



Politics Informed

what we see is what others miss

A matter of opinion polls

Stephen Edwards advises election watchers not to rely on opinion polls to predict the result.

No British general election would be complete without Peter Snow, his swingometer and a gruelling psephological analysis of the “results” both before and after they roll in. One crucial element of political coverage today is the opinion poll, now a mainstay of the study of elections, and the major tool of a burgeoning industry. Recent polls give Labour a seemingly unassailable lead with the Conservatives struggling more than 15% behind. But do these polls really display the gospel truth that they claim?

The truth is out there

There are a number of reasons to be sceptical. Pollsters are often misled by their blind trust in the thousand or so people they interview for each poll. Take the 1992 general election, often seen as the pollsters’ biggest failure. In the weeks leading up to the election, they confidently predicted a Labour lead of about 3%. Labour activists, however, awoke on the morning of 10 April, to the opposite result, a 21-seat Conservative majority! What went wrong? Did Labour commit suicide in the last few days of the campaign, or were the opinion polls’ calculations incorrect?

A bit of both, actually, but the pollsters’ post-election soul-searching revealed numerous

faults with their methods and analysis. We had the “shy Tory” factor, people not wanting to admit their true affiliation. We should also make allowances for that enduring human quality, the *ability to change one’s mind*. Evidence has shown that a significant percentage of voters don’t make up their mind on how to vote until a matter of days before the election. The decline in party identification has left a ground swell of voters who have no permanent adherence to a political party. In 1997 pollsters learned some lessons from 1992, and used more random telephone sampling as a result, but they still had a problem dealing with voters not declaring a voting intention.

Lack of interest

In a bid to move us away from opinion polls, William Hague often urges us to look to the “real” election results, Tory victories in the European Parliament and local government elections. Two points should be made about this: first, the very nature of these elections encourages those with a grievance to express themselves, whilst all others stay at home; second, a cursory glance at the data behind them shows that the real winner was apathy.

The effect of apathy will be crucial in this election. This stalking beast has the potential to lose Labour 30 seats or more, which

continued overleaf

And they’re off...

After the speculation surrounding the date of the general election, and the historic postponement of the local elections, Tony Blair’s decision to move the poll from the much-mooted 3rd May to 7th June now appears to have been vindicated.

Reported cases of foot-and-mouth disease appear to be levelling out and, in a frenzy of activity, ministers are patrolling the British countryside to demonstrate that the UK is not “closed for business”. However, none of the parties can predict with any certainty what might happen over the next few weeks. Rumours of Conservative splits and speculation of imminent leadership battles plague the right. The spectre of an economic downturn on the horizon worries the left.

Politics Informed election special looks forward to the campaign. Labour remains the hot favourite, but needs the full backing of its core vote, as well as the middle Englanders that voted for the party for the first time in 1997. Will tactical voting affect the fortunes of the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats? Has foot-and-mouth affected perceptions of the major parties? In a few weeks we will find out.

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Continued from the front page

would carve 60 off its majority. Perceptions of sleaze have turned a large number of voters off. In recent opinion polls, about 12% of those sampled said they definitely would not vote. If it rains on 7th June, this figure could increase to 17%; we are less likely to vote if we're going to get wet on the way!

Such mass abstention may hit Labour worse than the Tories. Tony Blair is trying to drum home the consequences of not voting to loyal activists. Devolution asks us to vote in an increasing number of elections, but are we being given fewer reasons to do so?

So think twice next time you see the latest poll results published in your daily paper. Look at the number of people who have said they will not vote, the number who are undecided and ask yourself how reliable the sample is anyway. Then, and only then, should you take the findings with anything more than a pinch of salt.

Win a magnum of champagne...

in our election competition by predicting both the winning party and the size of their majority in number of seats. Nearest guess wins, otherwise all correct answers will be placed in a draw on 8 June. Pass this to your colleagues to enter too, but one entry per person please!

Send us your entry by using the "contact us" form on our website at www.politicsint.com or by emailing us at alc@politicsint.co.uk. All answers to arrive by 1 June.



General election 2001: a three-horse race?

TV debates: a turn-on or big turn-off?

Andy Fletcher asks what the United States, Ghana, Turkey, Nigeria and Slovakia all have in common? Answer: they have all subjected their "wannabe" leaders to televised electoral debates.

Admittedly, in both Ghana and Nigeria, prominent candidates failed to turn up. In Slovakia, the party leaders did turn up, but one was drunk. And Turkey's television experiment ended in court where one candidate was ordered to pay \$40,000 to the country's new leader, after labelling him a "heroin trafficker" live on air.

While US voters see such jousts as part of the electoral process, the UK electorate has never had this opportunity to watch its prime ministerial pretenders engage in such a battle.

No consensus

The major sticking point appears to be deciding on a format. The Liberal Democrats were unimpressed with the idea of three separate two-way debates. The Tories are mindful that Liberal Democrat and Labour involvement in a three-way discussion could position them as "illiberal" on certain issues. Both Hague and Kennedy have, however, agreed in

principle to a joint BBC and ITV proposal for two debates between the three main party leaders.

Downing Street has refused to take part in the BBC/ITV programmes, maintaining that the intense media coverage would detract from the real issues of the election campaign. Behind the rhetoric remains the fear that Hague's perceived strong debating skills may hurt Blair politically in a head-to-head battle.

Bringing it to the people

The Gore/Bush debates were broadcast throughout the States, and many more watched proceedings over the internet. Links to useful web sites were offered, and the discussion was translated on-line into Spanish, reaching a wider audience.

It is uncertain whether televised debates have any real impact on voter behaviour. US research found that the Gore/Bush debates changed the voting behaviour of only 3%. The election is also a time of intense media coverage when the electorate is at political saturation point. Exposing voters to hour-long leader debates may only serve to turn people off the process in greater numbers.



Goodbye to all that

Andy Fletcher bids farewell to some familiar faces.

When an MP says he is leaving the Commons “to spend more time on politics”, you know he has become jaded with life at Westminster. Tony Benn, first elected in 1950, will be the most notable Labour retirement at the general election, and he will not go quietly. He claims the “work that needs to be done now to rebuild the Labour Party is best done from the outside”.

Labour has a number of seats to fill with long-standing MPs such as Jeff Rooker, Giles Radice, Peter Snape, Tom Pendry and Lawrence Cunliffe all retiring. Millbank denies claims that it is making way for modernising candidates.

Lobbying during the election

The general election has been called and the normal business of government suspended. But as Andrew Dunlop explains, we continue to offer political consultancy services.

We are planning ahead to prepare for a new government. We analyse manifestos and announcements made during the campaign in order to anticipate the new policy agenda. We audit the election chances of Members of Parliament to predict who we won't be seeing after the election. We may also be needed to provide crisis management for a client caught in the glare of publicity.

No policy decisions will be made until after the election, but government departments continue to operate because much of their long-term activity is unaffected.

The Tories will also get a make-over, with former prime ministers Edward Heath and John Major standing down. Theresa Gorman and Christopher Gill are also leaving and the departure of former leadership challenger Michael Heseltine should make way for the colourful journalist Boris Johnson in Henley.

The Lib Dems will lose their popular former leader Paddy Ashdown as well as Jim Wallace, deputy first minister in the Scottish Parliament. He, like other members of the devolved institutions including Henry McLeish and Rhodri Morgan, will resign their Westminster seats. So, whichever party returns to power, Parliament will be a sea of new faces come the next session.

The most important activity that key policy civil servants engage in during this election period is to put together detailed policy briefings for their incoming ministers. You may be able to raise imminent policy issues with a view to getting them into the ministerial briefing pack.

Election campaigns may offer few opportunities to secure policy commitments from politicians, but former ministers or spokespeople will continue to make campaign announcements on the policy portfolios they held. An issue runs a good chance of being taken up by a prospective parliamentary candidate if it has a local angle. Therefore, if you have a live policy issue, it could get aired on an election campaigning platform, but be aware that it may get hijacked by the media.

Queen's Speech Service

Elections are notorious for sucking resources out of political parties; every asset is thrown at winning seats and there is not much left over for thinking about what happens next. But someone has to do it because, at the very least, someone has to let the Queen know what is going to be in her traditional opening of Parliament speech

The Queen's Speech sets out the government's agenda for the coming session and this year that session will be unusually long; not seeing the point of a one month session before the long summer recess, Parliament has a provision for rolling legislation through until October or November 2002.

Politics International offers a unique Queen's Speech service to all our clients. We provide in advance of the Speech an in-depth forward analysis of those bills likely to make it in. We will also analyse as far as possible the impact each is likely to have on clients. And on the day you'll have our full support. We will be ready to make sure that you have a copy of the Speech and associated relevant departmental briefings, and an analysis of where and how the new legislative programme is going to affect you.

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If you or your colleagues would like to receive additional copies of *Politics Informed* contact Amanda Cunningham on 020 7592 3814 or alc@politicsint.co.uk.

The power of the press

The Sun newspaper's assertion on 20 March that it had been right all along about the election date of 3 May was followed ten days later by an "exclusive" that the prime minister was postponing the date. Both stories clearly came from sources close to the prime minister, the second briefing an apology for the first. Amanda Cunningham asks why this newspaper is so important to the Labour Party.

The Sun wot won it?

British media is distinguished by a highly partisan press. Papers can help set the political agenda, create and campaign on issues and, controversially, lay claim to influencing the voting patterns of their readers. But do they really have the influence on election outcomes that some claim?

The *Sun's* attacks on Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, were widely regarded as responsible for his 1992 defeat. The paper famously proclaimed that it was "the *Sun* wot won it". Its dramatic announcement in 1997 that it was backing "New Labour" had followed careful wooing by the Labour leadership of the newspaper and its proprietor. Was Labour's most decisive victory ever in May 1997 due to the support of the *Sun et al*? The Liberal Democrats also gained their highest polling ever without national press endorsement. Many argue that the results were actually down to tactical anti-Conservative voting.

Recent academic studies have revealed that newspapers have less effect on their readers'

voting preferences than it suits them to claim. Apparently, a third of *Telegraph* readers do not vote Conservative and a third of the *Mirror's* readership does not vote Labour. Many readers do not even know their daily paper's political leanings! People obviously use other criteria to select their daily newspaper and are less interested in politics than the papers and politicians would like.

Nonetheless, the *Sun* is backing Labour again and has been very supportive of the prime minister's decisions on the election date.

Reaching out to voters

Increasingly, however, politicians are bypassing national media and travelling to meet in person their core voters beyond Westminster. The LibDems have always campaigned to the regional press, and William Hague is now following suit, leaving London press briefings to his colleagues.

With a new cap on their election spending, parties are augmenting traditional campaigning methods by embracing email and internet technology. If you haven't already, expect to receive email jokes from party headquarters. Labour is even running a video mailing campaign in key constituencies.

Political bias

Campaign HQs are monitoring TV and radio output more intensely than ever, with all sides accusing the BBC and ITN of bias. No 10's Alastair Campbell believes that newspapers set the broadcasters' agenda. He is not alone in being wary of the power of the press.

MP or MSP? That is the question

Our Scottish Solutions co-ordinator, Alison Cairns, explains how the new Scottish Parliament interacts with Westminster.

The consensus view amongst the Scottish political parties is that parliamentarians cannot represent their constituents' interests effectively as members of both the Westminster and Scottish Parliaments. Because of the different election timetables – the next Scottish parliamentary elections will not be held until May 2003 – there is an overlap in responsibilities and a considerable degree of confusion and political point scoring.

However, at the general election there are a large number of Westminster seats up for grabs as most MSP/MPs are relinquishing their seats in the House of Commons to focus on developing a Scottish Parliament with bite as well as teeth. This sends a signal to the Scottish people and wider electorate that the devolution dividend is taken seriously and merits full time commitment from its members. Notably, whilst senior members of the Scottish Liberal Democrats and Scottish Labour are standing down from Westminster, Alex Salmond, the former leader of the SNP, has decided to stand down from the Scottish Parliament.

Perhaps the most interesting issue to emerge from the devolution agenda is the level of representation for Scots: the West Lothian question – should MSPs be allowed to vote on purely English matters – is as yet unresolved; and will the post of secretary of state for Scotland be merged with that of Wales into a secretary of state for the Union?

If you would like more information about our *Scottish Solutions* practice please contact Alison Cairns at agc@politicsint.co.uk.

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