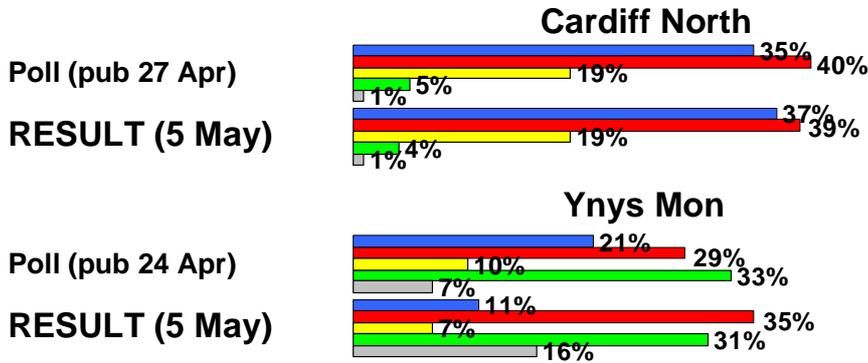
The Ynys Mon campaign is an example of this. From a polling point of view, this was made more difficult by the presence of a well known former Conservative standing as an Independent. But as the second chart below illustrates, the NOP poll there did correctly identify that it would be a two-horse race between Labour and Plaid.

The other NOP poll in Cardiff North and the three ICM polls for the Guardian were successful in both identifying the front two parties and how close the outcome would be. And, while we need to bear in mind that they were conducted during the penultimate week of the campaign, their broader performance in terms of registering share of the vote for many of the parties appears more than respectable.

ICM/Guardian constituency polls MORI



NOP constituency polls MORI

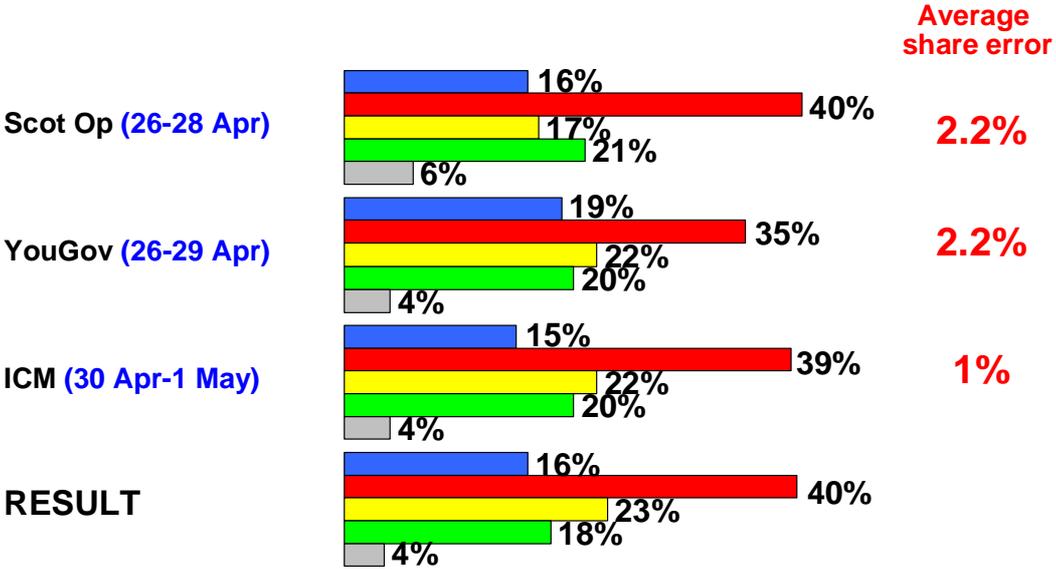


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In conclusion, then, the pollsters’ record in marginals – whether polling as a group or in specific constituencies – suggests that the industry is well placed for a future scenario where more rather than less emphasis will need to be placed on what is going on below the surface.

Finally, we move on to Scotland. We can identify only three polls conducted towards the end of the campaign. Two of these – the Scottish Opinion and YouGov surveys – completed during the final weekend rather than going into election week, and so might fall short of a strict definition of a “final” poll. ICM continue their very good recent record in Scotland, with an excellent final share prediction.

Final Scottish poll “predictions” MORI



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Conclusions

The Market Research Society’s report into the 1992 campaign “we would encourage methodological pluralism”. It asserted that “no pollster should feel the need to be defensive about responsible attempts to explore in a new direction”. And that “as long as we cannot be certain which techniques are best, uniformity will be a millstone”.

On this last point, there remains an ongoing debate about which techniques are best. But that we should not see that as a problem. Experience shows that circumstances which apply at one election do not necessarily apply at the next, and there will be an ongoing need to explore new approaches - against this backdrop of broad agreement of which factors all polling organisations need to be thinking about. At the heart of all this is the commitment by British Polling Council members to be open about both how their polls are carried out, as well as on how they are analysed. In doing so, the industry can claim to be following both the substance and the spirit of the MRS report, while being ever vigilant about that challenges that lie ahead.

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