Why Do Voters Lie to the Pollsters?

For months ahead of last May's UK General Election, polls predicted that the outcome was too close to call. On the day, the result was clear-cut. How did the polls get it so wrong? Paul Whiteley examines one reason: over-reporting.

In the months running up to last May's General Election, opinion polls predicted a tight finish, with both Labour and Conservatives falling far short of an overall majority. But on election night, the exit poll told a very different story: Conservatives had won, Labour was trounced. In the aftermath, the British Polling Council initiated an inquiry into this polling failure with the aim of discovering what went wrong.

Table 1 shows that eight different survey agencies understated the Conservative vote by an average of 4.2 per cent and over-stated the Labour vote by 2.4 per cent in their final pre-election surveys. These discrepancies in the polls can be explained by a wide variety of different factors, including problems with research designs, sampling, survey modes, inaccurate voter registration, and also difficulties in the recording of survey answers.

In this article I will concentrate on one factor which may help to explain the problem; the fact that some respondents gave misleading answers to interviewers in the pre-election surveys about their participation in the election. This is described in the literature as 'over-reporting'. One of the great advantages of an exit poll is that everyone in the survey actually voted, since they are approached by researchers outside the polling station. This is not true for respondents in pre-election polls. If pollsters interviewed a number of individuals who claimed they were going to vote but in the end did not, that could contribute to inaccurate polls.

Over-reporting Electoral Participation

There is a long history of survey methodologists worrying about whether people tell the truth in polls. An early paper on this issue published by Herbert Hyman in 1944 was titled simply *Do they tell the truth?* and this question has been repeatedly asked ever since[2]. This is thought to be a particular problem in surveys asking about sensitive topics such alcohol consumption, drug use and sexual behaviour. But it has also been a longstanding issue about whether people vote in elections, which arguably is not an overly delicate subject. Despite this, there is ample evidence to show that individuals do overstate their electoral participation. In a report written in 1968, which compared survey data from the American National Election Study with electoral records, Clausen concluded that: 'Estimates of turnout have consistently exceeded the population figures by about 12 to 13 per cent'[1].

In the case of the UK we can use the 2010 face-to-face British Election Study survey data to investigate this issue[3]. This was a probability-based panel survey which interviewed the same people before and after the election, and asked about voting intentions and, subsequently, voting behaviour. In addition, fieldworkers verified if their respondents actually did vote

Table 1: Eve of Poll Forecasts for Eight Polling Agencies in the 2015 General Election

Agency	Con %	Lab %	LD %	UKIP %	Green %	Others %	Mode	N	May
Opinium	35	34	8	12	6	5	Online	2960	4-5
Survation	31	31	10	16	5	7	Online	4088	4-6
Ipsos MORI	36	35	8	11	5	5	Phone	1186	5-6
ICM	34	35	9	11	4	7	Phone	2023	3-6
ComRes	35	34	9	12	4	6	Phone	2015	3-5
Populus	33	33	10	14	5	6	Online	3917	5-6
YouGov	34	34	10	12	4	6	Online	10307	4-6
Panelbase	31	33	8	16	5	7	Online	3019	4-6
Average	**33.6**	**33.6**	**6.9**	**13**	**4.8**	**6.1**			
Result	**37.8**	**31.2**	**8.1**	**12.9**	**3.8**	**6.3**			
Difference	***-4.2***	***2.4***	***0.9***	***0.1***	***1***	***-0.2***			

Source: British Polling Council http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/general-election-7-may-2015/.

Figure 1: The Relationship between Actual Voting and Self-Reported Voting in 2010

Source: BES face-to-face panel survey, 2010.

in the election using records held by local authorities. These records do not identify how people vote, but they do show whether they actually vote. This makes it possible to compare what people say they will do, or have done, with what they actually did on polling day.

The standard comparison made in studies of over-reporting is between self-reported turnout in the post-election survey and the validated turnout measure. Figure 1 shows that in 2010 about 71 per cent of the respondents truthfully reported that they voted in the election, while just over 17 per cent also truthfully reported that they did not vote. In addition, about 10 per cent claimed to have voted but did not, and 1.5 per cent claimed not to have voted when in fact they did. These figures show that over-reporting is a significant problem in surveys of UK general elections.

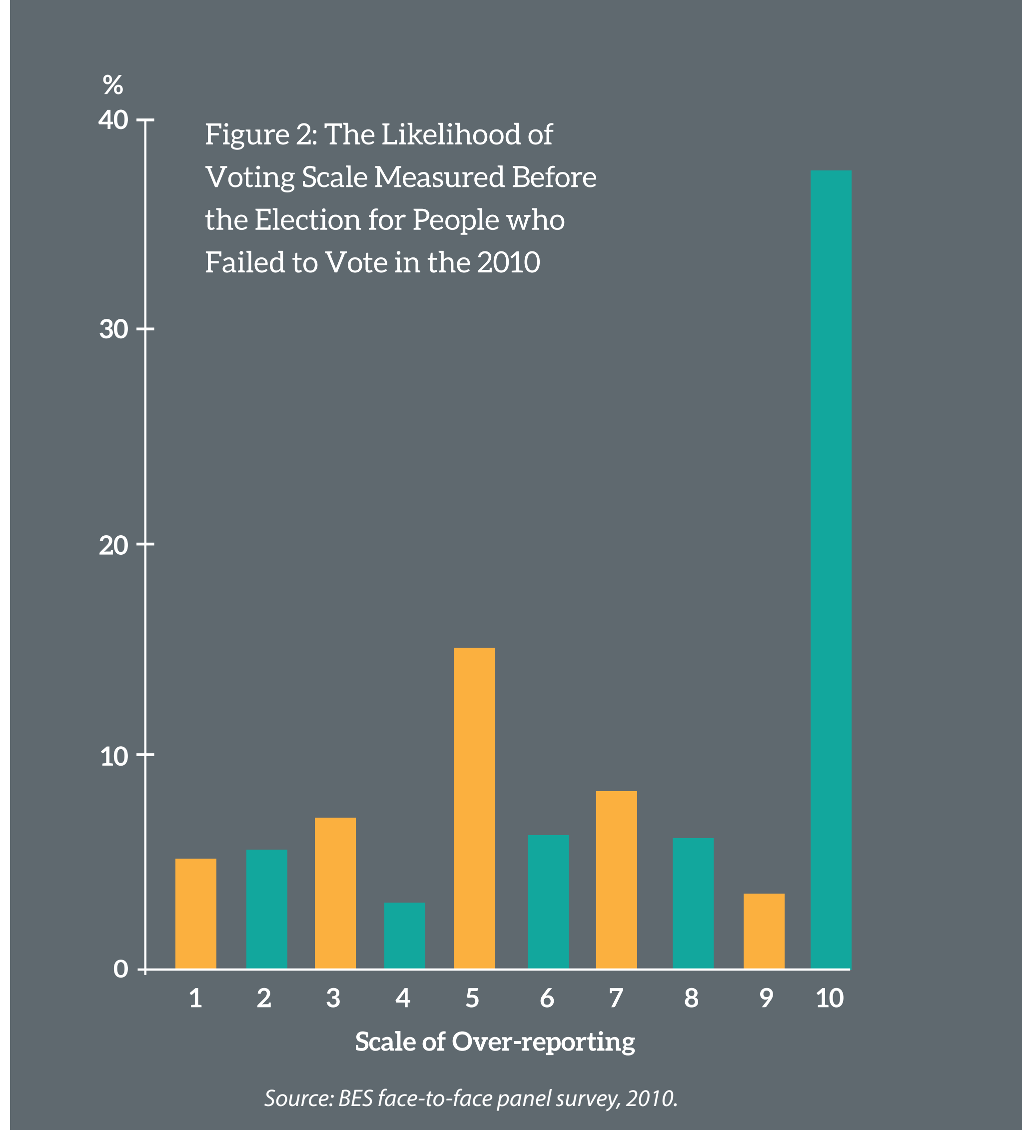
Likelihood to Vote

A second way of measuring over-reporting is to examine people's predictions of the likelihood that they will vote before the election compared with their validated vote measured after the election. This is arguably more important than the standard measure because it aims to identify over-reporters before the election takes place. This opens up the possibility of doing something about the problem in pre-election surveys. In the first wave of the 2010 BES survey, respondents were asked to predict the likelihood that they would vote using an eleven-point scale (0 – very unlikely, 10 – very likely). Clearly, if respondents scored themselves zero on this scale and did not subsequently vote they were not over-reporting. But if they gave themselves a higher score than zero this makes them over-reporters. A score of one on the likelihood of voting scale for a non-voter represents a very modest level of over-reporting, whilst a score of ten represents extreme over-reporting.

Some 81 per cent of respondents who scored themselves zero on the likelihood of voting scale subsequently did not vote, so their intentions were in line with their behaviour. But the remaining 19 per cent assigned themselves a score greater than zero and subsequently did not vote, which makes them over-reporters. Figure 2 shows that 38 per cent of these over-reporters scored ten on the scale, making up 7 per cent of all respondents. Clearly, there were quite a few people in the 2010 election who were really determined to vote but in the end failed to do so.

There is an important distinction between the two ways of over-reporting. The standard measure captures the people, who for whatever reason misled the interviewer when they reported their voting behaviour. This second measure does not necessarily do this, since respondents could have legitimately changed their minds between the first wave of the survey and polling day. It is possible to take into account the effect of people changing their minds in any analysis by constructing another scale, based on the difference between voting intentions prior to the election and self-reported turnout after the election.

Individuals who thought they were very likely to vote before the election and then subsequently reported not voting, are clearly not trying to mislead the interviewer, but have merely changed their minds. But individuals who claimed both that they were going to vote beforehand, and also that they actually did vote, but according to the validation exercise did not actually participate, are clearly trying to mislead. This scale can be used in any modelling to take into account legitimate changes of mind between the pre-election surveys and polling day.



Source: BES face-to-face panel survey, 2010.

Why do people over-report?

There are a number of explanations for why people over-report their electoral participation. One is that non-voters recognise that voting is a socially desirable thing to do and so they claim to have participated in order to impress the interviewer. In some cases they may even have forgotten that they abstained and convinced themselves that they did in fact vote. This can happen since memory failure is evident in the case of the 1.5 per cent in figure 1 who had forgotten that they voted. One of the implications of this argument is that high-status, well-educated, and politically engaged individuals are more likely to over-report than low-status, uneducated and the politically disengaged, because they are more likely to think that voting is socially desirable.

A second explanation is that a 'spiral of silence' may exist for supporters of some political parties. If these supporters perceive that their party is unpopular, this might make them reluctant to admit to interviewers that they are going to vote for it. The pollsters got it wrong in the 1992 election much as they did in 2015, and at that time this was partly attributed to 'shy Tories', that is, interviewees who were Conservatives but who told interviewers that they did not vote. As a consequence the Conservative vote was underestimated in 1992, much as it was in 2015.

A similar process can occur if there is a 'spiral of demobilisation' among supporters of a party. In this case the party is not seen as particularly unpopular, but some of its supporters are unenthusiastic about voting for it. When asked they claim to have voted for the party, but in the end they don't go to the polls. This may have happened to Labour in 2015, a phenomenon known as the 'lazy Labour' problem and if so, it would have inflated the Labour vote in pre-election surveys.

Pressure

Another longstanding explanation of over-reporting was first mooted in the US by Bernstein and his collaborators. They observed: 'People who are under the most pressure to vote are the ones most likely to misrepresent their behaviour when they fail to do so'[4]. This idea suggests that over-reporters feel pressured to vote by friends, family and others during the election campaign, but at the end of the day they do not vote. This makes them lie to interviewers because they feel that they have let down the people who pressured them in the first place. This is an example of what the psychologists Dan Arierly calls the 'fudge factor,' where people make excuses for themselves about low level dishonesty. US research found that blacks were more likely to over-report than whites, because they felt guilty about letting down their fellow ethnic group.

There is an alternative take on the issue of pressure. We know that the mobilising activities of political parties can encourage people to vote and also to change their party in an election. By implication, such campaigning could transform over-reporters into actual voters and thereby reduce the problem of identifying who is telling the truth. This is not necessarily inconsistent with the pressure argument, since the latter is linked to friends, family and group loyalties, whereas campaigning is associated with the mobilising activities of candidates and political parties. Some pressure works, but when it does not people will often tell lies.

Finally, we know that if an individual believes that a 'good citizen' should vote, this has a strong influence on their participation in elections. If they believe this but for whatever reason fail to vote, they are more likely to be over-reporters. Going against one's normative beliefs create pressures for dishonesty. Young people in particular have a weaker sense of the civic duty to vote than their older counterparts, and so they are more willing to admit that they did not vote. A similar point can be made about people who perceive that big differences exist between the political parties. If they feel this is true but end up not voting then they are more likely to over-report as a consequence.

A multivariate analysis of over-reporting in the 2010 General Election using the scale in figure 2 showed that there was not much support for the social desirability bias, that is the shy Tories and lazy Labour explanations of over-reporting. But the pressure theory, measured by an indicator of an individual's sense of guilt if they failed to vote, did stimulate over-reporting. Similarly, the perception that a good citizen has a duty to vote was also important. In addition, if people were contacted by the political parties during the election campaign, they were less likely to be over-reporters and more likely to be voters.

Correcting Polling Errors

The findings from this analysis suggest a methodological strategy which can be used by pollsters to try to correct for over-reporting in pre-election surveys in the future. Surveys should include a likelihood of voting scale which can be used to weight the responses. In the 2010 survey, actual voters scored an average of 8.36 on the scale and non-voters scored 3.87, with the over-reporters scoring 7.91. This shows that over-reporters are closer to being voters than they are to being non-voters. This information can be used to weight the data in order to reduce the impact of over-reporting. Some of the pollsters already do this, but there is a case for trying to improve the questions used to identify over-reporters in the surveys.

A similar point can be made about individuals who were contacted by political parties during the election campaign. They were less likely to be over-reporters in 2010, indicating that campaigning turns over-reporters into actual voters. Again, this information can be used to weight the data, in order to reduce over-reporting. This issue needs to be addressed because there is clear evidence that lying to interviewers is becoming more frequent, which explains, in part, why the polls in 2015 were less reliable than in earlier elections.

References

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