

# OPINION POLLING IN BY-ELECTIONS

The opinion polls were spectacularly wrong in Brecon. Of the five polls conducted in the last ten days, three, two by MORI and one by NOP were wildly off the mark; on the eve of the election, MORI underestimated Labour support by twelve percentage points.

The record of constituency-specific polling is not at all good. In the previous two by-elections, polls underestimated the SDP vote by thirteen percentage points. The polls' predictions in earlier by-elections (Darlington, Chesterfield) all show the same pattern if not to the same degree. The errors of Brecon should therefore be analysed for the general light they can shed on single constituency polls.

There is no doubt that national companies face major technical difficulties in having to do competent research very fast in a very restricted locality. Moreover, by-elections have increasingly been conducted in a steamy, hot-house atmosphere, whipped up by the attention of national media and political figures, but also fanned by the polls themselves, which may contribute to the volatility of the electorate in those places.

A major technical problem in by-election polling is the sampling method. The safest way to ensure that a sample can represent the population from which it is drawn is to make it big enough and to draw it at random. None of the companies uses this technique for

opinion polls however. They use quota methods, setting out to find people to fit quotas which are thought to be demographically representative of the electorate. Interviewers work in a small geographic area, and interview whoever they like within the quotas - so many men, so many young people and so on. The samples are usually relatively small. The response rates and degree of error are unknown.

In a single constituency it is hard to know what the quotas should be. The Census is out of date, and no supplementary information from other surveys is usually available, especially on subgroups within the constituency. The quotas are usually set for the constituency as a whole, instead of being set within wards of the constituency; in this way you may arrive at the correct number of unemployed overall, for example, but have found them in the wrong parts of the constituency.

Having to provide thirty or so trained interviewers for two days' intensive work in a small locality strains most companies to the limit. They are forced to interview people in the street, with inadequate control over interviewer selection bias or even over whether the person interviewed lives in the constituency.

It is very likely that sampling and field methods play a large part in explaining what went wrong in Brecon. It is a very large and sparsely populated constituency. The one company that came close to the final results was local, and probably had more trained local interviewers. MORI, perhaps worried at how well

their conventional methods would stand up in Brecon, went for maximising the number of locations the interviewers were sent to and hence minimized the number of interviews done at each point. Unable to set individual quotas, they weighted the final sample to force it to have certain proportions of each demographic group. Such weighting procedures are ill-understood theoretically and have got MORI into trouble before.

The other main technical problem is the validity of the questions asked. Polling companies are confident of their party support question at the time it is asked, but are less sure whether people will change their minds and whether they will actually vote. Even when they try to collect information on the last two, the papers in which the results are reported never temper their trail-blazing headlines with any caution as a result. In this by-election it was clear that most people who were considering changing their vote were contemplating a vote for the Alliance.

These difficulties might be understood a bit better and circumvented to some extent if they were not coupled with the fact that so many people wait until the last minute to make up their mind what to do. The greater the local indecision, the greater the interest of the horse-race journalists, the greater the number of national political leaders who descend to jockey for position, and the more polls are done to offer the odds, and to inform the local electorate how they are changing their minds.

These rather doubtful local polls, ironically, probably contribute to a situation in which prediction becomes extremely hazardous. The pollsters used to argue that the polls did not affect anyone. Since Bermondsey, where no serious commentator doubts that the polls helped turn a Labour lead of 28% into a Liberal win by a staggering 32%, they argue that polls allow people rationally to effect a preference vote. The Alliance, being a relatively new political factor, does better in by-elections than the polls predict, the argument might go, because the polls convince people that the Alliance candidate is in with chance.

This argument is not completely convincing in two respects. First it does not fit all the facts; in Portsmouth South, for example, the polls suggested that the Labour candidate was the one most likely to defeat the Tory, yet the Alliance won the election. Secondly, there is strong experimental evidence that poll results can influence individual opinion when there is no tactical issue at stake; the research suggests that it is the reporting of trends in polls which is most influential. While no simple bandwagon or backlash theory can explain Brecon or the pattern in other recent by-elections, it is still plausible that the polls, far from adding a rational ingredient to the debate, contribute to a highly unstable situation.

The bookies never believed that Labour could win Brecon. Horse-race journalism should perhaps have listened rather more carefully to them.

Chaz  
8 July 1985