

Opinion Polls and their Credibility

Learning from Mistakes

KHALID HASAN

Restoring polling's credibility –

If the polling profession had been correct all the time then Hillary Clinton would be President, there would be no Brexit, and we would all be eating Frankenberry Crunch for breakfast.

It is becoming a “big headache” for all voters and citizens to decide which opinion poll to believe. For the political parties which pay for them. Candidates are completely confused. Even Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump too! Pollsters are becoming a “laughing stock.” People tend now increasingly to reject poll data or any research findings inconsistent with what they “believe” to be the real situation. Animals – tigers, bears, monkeys, crocodiles and dolphins are coming to the front page. They are now the “pollsters.” At

least people are now entertained by these new predictors! Candidates need not cry after the election if the tiger called it wrong. They can explain the problem to the beast, in its cage.



Pollsters are facing serious challenges, particularly after the recent US election. Why is the credibility of this profession at

stake now? Important questions come to mind - why it is happening now and how can we collectively restore the credibility of poll results? What are the ways of demonstrating the validity of poll findings to our stakeholders?

The answers are not simple. The actionable consequences of receiving are not just taking an umbrella or wearing snow boots based on weather forecast. Neither is an opinion poll just a "lotto game." We need to look at the root causes of recent failures. Here follows some insights.

Polls are becoming "risky" and inaccurate -

- Voters can change their minds anytime and they do frequently,
- They can decide to not share their opinions and they do many times, or
- They can say something different or straight lie, and many voters do so.

Questions remaining include -

- Is it opinion polls or the pollsters which fail to predict correctly?
- How could a poll be found so wrong?
- Why in some elections did some opinion polls fail so miserably?
- Why were some of the polls found to be accurate?

What is an opinion poll? Why are they important?

An *opinion poll*, sometimes simply referred to as a *poll*, is designed to collect opinions on political issues such as candidates, parties, and willingness to vote from a particular sample. Then extrapolating across the whole population, arrive at what is called popularly called as forecasting or prediction. An exit poll -- another technique which is widely used during an election -- seeks to understand the

views of the voters taken immediately after they have exited the polling stations.

Polling is a social science. It is not like

“If the polling profession had been correct all the time then Hillary Clinton would be President, there would be no Brexit, and we would all be eating Frankenberry Crunch for breakfast.”



physics or chemistry or even any other market research. And that is the mistake we make. We generalize opinion polling as just any XYZ market research. Human beings,

voters, are different from consumers in subtle but important ways. Their votes are linked with their deep rooted faiths, beliefs and expectations. Also linked with fear and uncertainties. Voters want to bring to reality

India, Bangladesh and in many African and European countries.

US presidential election polls - The recent US presidential election came as a surprise to almost everyone, even to the Republicans

Table 1: Comparing the US poll results

Poll source	Date	Hillary Clinton Democratic	Donald Trump Republican	Leading by (points)	Sample size	Margin of error
UPI/CVoter ^[4]	November 1 – 7, 2016	48.7%	46.2%	2.5	1,728	± 3.0%
YouGov/The Economist ^[5]	November 4–7, 2016	49%	45%	4	3,677	± 1.7%
Bloomberg News/Selzer ^[6]	November 4–6, 2016	46%	43%	3	799	± 3.5%
ABC News/Washington Post ^[7]	November 3–6, 2016	49%	46%	3	2,220	± 2.5%
Fox News ^[8]	November 3–6, 2016	48%	44%	4	1,295	± 2.5%
IBD/TIPP ^[9]	November 3–6, 2016	43%	42%	1	1,026	± 3.1%
Monmouth University ^[10]	November 3–6, 2016	50%	44%	6	802	± 3.6%
Ipsos/Reuters ^[11]	November 2–6, 2016	44%	39%	5	2,195	± 2.4%
Bloomberg News/Selzer ^[6]	November 4–6, 2016	46%	43%	3	799	± 3.5%
USC/Los Angeles Times ^[12]	October 30 – November 5, 2016	43%	48%	5	2,988	± 4.5%

these hopes and aspirations, safeties and securities, happiness and comforts! Not just for themselves but for their children too.

Why polls are sometimes not accurate?

There are many polls found to be incorrect, even though conducted by well-known pollsters or research agencies using strict statistical formulas. The greatest examples were the recent polls in the US. Over the last two months before the November 8th election, more than 89% of the polls were found incorrect i.e. out of a total of 93 polls between 8 September and 8 November, 10 polls (including LA Times) gave correct result showing the lead to Trump (Real Clear Politics, 2016, Wikipedia, 2016). However, there are few good examples of successful polls in many countries - in

too. Almost all the polls consistently projected Hillary Clinton as defeating Donald Trump. According to a recent article published at the Guardian, William Davies said “Relying largely on opinion polls, election forecasters put Clinton’s chance of winning at anywhere from 70% to as high as 99%, and pegged her as the heavy favorite to win a number of states such as Pennsylvania and Wisconsin that in the end were taken by Trump.” (Guardian, 2016).

The Table 1 shows that all the polls except the poll by USC/Los Angeles Times could not connect the actual result. (Real Clear Politics, 2016, Wikipedia, 2016)

Arie Kapteyn, an economist at USC who ran the USC Dornsife/Los Angeles Times Presidential Election Daybreak Poll, said “This was an election where we could see

relatively many people who hadn't voted in the past. It was like a reservoir of people who were maybe not engaged," he says. "I think in many of the traditional voter models, these people are more likely to be missed." (Gendreau, 2017)

During the recent US election, most of the polls failed to reflect the voters' opinion. Most of the pollsters underestimated Trump's level of support which was based on deep-rooted emotional values, hopes and expectations and protecting themselves from uncertainties and fears.

Polls underestimated the reality in India

–A similar scenario occurred in India, the largest democratic country in the world. In 2004, during the General Elections (Lok Sabha), the leading research agencies conducted opinion polls in all over the country. Interestingly, most of the polling

of India in a newspaper column said "Thus poll predictions based on election surveys during the 2004 elections went completely haywire for most of the polling agencies and pollsters" (Rai, 2014). It shows that most of them were oblivious to people's emotional investments in their communities and nation as a whole.

Partha Rakshit – experienced pollster and was the President of Nielsen South Asia at that time, said "for a country like India, there are many factors that make it very tough (Rakshit, 2017):

1. Being a huge country, it is impossible to get a statistically representative sample within the time frame available... we have more than 500 constituencies!..I had devised a model where we did exit polls in what we call the swing constituen-

Table 2: General Elections 2004 in India

Seat Forecast	BJP allies	Congress allies	Others
NDTV-Indian Express	230-250	190-205	100-120
Aaj Tak-ORG Marg (ACNielsen)	248	190	105
Zee-Taleem	249	176	117
Star-C-Voter	263-275	174-186	86-98
Sahara-DRS	263-278	171-181	92-102
Outlook-MDRA	280-29	159-169	89-99
Actual result	189	222	132

agencies unanimously came to a "conclusion" based on their prediction that the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the ruling party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would win and would be able to retain power. The predictions were completely rejected by the voters, a serious shock hit the poll pundits and gurus. NDA lost the elections and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by Congress came back to power. Praveen Rai, the political analyst

cies... and pretty much assume the non-swing ones will remain the way they traditionally have voted.

2. Unlike most countries which have 2 or 3 parties who go to polls, we have more than 10 large parties, which makes the task more difficult, as you need larger samples to obtain the same relative error.. and these parties also vary by each state.

3. Finally, of course, because of the fear factor, many people don't like to reveal who they have voted for, so we are sampling only from those who agree to give us a response, and if the voting pattern of those who are willing to give us a response is different from those who are not willing to give us a response, then again, we can turn up with a wrong answer!"

Successful Cases:

However, there are also many cases of successful polls around the world.

Case 1: On December 29, 2008, 70 million Bangladeshi voters cast ballots to decide who would serve in the country's ninth parliament. After two years with

Bangladesh since its independence in 1971. The findings of the poll were of immense importance for a smooth change of power from military-backed government to civilian political party. The poll findings were compared with actual returns published by BEC (IRI, 2008). Remarkably, the accuracy of the result was 95%. It was shared with BEC, media, donors (such as USAID, World Bank etc.), US Government and the local political parties. Interestingly, all the political parties accepted the result. There was a smooth transition of power from the military-back government to the civilian party –Grand Alliance led by the Awami League.

Case 2: In 2008, CSR conducted two polls (May and July) in Bangladesh. Interestingly the findings of these two studies were

Table 3: Who do you plan on voting for in the next parliamentary election?

Political Parties in Bangladesh	Study 1 (%)	Study 1 (%)
Awami League	41.3	44.0
Bangladesh nationalist Party – BNP	27.1	24.1
Jatiya Party	4.5	6.5
Other parties	6.2	4.1
Not yet decided	20.7	21.0
Other responses	0.2	0.3
Total	100.0	100.0

an unelected military-backed caretaker government governing under a State of Emergency, the Bangladeshi people chose a democratically-elected government on a day characterized by very high voter turnout following campaigns conducted passionately but largely free of violence. At the invitation of the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC), USA based International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted an exit poll during that parliamentary election.

I led the Nielsen Bangladesh team to collect and analyze the data. Dave Williams – an international pollster was in charge of overall supervision. This was the first exit poll in

comparable and also matched with the election outcome. Awami League won the 2008 parliamentary election followed by BNP. Around one-fifth of the voters played a critical role in the election which were termed as “swing voters”, and majority of them were “first-time voters” and interestingly, they said “not yet decided” in the opinion poll. (CSR, 2008)

What was the reason behind these two successful case studies?

- Robust and detailed exploratory research was conducted prior to the main survey. The findings were used to design the methodology and tools.

The exploratory research was qualitative in nature, followed by quantitative approach,

- Extensive and thorough methodology (most importantly, the sampling design),
- Strict implementation of the design,
- Proper data collection by a very well-trained data collection team,
- Face-to-face interviewing technique was used for data collection in all the opinion polls, including the exit poll (for exit poll, interviews were carried out immediately after the election at the gate of the polling booths, which was permitted by BEC),
- Proper in-depth analysis and
- Most importantly, all the team members (including the data collectors) were engaged intellectually.

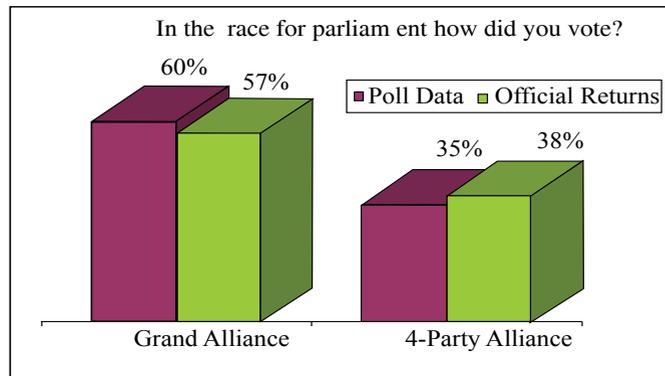
Reasons for error: Why polls sometimes fail?

Behavioral process:

- We must keep in mind that election process is a behavioral process. In majority of the cases, the voters usually judge and consider the candidates (and political parties) from their emotions and rationales;
- Voting is not a short term process, rather a long term process– voters consider what the candidate (or the party) did in the past (pre-election period assessment) and what may do in the future (post-election anticipation), which is judged on the basis of current or past activities or performances. Voters do not just

consider not just themselves but also their grandchildren.

- We should never consider opinion poll as just any “XYZ” market research, survey on FMCG or media habits. Opinion polls are the toughest of all research, dealing with people; their hidden cause and support for any political party. Political



affiliation is no less “strong” than religious affiliation. The hard-core supporters move by emotions and sentiments, not by logics. Most of the pollsters ignore this basic “driving force” rather plans like any other simple market research, using statistical formulas;

Research

We should conduct a thorough exploratory research which is essential to understand two important issues –

- Voters’ psychology, their hidden pains (experienced from the current government/party in power, their discrimination, abuse, torture, hearsay, financial burdens, fear, etc.) and they want to come out at any cost (again here emotion works, not the logic or statistics)
- Understand the deep-rooted culture and values of the voters. Each groups and sub-groups have different cultural values. Many a times, the pollsters (and political parties) ignore these issues and try to generalize.

Methodology

- Inappropriate or faulty methodology leads forecasting off-target. Better and appropriate sampling can be designed by analyzing at least the last three results of each constituencies/ridings. We should understand the root causes of selecting or rejecting the candidates.
- Response bias depends on mode of interviewing:
 - Telephone survey – not going to work; not the right tools to ask sensitive questions. I did a qualitative research among voters in Toronto and it was found that the “call receivers may not be fully engaged with the process; may take it very casually; most dangerous if it is the automated survey – anyone can answer whatever he/she likes. Sometimes the call receiver takes it as a ‘fun.’”
 - Online survey – another example of off-targeted research, serious errors;
- Face-to-face vs. Telephone interview – in many Asian and African countries, due to low internet penetration, traditional “pen and paper interview” (PAPI) approach is still used to collect information from the voters in person. The voters can talk in person, face-to-face with the interviewers. The trained and skilled interviewers create a rapport and relationship of maintaining “mutual trust, privacy and confidentiality” and it works and was found quite effective. Most importantly,

“Trump voters were notably less comfortable about telling a telephone pollster about their vote.”

the interviewer can see physically and verify (a) the “genuineness” of the respondents, (b) influence on speaking the truth, and (c) the respondents can also verify about the interviewers and feel comfortable from “not being fraud” (there are many instances of fraud cases happening through phone calls). There is “human touch”, not merely mechanical and robotic. On the other hand, in developed countries where there are high penetration of phone and internet, pollsters prefer to use telephone interviewing method. Here all the above three points are seriously missing. According to LA Times “Trump voters were notably less comfortable about telling a telephone pollster about their vote.”(Kirk and Scott, 2016)

- Swing states and swing voters –we frequently say and hear about the swing voters or swing states or swing provinces. From where these emerge? Actually voters become swing voters and they form swing states or provinces. There are voters who are not “hard core loyal” to political parties. For examples, in response to a question “Do you have any plan to caste in the upcoming election?” those who says “Not sure/not yet decided” or “Can’t say” they are actually in the swing voters segment. They are either will not say or feeling shy or something they have in their mind. These are the most critical voters. They can take the election result to any direction. In 2008, according to Nielsen survey in Bangladesh, around one-fourth of the voters were the “first time voters” and they were one of the major deciders who

contributed changing the result of the 8th parliamentary election. When the result came out, most of the political experts were surprised to see how the young first-time voters could swing the game?

Similar situation happened in the recent US election where the pollsters could not hear the voice of certain category of voters, such as lower educated whites, elderly rural whites, and non-immigrant seniors.

Demographic profile

– it plays a great role in swinging the total results. In the recent US Presidential election, demographic factors played a significant role and created polling gap in favor of Trump. The pollsters should drill down the characteristics of the following profiles:

- Educated vs. less educated or not-educated
- White vs. brown vs. black
- Religious factors – Christian, Jews, Islam, Hindu
- Regions – geographic variations
- Economic – rich, poor
- Citizenships – born, immigrants, British, Mexican, South Asian, African
- Employment – working vs. non-working, white color vs. blue color
- Gender – male, female, LGBT.

Underestimating the voters - simple demographic segmentation policy will not work. Must consider each and all the voters segments. During the recent US elections, voters' segmentation was not done properly; seriously underestimated by the pollsters;

as a result, Hillary Clinton could not find a winning strategy. Similarly, Trump too. He was always understated and underrated. Therefore, the result was an “unacceptable blow” to the candidates and the supporters

too. We have witnessed the “violent after effect” in different American cities.

Though almost all the polling agencies and pollsters were predicting a Clinton win, LA Times were consistently predicting Trump as the winner. There were 93 polls between 8 September and 8 November, interestingly LA Times predicted 9 times favoring Trump. (Real

Clear Politics, 2016, Kirk and Scott, 2016)

The question is what was the secret of LA Times? How the pollsters at LA Times were so accurate to their forecasting? How they could capture the views from the “forgotten men and women”?

According to an article by Ashley and Patrick published in The Telegraph - “The LA Times said that one reason they believe their polling was successful was because they didn't underestimate Trump's support, as their online system captured people's will better than phone polls. LA Times further said “Trump voters were notably less comfortable about telling a telephone pollster about their vote. Voters who backed a third-party candidate were even less comfortable responding to a poll. Women who said they backed Trump were particularly less likely to say they would be comfortable talking to a pollster about their vote.”(Kirk and Scott, 2016)

Non-response bias from hard-to-reach groups– there are two types of voters who do

“Pollsters need to look wearing the lens of the target voters, not the way they want to validate. They must find the way to hear the voice of the voters.”

not want to share their views, they are the most hard-to-reach groups. Type 1 voters may not like to share their views, because they consider it as a privacy issue or fear of political or legal consequences or revenge from the opponents. The second type of voters (type 2) are “radical” – politically, or religiously or culturally highly motivated, they want real change of the country at any cost. They want to keep their views secret. Therefore, they just show up on the Election Day. Pollsters really struggle to hear their voices.

Response-bias from “dishonest” voters –

In India, it was observed in the exit poll of 2004 Parliamentary Election where a large number of the voters were not honest in sharing their views, because of political fear. It also happened several times in Bangladesh and Nepal where minority voters did not disclose the truth just to save themselves from being identified. There were instances where the opponents took “revenge” after the election. Similarly during exit polls in India, many voters those interviewed outside the polling booth immediately after they have voted, do not reveal the truth, because of being identified and targeted individually by the opponent political parties.

Shy effect–It is found in many polls in different countries that there is a segment of voters who feel shy or less comfortable about sharing their views to the pollsters. This happens mostly to the voters who are apparently “minority” such as visible minority (e.g. minority in terms of religion, race, color, and immigrants) or media-created minorities, for example Trump voters before election. The media portrayed Trump in such a way that many voters felt less comfortable to be open. Similarly, non-BJP supporters in India in 2004 or Jamaat-e-Islami supporters in Bangladesh in 2008 felt shy to disclose their opinion. Therefore, pollsters face difficulties in getting the views from these segments. Ashley and Scott (Kirk and Scott, 2016) said “voters who backed a third-party candidate were even less comfortable responding to a poll. Women who said they backed Trump were particularly less likely to

say they would be comfortable talking to a pollster about their vote.”

Respondent selection bias - Poll researchers may be biased in selecting the respondents. They

consider “who is likely to vote.” They design and portray the whole scenario in such a way so that their audience, i.e. voters, media, and politicians, can speak in their (researcher’s) language and discuss about the political context of the country or society as the researcher wants to justify and validate preconceived anecdotes, or sentiment and emotions. Since voters are now more “diplomatic” than before in expressing their willingness to vote, it is becoming difficult to know who is going to cast vote. Researchers usually ask “do you have any plan to cast in the upcoming election?” and the possible answers may be (a) yes, (b) no or (c) not sure/will not say. If they say affirmative (a), the researchers may further ask “Who do you plan on voting for in the next parliamentary election?” Therefore, pollsters purposefully avoid selecting those who said “b” or “c.” In reality, “c” category of respondents will definitely cast their vote. In real life situations, many of the voters those said “no” may still cast their votes. That is the toughest job of the pollsters to understand the “hidden views” of the voters. Any mistake may have costs in accuracy and credibility.

Voter centric - Voice of customers -

Pollsters and the data collectors rarely listen to voters, rather they wait for responses. Understanding the customer needs through the “voice of customer” (in opinion poll the customers are the voters) is imperative for interpreting from them better results. This will ensure the proper aligning of interconnected polling processes. Most polls lack the deeper analysis of the voters’ voice. The same happened in the US Presidential Election. The people in general and political parties and the candidates and the whole world were not only surprised to see the result of Donald Trump as the next president. Why it happened? The answer is simple, almost none listened the murmurs of the voters of particular segments, such as seniors, less educated, rural, whites, men and

so on. There was serious lacking of deeper analysis. There is a need for interpreting the information using qualitative approaches, not just translating the numbers with some “cheap” quantitative statistical analysis.

Conclusion

Lots of people are not sure about casting their votes. The number one reason for this uncertainty is either the voters have lost their trust in the candidates or are confused and have doubts. Pollsters need to look wearing the lens of the target voters, not the way they

want to validate. They must find the way to hear the voice of the voters. ■

Khalid Hasan Ph.D. is Chief Operating Officer of ResInt Canada. He has over 25 years' experience in social & community development, market research and business, focusing on North America and emerging markets in Asia. He has co-authored two books on marketing with cases from Asia.

REFERENCES

Gendreau, Henri. (2017); “The Pollster Who Predicted Trump Thinks Geert Wilders Could Win Too” WIRED, March 2017; <https://www.wired.com/2017/03/pollster-predicted-trump-thinks-geert-wilders-win/>

Guardian (2016): <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jan/19/crisis-of-statistics-big-data-democracy>

IRI (2008), Exit Poll, Bangladesh Parliamentary Election December 29, 2008, International Republican Institute, USA; <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2009%20January%206%20Exit%20Poll%20Bangladesh%20Parliamentary%20Elections,%20December%2029,%202008%282%29.pdf> and http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/fields/field_files_attached/resource/bangladeshs_2008_parliamentary_elections.pdf

Kirk, Ashley and Patrick Scott (2016); How wrong were the polls in predicting the US election and why did they fail to see Trump's win? Source: Telegraph: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/11/09/how-wrong-were-the-polls-in-predicting-the-us-election/>

New York Times Election (2016), <http://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/president>

CSR (2008); Center for Strategic Research Bangladesh conducted opinion polls in all the administrative divisions in Bangladesh in 2008.

Rai, Praveen. (2014), Economic and Political Weekly, Vol 49, Issue No. 16, 19 Apr 2014. <http://www.epw.in/journal/2014/16/election-specials-web-exclusives/status-opinion-polls.html>

Rakshit, Partha (2017) shared this view to the author through email. April 2017

Real Clear Politics (2016), http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/general_election_trump_vs_clinton-5491.html#polls;

Wikipedia (2016): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nationwide_opinion_polling_for_the_United_States_presidential_election,_2016;

PHOTO CREDIT:

The Daily Star; Voting in Tangail by-polls end. Voters are seen standing in a queue at Kalia Government Primary School polling centre in Basail; March 29, 2014. <http://www.thedailystar.net/voting-in-tangail-by-polls-end-17775>

Sabiha Chowdhury (2016), Hindustan Times Trump or Clinton? Animal kingdom predicts the 45th US president. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/trump-or-clinton-animal-kingdom-predicts-the-45th-us-president/story-APM27mydArf66yRSXYBjKl.html>