

Opinion polls and the 1983 election

There are two propositions about the use of opinion polls in the 1983 election that one hears in this post-mortem period. The first is that the Conservative Party machine used them as part of a space-age Goebbels-like propaganda effort to convince the public to re-elect Maggie. The second is that they were used to generate a bandwagon effect to boost support for the Alliance. Both of them are rather overstated as diagnoses, but both contain a germ of truth.

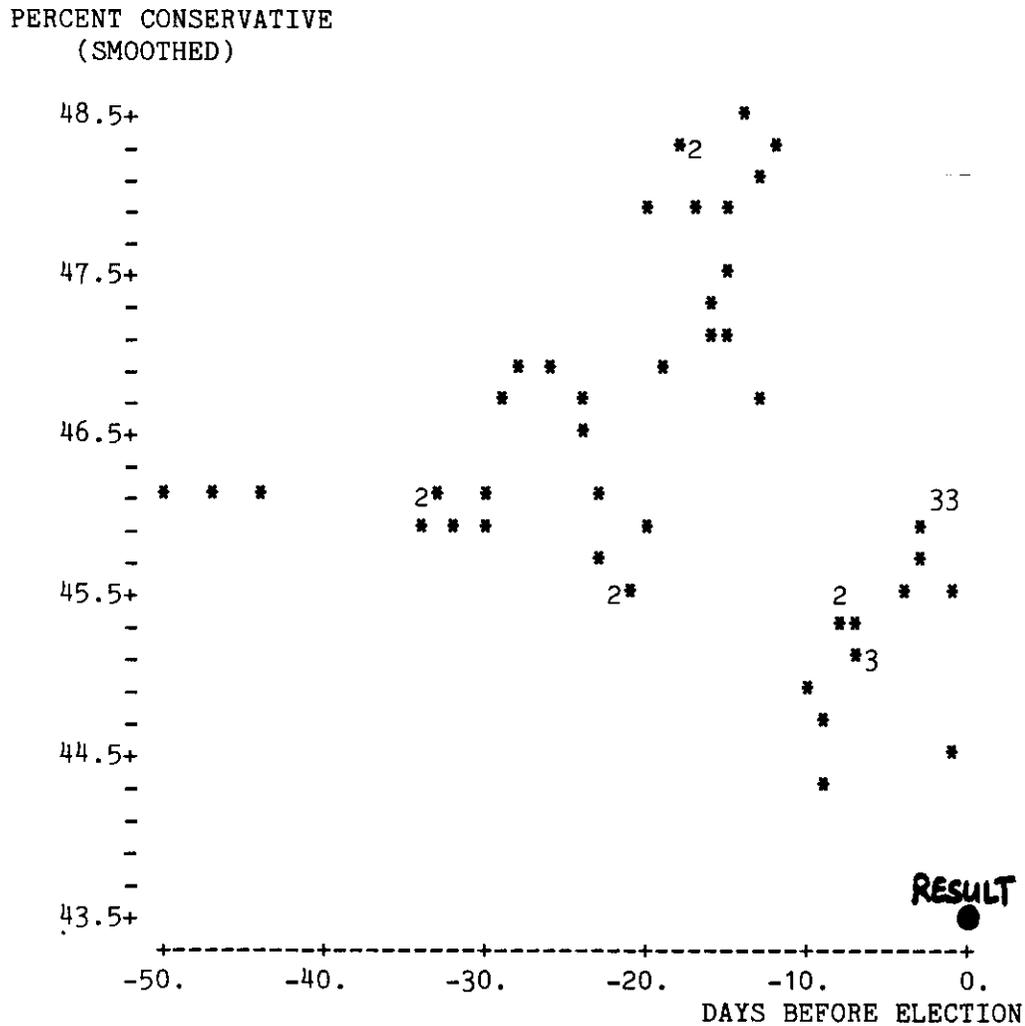
1) Manipulative use of private polls

The June 9 result has provided some prime specimens for record-collectors. Maggie won a bigger proportion of the Conservative + Labour vote (61%) than at any election since 1931, and she is the first Prime Minister this century to win two successive terms in Downing Street with a clear majority. She was "returned with a landslide". She certainly had an expensive and energetic party machine using all the latest techniques from the sincerity machine to extensive private opinion polling, and many attribute her success to this. (Panorama's programme, The Making of Maggie, examined this side of the campaign thoroughly - after the election!)

The Conservatives have been using private polls extensively for some time. The company Opinion Research Centre (ORC) was set up with money from the Conservative party to provide the right with a service that they did not feel they were

getting from existing polling companies. A split from this company, Opinion Research and Communication (ORAC as opposed to ORC) was influential in polling for the 1979 election, and established a polling service for a group of industrialists called the Committee for Research into Public Attitudes to help in the ideological argument with the trade unions. ORC did not do public polls in this election; they devoted all their energies to private opinion polls for the Conservative party. The germ of truth in the first argument is that the Tory party has grown adept at careful market research into political opinions to inform its propaganda efforts. But Maggie's success on June 9 was not the result of persuading large numbers of people that her policies were right. Indeed, a different set of records could have been made available for the record-hunters. It is not just that fewer people voted for the Conservatives this time than voted for them in 1979: they have the smallest share of the total popular vote ever achieved by a party winning a working majority in the House of Commons (43%). Post mortem analyses such as Panorama's merely serve to maintain a myth about her superhuman powers. If we measure the impact of the Tory campaign by looking at the polls conducted during the campaign, we see no evidence that the public were won over by these transatlantic marketing techniques (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Tory share of vote in pre-election period



Maggie moved from being the most unpopular premier since polls began to something like her current position during the Falklands war, (not shown here), and the election campaign made little difference to her standing.

2) Bandwagon effects from published polls

What caused the Tory win was a split in the effective opposition, and explanatory energy must therefore be focussed on the rise of the Alliance if the June 9 result is to be correctly appreciated.

Many are worried that opinion polls were carefully timed and reported to help a media hype that the Alliance could win. The polls were undoubtedly important in the by-elections running up to the general election, Bermondsey being the prime case. There a Labour lead of 12% over the Liberal candidate was converted into a Liberal lead over Labour of 32% in the space of eight days and three opinion polls. Nobody seriously denies that poll information was instrumental in changing people's voting intentions, persuading disaffected Labour voters that the Liberal candidate could win.

But tactical voting is most plausible in these constituency-specific polls, and it did not even take place in all of them (e.g. Darlington). Evidence from the national polls is less clearcut. As is well known, the Labour share of the vote declined quite sharply in the last 20 days of the election campaign (Figure 2) and the Alliance was the beneficiary (Figure 3).

One of the polling companies, Audience Selection, used telephone interviewing throughout the campaign in its polls for the Sun, and this technique is very clearly biased against Labour and for the Alliance.

It seems as though Audience Selection polls consistently took the lead in the upward trend.

However, the evidence from earlier elections runs contrary to the general idea of electoral bandwagons. Figure 4 shows the pre-election polls in the last six elections, expressed as the percentage lead that Labour had over the Conservatives.

In the first four elections shown, the polls consistently over-called the winner, regardless of whether it was Tory or Labour. An anti-bandwagon effect is a more plausible interpretation of these results, and there is evidence, both experimental and call-back, to suggest that this operated on turnout, not by persuading people to change their vote: people are just less likely to vote at all if their party is predicted to win. Only in 1970 did anyone bother much about this systematic error, because only in 1970 did it include the zero point, and lead to the wrong winner being called. These elections would not encourage any Alliance campaign manager to make too much of people's desire to be on a winning bandwagon in elections.

Figure 2 Labour share of the vote in pre-election period

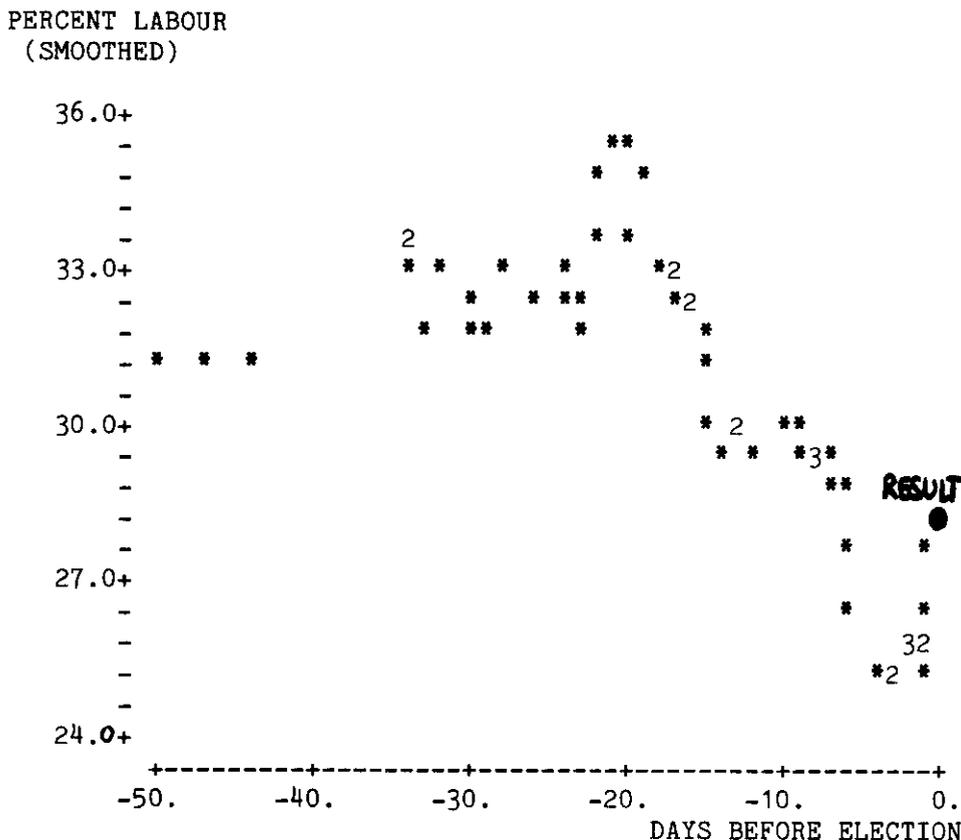


Figure 3 Alliance share of the vote in pre-election period

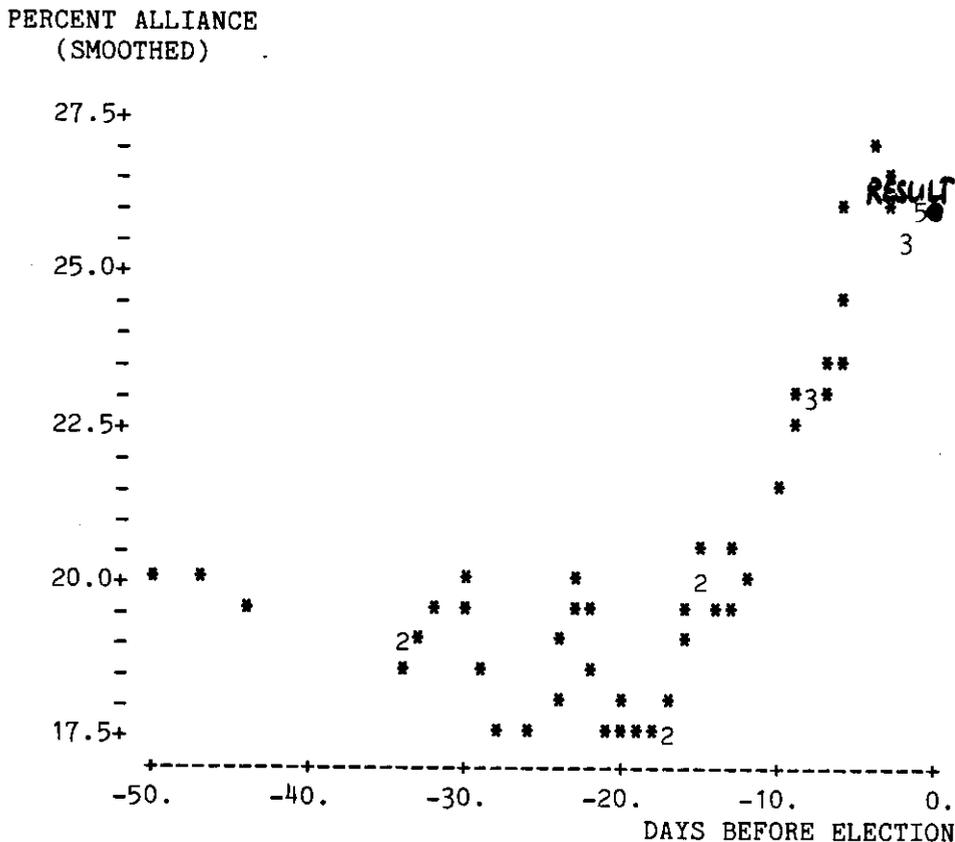
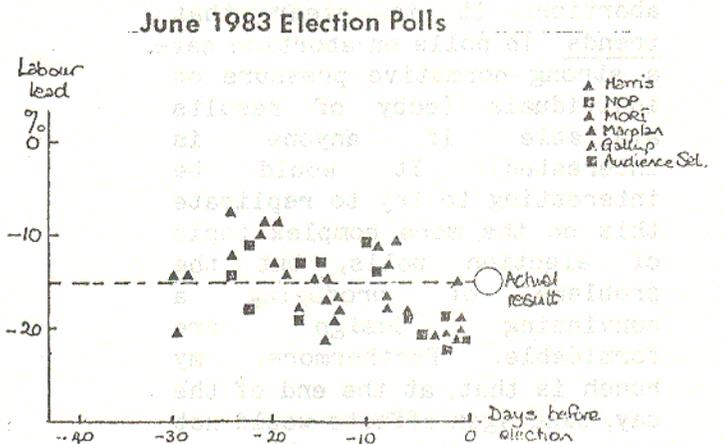
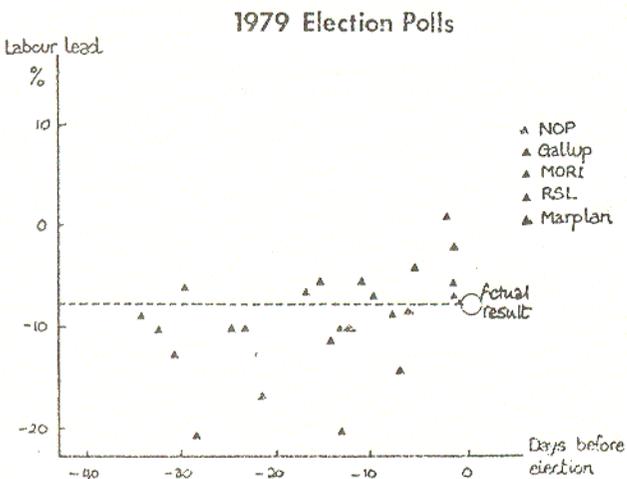
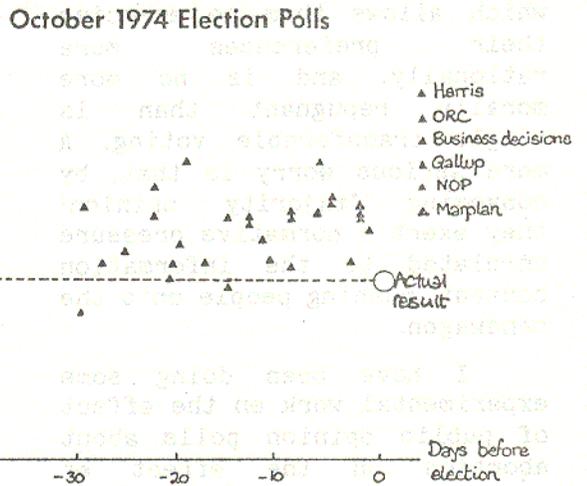
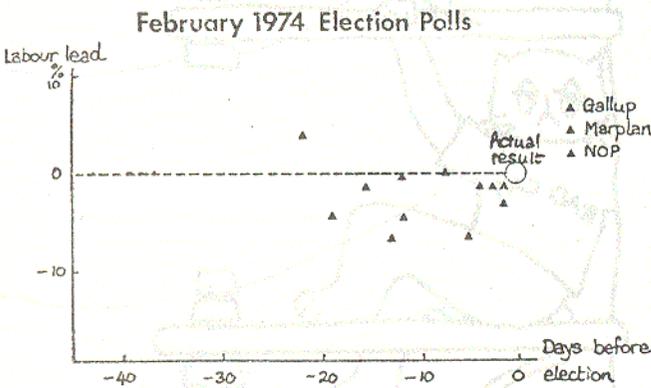
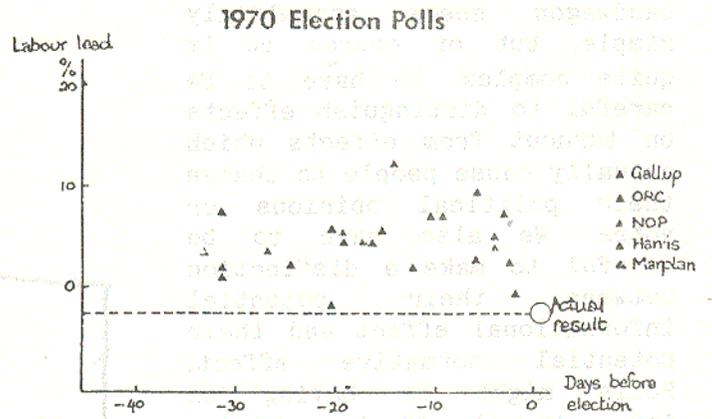
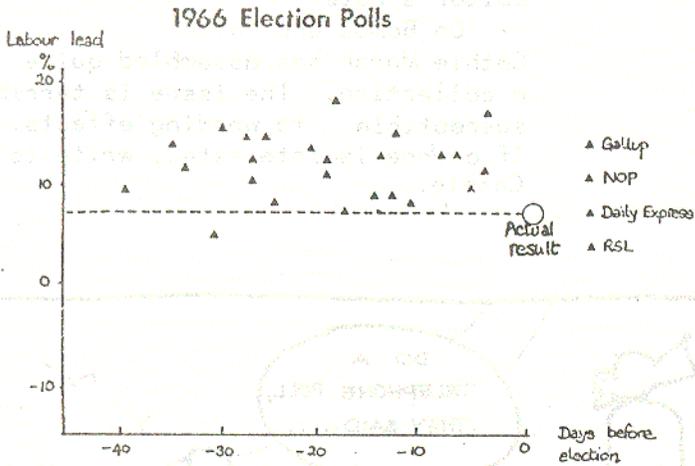


Figure 4 Pre-election polls in the last six elections



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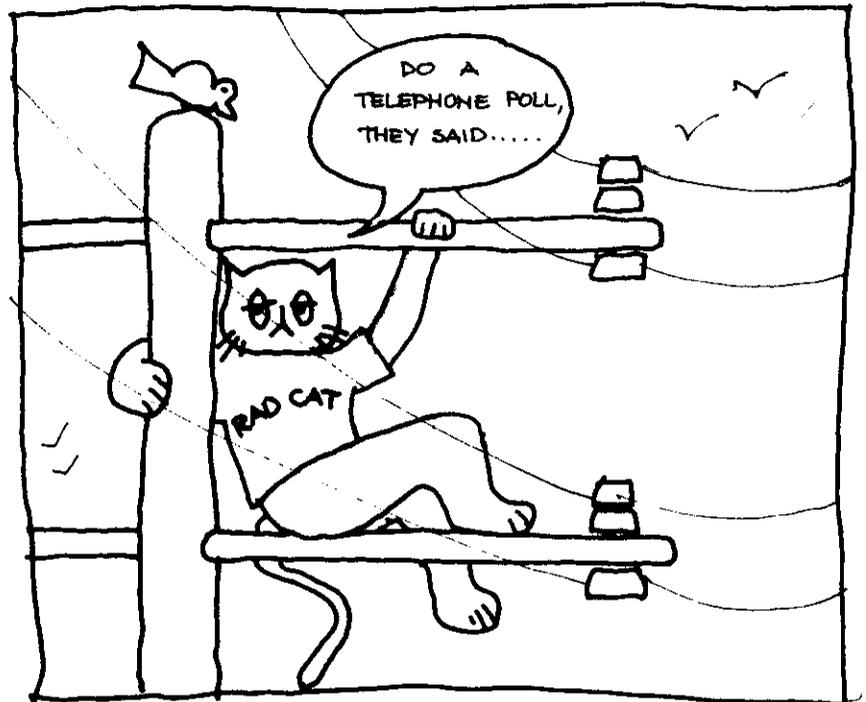
The idea of an electoral bandwagon seems appealingly simple, but of course it is quite complex. We have to be careful to distinguish effects on turnout from effects which actually cause people to change their political opinions or votes. We also have to be careful to make a distinction between their potential informational effect and their potential normative effect. Polls might be having an informational effect by giving the public the information which allows them to exercise their preferences more rationally, and is no more morally repugnant than is single transferable voting. A more serious worry is that, by conveying 'majority opinion' they exert a normative pressure unrelated to the information content, pushing people onto the bandwagon.

I have been doing some experimental work on the effect of public opinion polls about abortion on the effect of personal opinions about abortion; it is clear that trends in polls on abortion have a strong normative pressure on individuals (copy of results available if anyone is interested). It would be interesting to try to replicate this on the more complex topic of election polls, but the problems of producing a convincing design are formidable. Furthermore, my hunch is that, at the end of the day, bandwagon effects would not turn out to be very strong in comparison to the other political forces operating in the current maelstrom.

Editor's note:

'On Bombs and Polls'

Cathie Marsh has assembled quite a collection. The issue is terribly susceptible to wording effects. If anyone is interested, write to Cathie.



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