British Polling Council

A Quick Guide for Journalists to the Use and Reporting of Opinion Polls

The results of a poll have just landed on your desk.
You have to write a report about it in a matter of hours.

But can you trust it? What should you be looking out for?
And what details should you include?

Here is a quick guide to what you need to know and do –
in just five minutes.

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How do polls work?

A typical opinion poll only interviews a thousand or so people. Yet polls are often used to make claims about what everyone thinks.

How is this possible?

The answer lies in statistical theory. This shows that if a thousand people are selected for interview at random – such that everyone has an equal chance of being included – most of the time the answers they give will be similar to the answers that would have been given if everyone in the country had been interviewed.

A little more formally, if 50% of all voters are in favour of something, there is a 95% chance that the level of support among a random sample of a thousand will be between 47% and 53%.

In practice, polls very rarely select the people they interview purely at random. However, any poll should be using methods that are intended to secure samples of people that – most of the time - have views that are similar to those of the country as a whole.

How are polls conducted?

Nowadays, most opinion polls are undertaken over the internet. People answer on their smartphone, tablet or computer.

Some are done by ringing people on the phone – on their mobile or landline.

Both types of polls are often conducted over two or three days, though sometimes a little longer.

Most commonly, internet polls interview a sample of people (often called a 'panel') who have previously indicated a willingness to answer poll questions. When they first joined the panel these people will often have given a lot of information about themselves. This helps the polling company ensure the people asked to complete a particular poll are typical of the country as a whole.

However, some internet polls use 'river sampling' – inviting people who have visited certain websites or who use certain smartphone apps – to complete a poll.

Some polls conducted over the phone simply ring at random phone numbers that are thought to be in use. Others may ring people about whom some information is already known.

Government and academic surveys are sometimes undertaken by interviewing people face to face in their own homes. In these instances, potential respondents are often selected entirely at random, while interviewing is conducted over an extended time period.

Should some polls be avoided and ignored?

Yes – any poll in which anyone can choose to take part.

For example, sometimes websites put up a poll question and invite their readers to say what they think. Or anyone can try to ascertain people's views by putting a poll question up on Twitter.

In such a poll, nothing is known about the characteristics of those who have responded. They may well not be representative of voters in general - even if many thousands of people have answered.

What can go wrong with polls?

As we have seen, statistical theory suggests polls should usually be reasonably accurate.

But it also implies that not every poll will be right. Just occasionally the chance, random variation to which all polls are subject **means the people they have interviewed have rather different views from voters in general**.

The potential impact of this random variation depends on the size of the poll. The fewer people who are interviewed, the greater the risk that the figures will diverge from the real position among voters as a whole. That is why most polls interview at least a thousand people - and often more.

Meanwhile, **not everyone who is asked to take part in a poll does so.** Those who do not respond may have different views from those that do.

Pollsters are alert to these risks. They will usually look at who has responded to a poll and check that, for example, the proportion of men and women in their sample, or the proportion of younger and older people, matches the known proportion in the population as a whole.

If there is a discrepancy, they may 'weight' their data so that those who belong to a group that is under-represented in the sample count as more than one respondent - and those who belong to a group that is over-represented count as less than one - so that each group is represented in proportion to its size in the population.

Most polls are weighted in this way. It helps reduce – but does not eliminate – the risk that a poll will get it 'wrong'.

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Are there limits to polls?

Here are five important limitations to bear in mind.

Beware of small movements.

The chance, random variation to which all polls are subject means that two polls on the same subject taken at different times can produce different estimates of how many people hold a particular point of view even though attitudes among the population as a whole have not changed.

Consequently, small differences of a few points or so between one poll and the next may mean little or nothing – and the temptation to focus on them should be avoided.

Often, it is only possible to be reasonably sure that attitudes have changed if and when a number of different polls all show much the same movement.

Beware of small differences.

That same random variation also means that we cannot place much reliance on small differences in the same poll. If, for example, a poll says that 51% support something and 49% are against, we cannot be sure that supporters are more numerous than opponents. All that we can safely say is that the public are more or less evenly divided on the subject.

Beware of 'outliers'.

As should by now be apparent, sometimes an individual poll will come up with an exceptional result that is 'wrong'. If a poll shows a big change that is not replicated by any other polls, the chances are it is just a statistical blip.

Beware of small sub-groups.

When polls are reported they not only provide estimates of what voters as a whole think, but also figures for those in different groups – men and women, younger people and older people, etc.

However, even with an overall sample size of 1,000, the number of people who belong to a particular group might be quite small. If so, given the random variation to which all polls are subject, there will be a lot of uncertainty about the accuracy of the figures for that group. Meanwhile, the figures for two such sub-groups could differ substantially when there is no difference among voters in general.

So, caution is needed in comparing the results of two polls as a whole – or two different sub-groups in the same poll.

Beware of fine detail.

Polls are an estimate of what the public think, subject to error. So, it makes little sense to report the percentage who give any particular answer to anything more precise than the nearest whole number – 54%, not 53.7%.

Illustrating the results

Graphs are often a good way of illustrating the key findings of a poll.

Here are three different types of graph that are commonly used.

Each one illustrates the results of a survey on attitudes towards the death penalty.

Respondents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed that, 'For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence'. They could give one of five answers ranging from 'agree strongly' to 'disagree strongly'. The question has been asked previously on a regular basis.

The first graph – a pie chart – reports the most recent finding in full. The size of each slice is proportional to the percentage it represents. Here that means it helps illustrate the fact that no single point of view was particularly popular.

Figure 1 For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence

3% Don't know
21% Agree strongly
22% Disagree strongly
21% Agree
18% Disagree
15% Neither
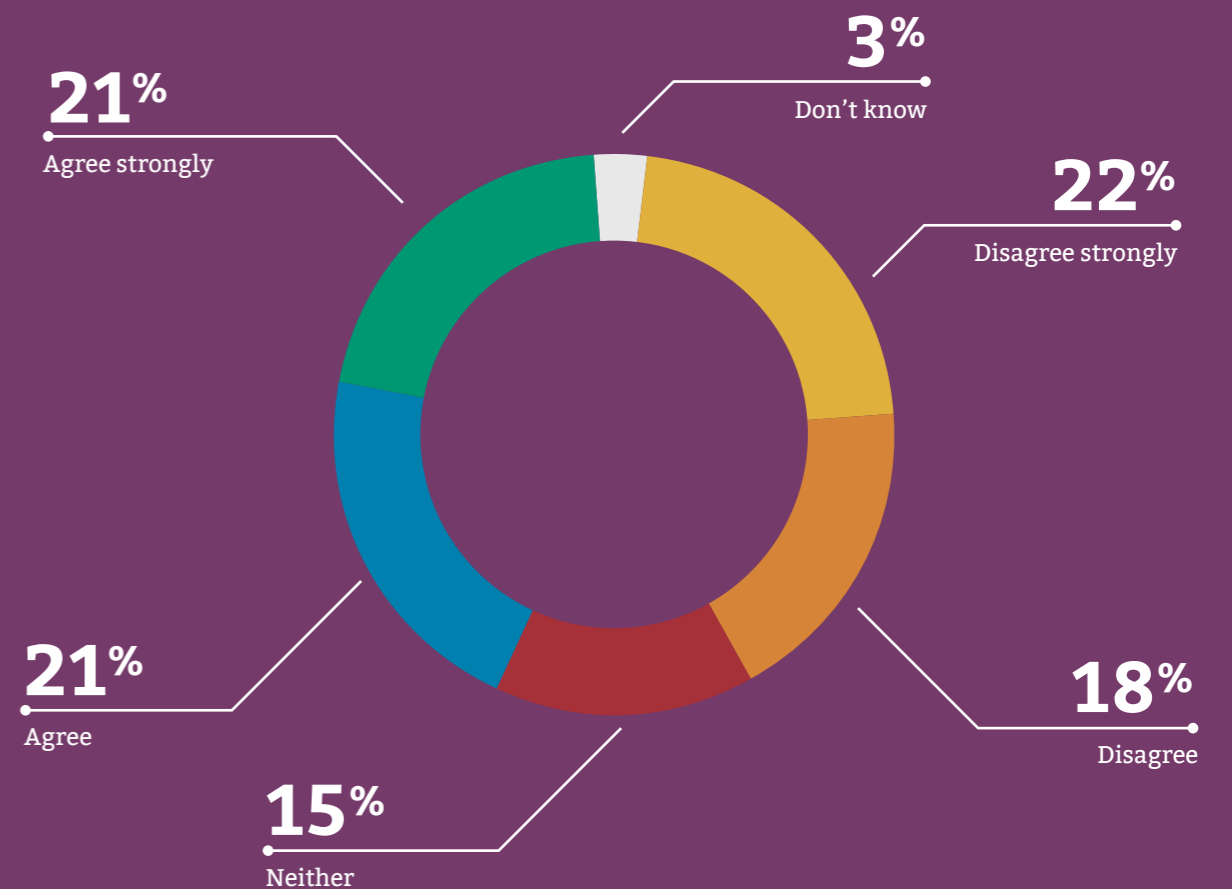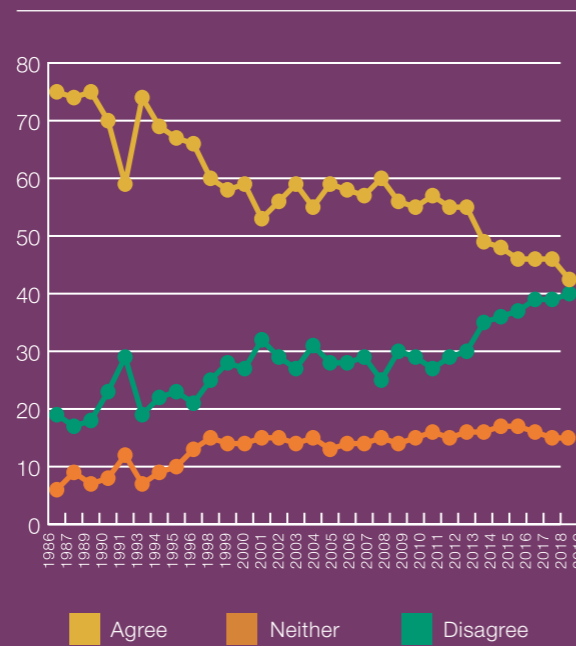
Source: British Social Attitudes

The second graph (below) is a histogram. The height of each column is proportional to the figure it represents. To simplify matters, those who said 'agree strongly' and those who said 'agree' have been added together – as have those who replied 'disagree strongly' and those who said 'disagree'.

The first trio of columns shows the pattern of responses among those under 45, while the second trio portray the figures for those aged 45 and over. This enables us to show that, whereas older people are more likely to support the death penalty than they are to oppose it, the reverse is (narrowly) true of younger people.

The third graph (see right) is a line graph. It is being used to show how attitudes have changed over time.
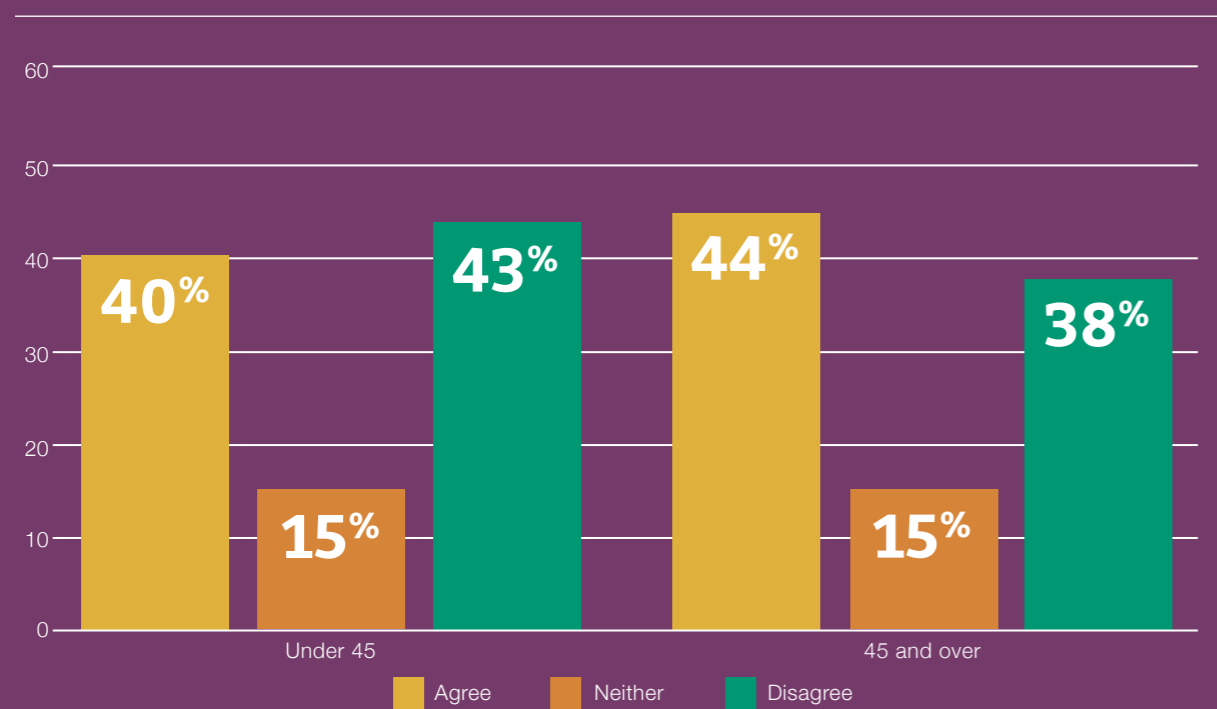
It shows that support for the death penalty has gradually been declining over time, though supporters still marginally outnumber opponents.

Figure 3 How Attitudes towards the Death Penalty have changed over time

■ Agree   ■ Neither   ■ Disagree

Source: British Social Attitudes

Figure 2 How Attitudes towards the Death Penalty differ by Age

■ Agree   ■ Neither   ■ Disagree

Source: British Social Attitudes

Does the wording of poll questions matter?

Most certainly.

People who respond to a poll have answered the particular questions they have been posed. If they had been asked different questions about the same subject, they might have given different answers.

Alas this is not always possible – but it does mean that any claims that public attitudes have changed should be based on comparing the results of two or more polls that have asked the same question at different points in time (as well as being comparable in other ways in how they have been conducted).

That does not mean that there is necessarily a 'right' or a 'wrong' way to ask about a subject. Rather, ideally a poll will ask more than one question, coming at a subject from different angles. That way, it is possible to ascertain whether the views people express are consistent or not.

But there are a few general rules to bear in mind.

1 **Good poll questions use ordinary, everyday language**, not impenetrable jargon or technical terms with which people may not be familiar. 'Do you think the government should spend more or less money on building new roads?', not, 'Do you think the government should invest more or less on enhancing the country's road infrastructure?'. Respondents are more likely to say 'Don't Know' in response to complicated questions – or even worse answer at random.

2 **Leading questions are usually best avoided.** Not, 'Do you agree that….', let alone, 'Do you agree with the Prime Minister that…?', but, rather, 'Do you agree or disagree that…?' Otherwise there is a risk that respondents think there is a right answer to a question.

3 **Watch out for double-barrelled questions.** If someone says they disagree that 'immigration should be increased because it would be good for the economy', we cannot be sure whether this means they are opposed to increasing immigration or that they think increasing immigration would not be good for the economy.

Meanwhile, words that have the same meaning may still have different connotations. People might be in favour of 'government spending' but warm less to 'spending taxpayers' money'.

Anyone using or reporting the results of a poll should look carefully at the questions that were asked – and decide for themselves whether they think they were worded clearly and fairly or not.

What about the don't knows?

Not everyone has a view on a subject. And often those answering a poll are given the chance to say they 'Don't Know'.

In reporting, it can sometimes seem more straightforward simply to ignore them – and just focus on the views of those who express a view.

Perhaps 60% of those who express a view agree and just 40% disagree. 'Majority back….' would appear to be the headline.

But if, say, 30%, said Don't Know, that means that well under half (42%) said they agreed.

Practice varies. Polls of voting intention in an election routinely leave out the Don't Knows when reporting their headline figures. In contrast, polls of people's attitudes often leave them in.

If they have been left out, this should be made clear – and care taken to avoid giving a misleading impression of the strength of the support or opposition that people have expressed.

If a lot of people say 'Don't Know' the question should probably not have been asked in the first place!

Here is an example of the big difference that including or excluding those who said 'Don't Know' can make.

In this survey people were asked whether they preferred elections to produce an overall majority for one party or a result that is proportional to votes cast.

Rather more said they preferred a majority than backed a proportional outcome.

However, nearly a quarter said they did not know which they preferred.

If, as in the first graph, the 'Don't Knows' are included in the figures that are reported, it appears that neither outcome is preferred by a majority of all voters.

However, if, as in the second graph, they are excluded, the impression is given that most voters prefer a majority outcome.

Figure 4 Majority Government vs. Proportional Representation

With DKs
- Majority government: 40%
- Proportional representation: 36%
- Don't know: 24%

Without DKs
- Majority government: 53%
- Proportional representation: 47%

Legend:
- Majority governement
- Proportional representation
- Don't know
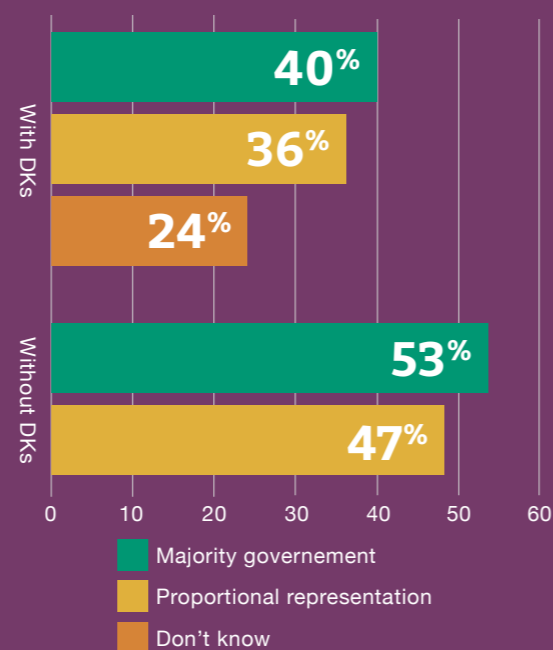
Source: 2014-23 British Election Study Internet Panel Wave 19. Respondents were asked to state whether they preferred 'That one party get more than half the seats in parliament so it can govern on its own' or 'That every party's percentage of seats in parliament is the same as their percentage of the vote'

What technical details should I report?

The technical details of a poll can seem dull and uninteresting. But hopefully you now appreciate that they matter.

The British Polling Council recommends that the media report of any poll should include the following information:

- Who commissioned the survey
- When the interviewing was done
- How was the poll conducted – internet/phone/face to face, etc
- Who was interviewed – general UK public/ people in Scotland/Political party members, etc
- How many people were interviewed
- The % expressing each point of view

And ideally it should also include:

- The full wording of each poll question
- A web address where full details of the poll can be found

Most of this information can be weaved informatively into the text of a well-written poll report.

Companies that are members of the British Polling Council are committed to making this information – together with the detailed computer tables – available on their websites. Membership of the Council represents a commitment to transparency in the conduct and reporting of polls, but does not represent a quality mark in the conduct of polls.
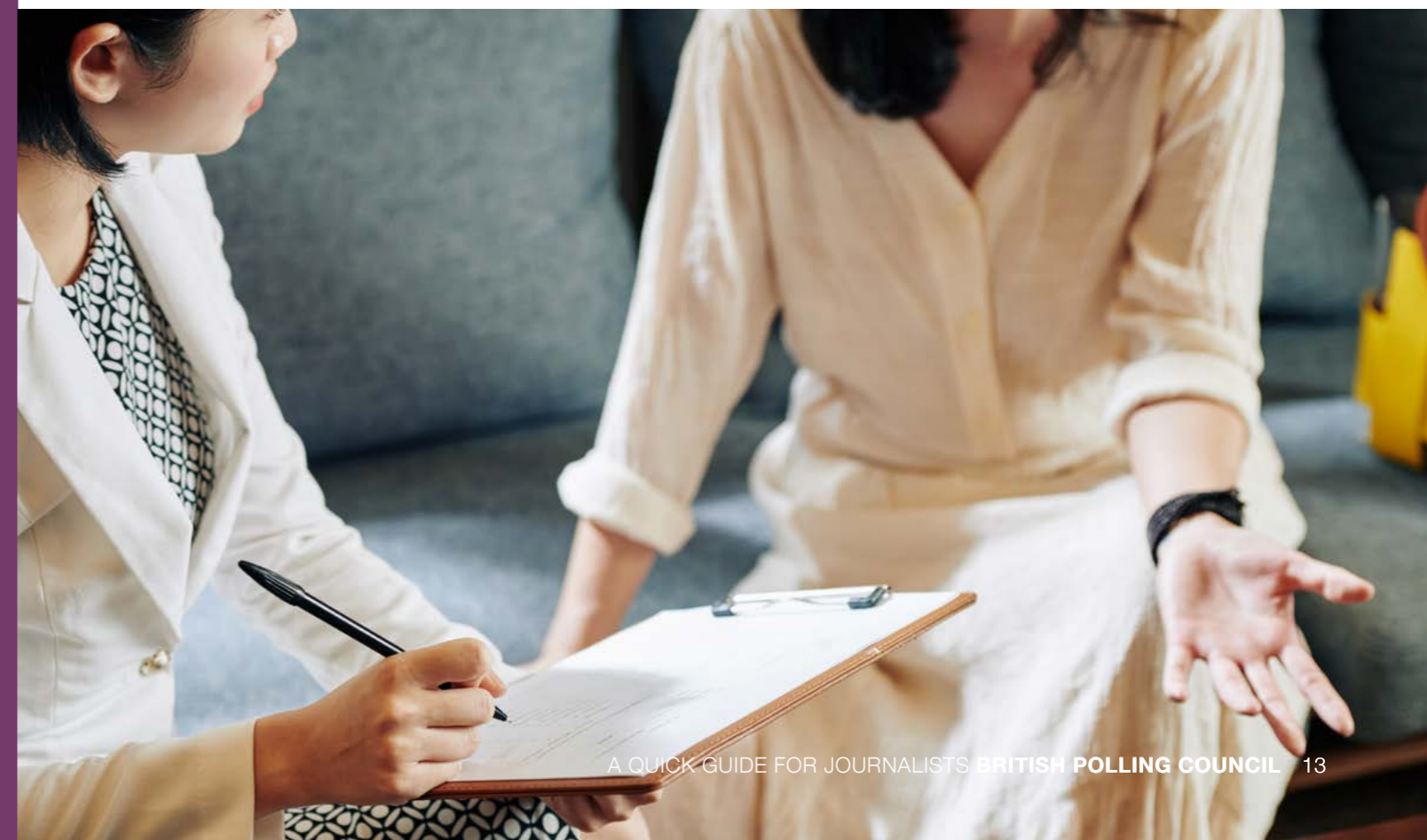
Spotlight on MRP

Multilevel regression and post-stratification (MRP) is a way of using large national samples to estimate public opinion at a local level.

Here, a "large" national sample can be anything from 6,000 to 100,000 respondents. Most often MRP is used to estimate opinion in Westminster constituencies.

The first stage of MRP is the construction of a statistical model that summarises how public opinion or voting intention differs depending on the characteristics of (i) individual survey respondents and (ii) the area in which they live.

This model is then used to generate estimates of the balance of opinion or vote intentions among different types of people living in different areas (e.g. vote intention among 55-64 year old men who voted Conservative at the last election and who have a university degree).

Meanwhile, the numbers of people of each type in each area is ascertained from external sources (such as Census and other data).

Finally, taking into account how many of each type of voter there are in each area, an overall estimate of public opinion or vote intention for an area is generated by adding up the estimated opinion or vote intentions for each type of voter in that area.

MRP only works when there is a strong link between, on the one hand, the characteristics of individuals and areas and, on the other, the opinion being modelled. For example, MRP is good at modelling the proportion of people in each area who will vote, say, Labour, because how many people voted Labour in this constituency last time is a very strong predictor of how many people will vote Labour this time.

Conversely, MRP would be a bad predictor of modelling the proportion of people in each area who have a particular hair colour, because it is hard to predict hair colour on the basis of their personal characteristics or the area in which they live.

MRP also only works when the same "opinion object" is being asked about in each area. MRP should not be used to investigate how satisfied different areas are with their MP, because the relationship between "past vote" and "support for the local MP" looks very different depending on the party to which the local MP belongs.

Many of the questions you should ask when given a regular poll have their equivalent in MRP analyses.

Just as in the case of a regular poll, it is important to understand how the sample was obtained.

Much as in an ordinary poll you would ask how the data have been weighted, in a MRP poll you should ask which characteristics were used in the modelling of the survey data.

Instead of asking about the margin of error, you might ask about the level of uncertainty associated with the MRP estimates.

> **Multilevel regression and post-stratification (MRP) is a way of using large national samples to estimate public opinion at a local level.**

A checklist

Finally, here is a checklist of five questions to which you should make sure you know the answers before you start to write:

How and when was the poll conducted?

Who was interviewed?

How were they chosen?

Who sponsored or paid for it?

What questions were asked?

Conclusion

Best of luck. We hope you found this guide useful.

You might like to download this document and keep it easily accessible for the next time the results of a poll come winging your way.

If you would like to know more, a detailed guide to the interpretation of polls is available from the press regulator, IMPRESS, and the Market Research Society:

Interpreting polls and election data – guidance for media and journalists
https://www.mrs.org.uk/resources/interpreting-polls-and-election-data-guidance-for-media-and-journalists-

The National Council for the Training of Journalists has launched a free e-learning course, which is designed to improve the quality of poll reporting. This was developed in association with the British Polling Council and Market Research Society.

Follow the link below to get started
https://www.nctj.com/latestnews/nctj-launches-polling-course-british-polling-council-market-research-society

The officers of the BPC would like to thank Professor Chris Hanretty for developing the MRP element of this updated guide

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