The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) is a professional body for statisticians and data analysts, with almost 8000 members across the world. We have been promoting the importance of statistics and data since our foundation in 1834, and we continue to engage with professionals and with government regarding the use of data and statistics.

Two of the RSS’s key strategic goals are, first, for statistics to be used effectively in the public interest and, secondly, for education to improve statistical literacy across all sectors of society. We believe all journalists should be statistically and numerically competent so they can report effectively on the statistics which affect people’s day to day lives. Pre-election polls are regularly reported in the media and are one of those areas that we believe should be covered carefully so that readers, viewers and listeners can critically assess their findings.

Summary

- On the methodology of polls, we support the recommendations made by the British Polling Council and Market Research Society’s inquiry into the 2015 British general election opinion polls, so will not be commenting on this area in detail. This submission therefore largely focuses on the media’s communication of polls.

- We believe political opinion polls should be reported by the media with particular care. All journalists can refer to free sources of guidance and training such as the BBC’s editorial guidelines, the British Polling Council’s guidance for journalists, and RSS resources on how to report accurately and effectively on numbers and statistics.

- This should be accompanied by more comprehensive in-house training and support for journalists so they are better able to treat polls with an appropriate level of caution whilst meeting tight editorial deadlines. Journalists need to be schooled in key statistical concepts such as uncertainty so they can accurately report on polls.

- There are many times, however, that even carefully-reported polls prove to be very wide of the election result, and this can affect trust in reporting. Even after the 2016 inquiry into British general election opinion polls, more remains to be done to improve the

---

methodologies of polls and their suitability for predicting election results, nationally and locally.

- We are cautious toward arguments that there should be fewer public polls. There is clearly a demand for public opinion and, if polls were absent, other sources of predictions might form the replacement.

- Some prominent failures in polling do not paint the whole picture as there have been several recent changes and successes in the industry. Polling companies are seeking to innovate, and there have been some impressive results using sophisticated statistical procedures such as the adoption of MRP (multi-level regression and post-stratification).

- It is crucial that pollsters and independent parties conduct critical inquiries in public so that the causes of uncertainty can be better understood. This House of Lords inquiry, alongside leadership by the British Polling Council on the technical aspects of polling, will provide much food for thought as pollsters consider the lessons from recent elections.

**Polling methods and accuracy**

1.1. Following the outcome of the 2015 General Election, in which the Conservatives unexpectedly won an outright majority, there was considerable backlash from the media and the public regarding the polls which had largely predicted a hung Parliament. Many said polls should no longer be such a focus for reporting in election periods, with some newspapers saying they would stop using them altogether. An inquiry into what went wrong was commissioned by the British Polling Council (BPC) and the Market Research Society (MRS). It was chaired by Professor Patrick Sturgis and the final report was launched at the RSS in March 2016. This report made twelve recommendations for BPC members which, it was hoped would rectify the issues associated with previous polls.\(^2\) With a further UK general election having taken place since then, as well as a referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union, there remains much debate about the usefulness of polls.

1.2. Despite the failings of some polls, which have been widely noted, there have been some more successful aspects to recent polling. The apparent success of the MRP (multi-level regression and post-stratification) statistical procedure in the US 2016 and UK 2017 general elections has pointed to the potential advantages of using complex statistical techniques.\(^3\) Caution is

---

\(^2\) Ibid.

required, however, and it must not be assumed that new methods can correct a poorly understood sample.

1.3. As RSS Honorary Fellow, Professor John Curtice and others have noted, the exit poll for the UK’s 2017 General Election defied many previous predictions but it was nonetheless accepted as a basis for initial on-air discussion of the outcome, and was relatively trusted for this purpose given the performance of its methodology in recent years. It has been argued that exit poll methodology, using longitudinal tracker surveys, could be adapted for pre-election polls and this is something we believe should be explored for future elections.

1.4. We believe there is a need for caution toward arguments for fewer public polls or indeed a complete ban on polls in the run-up to elections, as proposed by Labour peer, Lord Foulkes. Deterrence of reporting could mean that important developments are not advanced in public and it is crucial that guidance does not exacerbate this issue. There is also the separate issue of private polls being commissioned by interested parties. Such private polls are unhelpful as the public do not get to benefit from the knowledge of their findings. There is clearly a demand for public opinion and, if polls were absent, other sources of predictions - such as betting odds - might form the replacement.

Media coverage of polling

2.1. The media tends to extensively cover opinion polls throughout election periods and outlets often commission their own polling. Some have argued that journalists have become over-reliant on polling and should look to other data sources. We believe polls can still be a helpful tool but more must be done on improving the methodologies of the polls themselves and journalists should be given the right training so they can accurately and effectively report on them.

5 David Spiegelhalter, Was anyone right about the pre-election polls?, Significance, 18 May 2015. Available from: https://www.statslife.org.uk/politics/2256-was-anyone-right-about-the-pre-election-polls
6 Patrick Wintour Polling industry must be more tightly regulated, say Labour peers, The Guardian, 10 June 2015. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/jun/10/polling-industry-general-election Labour-
2.2. It is crucial that journalists can interpret political polls, and translate their findings and complex methodologies in a way that is easily understandable for the public whilst being aware of, and capable of conveying, each poll’s assumptions and uncertainties. The BPC has some useful guidelines for journalists on what to look for when they receive a poll. The RSS also provides guidance for journalists on how to report accurately and effectively on statistics.

2.3. We have seen some improvements in the reporting of polls since the inquiry into the 2015 General Election which issued recommendations for the polling industry. In terms of media reporting of polls, some outlets have been particularly good in using scatter plots to show the range of predictions produced across a wide range of polls, rather than just the central trend.

2.4. This can be seen in conjunction with the rise of data journalism over the last few years. However, whilst some outlets’ reporting has become more sophisticated, others still fail to do simple things like show the margin of error, or use visuals such as bar charts which can be misleading.

2.5. The BBC has helpful editorial guidelines on reporting on opinion polls; they detail what language should be used, the context, and what needs to be included, e.g. on the sample size and margin of error. Following a review into the organisation’s overall reporting of statistics, these guidelines were followed earlier this year with fresh guidance on the reporting on statistics, which benefitted from expert RSS input. Both sets of guidelines are useful for journalists of any media outlet who are reporting on polls: however, this should be accompanied by more comprehensive in-house training so journalists are confident reporting on polls whilst under tight editorial deadlines.

2.6. The BBC’s guidelines on polls state that the results of a poll should never be a headline or lead a news bulletin. It has been argued that journalists need to do more themselves to portray the whole range of public opinion, rather than allowing polls to be the sole focus of news bulletins.

---

and must display the range of results across different polls. Journalists also need to consider how the story may change if you, for example, add or subtract the margin of error.

2.7. The BBC’s guidelines state ‘we should not normally rely on the interpretation given to a poll’s results by the organisation or publication which carried it out or commissioned it’. This, however, relies on the journalist having the skills and time to make their own interpretation. Statisticians have a role to play in helping journalists identify the nuances of polls, rather than just reporting on results without the necessary context. The RSS, along with organisations like the Science Media Centre, acts as a key contact point for journalists looking for help on reporting statistics. Increasing such links with the statistics community would be beneficial for journalists reporting on political opinion polls.

2.8. We believe political opinion polls remain an important part of the media’s coverage of election campaigns. However, journalists must not rely on them for easy headlines but, rather, be able to interpret the findings for themselves, whilst bearing in mind that polls are just one way in which public opinion can be captured. If journalists had access to more comprehensive training, as well as better links with the statistics community, significant improvements could be made in their reporting of poll findings.

_14 September 2017_

---