CAVEAT POPULI QUAESTOR

The 1992 British General Election Polling Debacle

By Robert Waller

"The opinion polls blew it." This remark by the respected political observer Peter Kellner on BBC television at about 2 am on Friday, April 10, encapsulates the immediate reaction to the 1992 British General Election. It was widely reported as the most disastrous result in the history of opinion polling in the UK, at least since the General Election of 1970 when the polls also apparently picked the wrong winner. The very authority of political polling was immediately called into question. But, did all the pollsters get it all wrong, or can polling evidence actually illuminate the almost entirely unexpected Conservative triumph?

Data from the final pre-election polls show the magnitude of their failure to estimate the electorate's decision. Every poll found the contest extremely close, with a tilt to a slight Labour edge. In fact, the Conservatives won handily. Inadequate sample sizes certainly can't be blamed—all of these polls interviewed at least 2,000 respondents across Britain.

What The Late Polls Showed

Poll	Interview Dates	Con.	Lab.	Lib. Dem.	Other	Lead
Harris	4/5-7	38%	40%	17%	5%	LAB +2
Gallup	4/7-8	38.5	38	20	3.5	C +0.5
ICM	4/8	38	38	20	4	LEVEL
MORI	4/7-8	38	39	20	3	LAB +1
NOP	4/7-8	39	42	17	2	LAB +3
Actual Result of 4/9		43	35	18	4	C +8

Pollsters often say, of course, that no pre-election poll can be counted on as a prediction, since people may change their minds about how and whether to vote at the last minute. Yet in the past three British General Elections, the final polls by organizations such as MORI have been uncannily accurate. If there was a very large, very late swing this time, it surely stands in need of explanation.

In fact, the matter is more complex than that of a huge shift of opinion on election day. It requires some reassessment of the way polls need to be analyzed. For one thing, too much attention was paid to the hypothetical voting intention question, which elicits transient and "unpriced" opinions. Other questions also deserve serious consideration.

A Deep Suspicion of Labour on Matters Economic

Consistently during the campaign, respondents said the most important issues were the health service, unemployment, and education, on which Labour retained large leads. The Conservatives remained, however, the party most trusted on the handling of the economy—even in dealing with an economic crisis which occurred on their watch—and were favored to put money into the pockets of the voters and their families. Their lead on such issues, including taxation, varied from between 10 and 20 percentage points throughout the campaign. Voters preferred the Conservatives on the truly critical questions of economic stewardship.

When they reached the privacy of the polling booths, uppermost in voters' minds, it seems, was the gritty realism of economic prospects. When we look at the Harris/ITN exit poll—which found a reasonably accurate voting intention—49% thought they would be worse off as a result of Labour's proposed tax changes, while only 30% thought they would be better off. A Conservative advantage was notable among skilled blue collar workers, who reckoned that the Opposition's tax proposals would harm them by 48% to 32%. This social group once again gave a higher proportion of its votes to the Conservatives than to Labour—after consistently threatening not to in opinion polls throughout the campaign.

Besides economic self-interest, other matters may have weighed heavily in that final, "priced" decision at the voting stations, when voters chose between Mr. Major's Tories and a Labour Party which had a real chance of forming government for the first time in 18 years. The exit poll showed that, for all his confidence, Neil Kinnock came across worst of the party leaders. Mr. Major's restrained, non-Thatcherite style was reassuring.

A Reluctance by Some to Say They Voted Status Quo?

Labour commanded the moral high ground in many ways, being favored to protect the National Health Service and State Schools. Some respondents to opinion polls seemed as reluctant to admit to a Tory vote as they were to put up Conservative posters in many parts of the country. On the eve of the Election, I toured the marginal constituency of Hayes and Harlington in middle-income West London. Every third house seemed to sport a Labour poster: I only saw two that declared support for right-wing Conserva-

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tive Terry Dicks. Yet Dicks won by 53 votes. My own home constituency of Richmond, Surrey, turned bright orange with Liberal Democrat posters; yet the Tory there was returned with an increased majority.

There is another piece of evidence that a critical element in the electorate was reluctant to admit to voting Conservative. A late swing would not affect exit polls, which catch voters just after they cast their ballots. Yet all three published exit polls also overestimated the Labour vote, although by less than did the pre-election polls. It's unlikely that voters told the pollsters a different story from their actual vote; our questionnaire was anonymous, self-completed, and placed in a sealed ballot box. It's more likely that a larger portion of Conservative supporters than of Labour voters refused to participate.

What The Exit Polls Showed

	Con.	Lab.	Lib. Dem.	Other
Harris/ITN exit poll	41	36	18	5
NOP/BBC exit poll	40	36	18	6
Actual Result	43	35	18	5

Other Sources of the Polls' Failure

What other factors can be identified to account for the pre-election polls' overestimation of Labour's strength compared to the Conservatives? Differential turnout can largely be discounted. The national turnout was very high—nearly 80% of those on the Electoral Register (and nearly 90% of those actually able to vote, since the Register is quite inaccurate). Pollsters did interview some people who had excluded themselves from the Register because of fear of the so-called Poll Tax levied by local government—hardly likely to be Tory supporters. However, this was only a small-scale phenomenon outside safe-Labour inner-city areas.

Pre-election polls in Britain also fail to take account of the incumbency effect of politicians seeking re-election. The voting intention question refers strictly to party preference, rather than naming the individuals on the ballot paper. Although it is generally true that in Britain we still speak of "voting Labour" rather than "voting Kinnock" or voting for our local candidate, there is a demonstrable, if fairly small and variable boost, for sitting MPs. The movement against the Conservatives and to Labour in open races was somewhat larger than in other critical marginal seats.

Sending a Message—But Not Electing a Labour Government

These several minor factors do little, however, to explain the gap between the findings of the pre-election polls and the result of the 1992 General Election. Re-interviews of respondents since April 9 have shown some signs of a late swing based primarily on fears of a Kinnock Government's tax policies, and also of the Conservatives' success in persuading late deciding floating voters that their economic stewardship would be the most trustworthy.

In the end, voters decided to look forward to the next five years rather than express a protest against the recent problems of the Conservative Government. The end of term "school report" was not too favorable for the Tories, but the prospect of Labour was judged to be worse.

All this suggests to me something different from a "late swing." Had the election been held a week earlier, the same phenomenon—Labour ahead in the polls, the Conservatives winning the actual contest—might well have occurred. The act of deciding who will rule for the next five years, whose policies will be brought to bear on one's own family, is a different type of act than responding to a survey questionnaire. I am not suggesting that large numbers of Britons lied to interviewers. They may well have thought seriously of voting Labour in the circumstance of the interview. Much of the populace was indeed in a mood to protest things-as-they-were, as a number of unfortunate Conservative candidates in non-crucial mid-term Elections discovered.

It's likely, then, that many voters told the pollsters they would vote Labour, and then actually opted for the Conservatives. Voters seem to have caught on to the fact that they can use the pre-election polls to "send them a message," and then express their deepest underlying interests in the only poll that counts—the balloting on election day. Polling, in this environment, has become a more complex and demanding science.

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