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THE DIVERGENCE BETWEEN PHONE AND INTERNET POLLS: WHICH SHOULD WE BELIEVE?

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most striking feature of the polling of voting intentions that has been conducted during the EU referendum campaign has been the divergence between the results obtained by polls conducted via the phone and the figures produced by polls done over the internet. Whereas polls done over the internet have consistently suggested that the level of support for Remain is more or less equal to that for Leave, those conducted via the phone have nearly all put support for Remain well above that for Leave. This had led to a number of attempts to compare the two kinds of polling systematically with a view to trying to understand the reason for this divergence. This paper assesses the evidence produced by these attempts and considers what guidance it gives us as to which set of results is more likely to represent accurately the current distribution of voting intentions amongst the general population.

TWO WAYS OF POLLING

The aim of any poll or survey is to make contact with a sample of the general population whose views are representative of the population as a whole. However, telephone and internet surveys set about the task of achieving that objective in very different ways.

Telephone surveys typically rely on ringing telephone numbers, both landline and mobile, at random and securing an interview with one of the persons at the other end of the line. Usually the polling company does not know anything in advance about who they have contacted, and it is, in effect, relying on the statistical theory that if a thousand people are contacted at random, the true value of whatever the pollster is trying to estimate will 95% of the time be within three points either side of the figure obtained by the sample. However, the interviewer is likely to be instructed by the polling company to try and fill a quota of kinds of people to interview – men, women, younger people, older people, etc – so who is asked to complete the interview is not in fact simply a random process. In some instances, though, instead of ringing numbers at random, a company may have access to a database of people who have previously been contacted by a survey company and about whom consequently some demographic details are already known. That information can then be used to complete a quota of the kinds of people it wishes to contact.

Internet surveys are typically undertaken by issuing an invitation (for example, by e-mail) to a sample of people who have previously agreed to participate in such surveys and who accordingly have already provided a considerable amount of information about themselves. The invitation can thus be sent to a group of people whose collective characteristics match those of the general population for any characteristic whose distribution amongst the general public is known. But typically it is only sent to those who have already joined the relevant panel of people willing to participate, though sometimes an internet polling company may also try to secure the participation of others by posting invitations to participate on one or more websites, including not least sites that may have little themselves to do with politics or social affairs.

There is one potential problem that, above all, can bedevil both approaches. Not everybody who is rung or invited to participate will do so. People may not answer their phone or read their email, and even if they do may still decline to participate. Indeed, people are less willing nowadays to participate in surveys than they once were. Moreover, polls are typically conducted over no more than two or three days, and thus are more likely to secure the participation of those who are easily contactable. In short, despite their best efforts to secure the participation of a sample of people who appear to be representative of the population as a whole, differences in people's availability and willingness to participate can mean that the sample a polling company achieves does not look so representative after all. As a result, once the data have been collected, all polls are subjected to a process of 'weighting' whereby respondents with characteristics that appear to be underrepresented in the sample are given a weight of more than one, while those with characteristics that are seemingly overrepresented are given a weight of less than one. Consequently, a poll's estimate of the number of Remain and Leave supporters is the sum of the weights applied to each respondent expressing that preference rather than simply the raw number of respondents stating that view.

THE RECORD

The divergence between the results obtained by internet and phone polls in the referendum is summarised in Table 1. The table shows the average level of support for Remain and Leave across all of the polls conducted in three periods - up to the conclusion of the Prime Minister's renegotiation of the UK's terms of membership, during the first six weeks thereafter, and then since the beginning of April (up to 19 May). Note that in each case we have excluded those who said Don't Know from the calculation, and thus together the levels of support for Leave and for Remain add up to 100.

Table 1 Average Levels of Support for Leave and for Remain in Polls of Referendum Vote Intentions September 2015 – May 2016

	1.9.15-18.2.16		19.2.16-31.3.16		1.4.16-19.5.16	
	Internet	Phone	Internet	Phone	Internet	Phone
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Remain	50	60	50	56	50	55
Leave	50	40	50	44	50	45
No. of Polls	50	8	21	8	24	13

In the first phase of the campaign (up to the conclusion of the renegotiation) polls conducted via the phone were few and far between. Yet those that were conducted painted a very different picture of the referendum race than did those conducted via the internet. On average they suggested that the balance of opinion was 3:2 in favour of Remain while the internet polls pointed to a dead heat. Since the conclusion of the renegotiation rather more polls have been conducted via the phone. Although they now paint a somewhat less rosy picture for Remain, they still suggest that support for Remain is well above that for Leave, whereas those polls conducted via the internet have continued to suggest that the race is a dead heat.

POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

Why might the two kinds of polling be obtaining rather different results? There are two principal sets of possible explanations.

The first is that the divergence arises out of differences in the way in which the two kinds of poll are administered to a respondent. In a phone survey the respondent chooses one of a set of options read out to her by an interviewer. In an internet survey she picks one of a set of options that are presented on a screen. This can have implications for the way in which the answer 'Don't Know' is treated, while the presence or otherwise of an interviewer may make a difference to the answer that a respondent gives.

In a phone survey it is possible not to offer 'Don't Know' as a potential answer but for the interviewer still to accept it as a valid response if that is the reply the respondent gives. In an internet survey, in contrast, the polling company has to decide whether or not to offer Don't Know as an answer on the screen and, if it is offered, with what degree of prominence. Not offering the option means that all respondents are forced to answer one way or the other – or to give up on the interview entirely. Offering it may encourage people to use it. If it is the case that support for one side in the referendum is more hesitant than that for the other, offering Don't Know as an option may mean that respondents who might otherwise (albeit perhaps reluctantly) declare a preference instead say they are not sure. Perhaps in this referendum there is a body of hesitant voters who are inclined to vote to Remain, but say Don't Know if given the chance to do so – as is more likely to be the case on an internet survey.

Meanwhile, ultimately of course, polls rely on their respondents giving honest answers to their questions. But sometimes the presence of an interviewer may lead a respondent to temper her views, especially if she perceives that her opinions are not widely shared or may not be considered socially acceptable. It has long been recognised that this may be an issue when people are asked their opinions about sensitive subjects such as race or sexuality. People can, for example, be less willing to admit to views that may be considered racially prejudicial. So perhaps in this referendum, voters perceive that saying you will vote to Leave is not a particularly popular opinion in some quarters and thus may be reluctant to declare to an interviewer that that is how they intend to vote.

The second possible set of explanations arises out of the different ways in which the two ways of polling obtain their samples. As we have already seen, most internet polls rely on contacting people who have already agreed to participate in their surveys. At the same time, phone polls have to trust that the people they do manage to contact are indeed representative of the general population even though previously they may have not known anything about them. But perhaps those who agree to sign up to undertake an internet poll are different from the general population even after we have taken into account a wide range of characteristics. Is, for example, a 60 year old widow who used to work as a nurse and who agrees to participate in an internet survey necessarily the same as a 60 year old widow who used to work as a nurse who is not signed up to an internet survey panel? Alternatively, perhaps the kinds of people who are successfully contacted and interviewed by a phone poll that is conducted over a short period of time are rather atypical in their views even when we have taken into account their demographic characteristics.

There is, of course, nothing new about these methodological differences. They certainly did not account for the underestimation by the polls of the Conservative lead over Labour at the 2015 general election. That underestimation was in evidence in both kinds of polling. However, the question of whether the UK should remain in or leave the EU is a very different one from which party to back in a general election. It is a choice that cuts across people's party political

preferences. Thus, it is quite possible that even if these methodological differences do not make much difference in estimating Conservative and Labour vote intentions in a general election, they may still matter when estimating the distribution of support for Remain and Leave in this referendum.

THE DON'T KNOW ISSUE

On average, it is the case that phone polls tend to report a lower proportion of Don't Knows (which in some polls can also include people who refuse to say how they will vote or who declare that they definitely will not vote) than do those conducted over the internet. Since the beginning of April, phone polls have on average reported a Don't Know figure of 11% whereas in internet polls the equivalent statistic is 17%. Not all of this difference necessarily simply reflects the ease with which respondents can say Don't Know, as quite a few companies ask those who initially say Don't Know which way they are more inclined to vote, and if they say Remain or Leave in response to that follow-up question are counted as a Remain or Leave supporter rather than as a Don't Know. Even so, this does not stop the evidence being consistent with the argument that Remain supporters are more reticent and consequently are less in evidence in polls that have a higher proportion of Don't Knows.

That this phenomenon might help account for the divergence between the results of internet polls was given greater credence by the results of an experiment conducted at the end of February by Populus in conjunction with the Number Cruncher Politics website (Singh and Kanagasooriam, 2016). They conducted two polls, one by phone and one via the internet. In both cases half of the sample was offered Don't Know as an option while the other half was not (which in the case of the internet sample meant in practice that it was only available as a small button). As Table 2 shows, in both cases not only did more people choose Don't Know when it was offered as an option, but also fewer people said they would vote for Remain. In contrast the level of support for Leave was much the same irrespective of whether Don't Know was offered as a response or not.

Table 2 Results of Populus Experiment on Impact of Offering/Not Offering Don't Knows

% said they would vote	Phone Poll		Internet Poll	
	Don't Know offered	Don't Know not offered	Don't Know prominent	Don't Know not prominent
Remain	39	48	39	45
Leave	36	37	44	46
Don't Know	24	15	18	9

Source: Populus/Number Cruncher Politics 26-28.2.16

However, even this experiment suggested that there is more to the divergence between phone and internet polls than the way in which they treat the administration of Don't Knows. Both when Don't Know was offered as an option and when it was not, the internet poll put Leave ahead (albeit in one instance only very narrowly) while the phone poll put Remain ahead.

Meanwhile, if we look a little more closely at the polls that are conducted over the internet, they vary widely in the proportion of Don't Knows that they report. Since the beginning of April, 14 internet polls have reported a level of Don't Knows at or below the average for such polls of 17%. In the remaining 10 polls the proportion of Don't Knows has been 19% or more. Yet the average level of support for Remain and Leave (once the Don't Knows themselves are excluded from the calculation) in these two sets of polls is virtually identical. It stands at Remain 51%, Leave

49% in the ten polls with more Don't Knows and at Remain 50%, Leave 50% in the 14 with fewer such respondents. If it is the case that Remain voters are more reticent and less likely to declare themselves in polls that make it easier for them to say Don't Know, we would anticipate that support for Remain would be lower in those polls with most Don't Knows. Yet this proves not to be the case.

At the same time, it should be borne in mind that it is not necessary for an internet poll to offer respondents the option to say Don't Know, not even in the form of a small box as in the case of Populus' experiment. In the online polls that they have conducted, ORB have not offered respondents the option at all. Everyone has had to answer Remain or Leave, irrespective of how reticent they feel about their choice. Yet the results of their internet polls have on average been very similar to those obtained by every other internet poll. In the eight such polls the company has conducted to date, it has on average put Remain on 51%, Leave on 49%.

There is then some evidence that the lower level of support for Remain could at least in part be accounted for by the relative ease with which supposedly reticent Remain voters can say Don't Know on an internet poll. However, amongst internet polls themselves there is no clear relationship between the number of Don't Knows that they report and the level of support for Remain. Indeed, even when an internet poll has not allowed someone to say Don't Know at all, it has still secured a lower level of support for Remain than obtained in most phone polls.

SHY LEAVERS?

The second reason we identified earlier as to why the difference in the way in which phone and internet polls are administered might matter, is that perhaps some respondents are reluctant to give what they consider to be a socially unacceptable answer to someone who is interviewing them down the phone. Maybe as a result, the internet polls are uncovering Leave supporters who are hidden from view in a phone poll.

It is, of course, always very difficult to prove that a group of voters are deliberately hiding their true preference from an interviewer. However, one possibility that we might consider is that if Leave voters are more reluctant to declare themselves in a phone poll, we might expect to find a difference between the two kinds of poll when those who initially say Don't Know are asked in which direction they are leaning. If the theory is correct, a higher proportion of those who initially say Don't Know in a phone poll should be closet Leave supporters than is the case in an internet poll – and that consequently when pressed a little as to how they might vote, more of the Don't Knows in a phone poll should say they are inclined to vote Leave.

The polls vary considerably in the extent to which they succeed in evincing an inclination in either direction from those who initially say Don't Know. (Both Ipsos MORI's phone polls and Opinium's internet polls are much more successful than other companies in doing so.) Still, if we look at the average level of support amongst initial Don't Knows for Remain and Leave across all of the companies that do try to assess their inclination, we find much the same pattern in the internet polls as in their phone counterparts. On average, in the most recent poll of those internet polling companies that do try to press the Don't Knows into declaring an inclination, 30% declare an inclination to back Remain, while 18% state they are inclined to back Leave, a difference of 12 points. The equivalent figures for phone polls are 37% and 27% respectively – a not dissimilar gap of nine points.

This evidence is, of course, far from definitive. If respondents really are reluctant to declare a preference to Leave to an interviewer, they may still fail to do so when pressed to give an

inclination. All that we can say is that we cannot uncover any evidence that appears to substantiate the argument.

SAMPLING DIFFERENCES

As we noted earlier, no polling company simply reports the total number of people who say they will vote to Remain and the proportion who propose to vote to Leave. In the event that they find too many people in one group or too few in another, they weight their data so that each group is represented in proportion to their size in the population. Given that the polling companies are typically weighting to very similar targets, this practice limits the scope for divergence in their results. That such divergence is nevertheless still occurring means that the two methods must be finding differences in the proportion of Remain and Leave supporters within the social groups by which they are weighting their data.

The extent to which this is the case can be assessed by looking at two pairs of parallel polls conducted by ICM. Each pair consists of a phone and an internet survey conducted at the same time. The first pair of polls was administered in mid-April, the second pair in mid-May. Given that the pairs of polls were conducted at exactly the same time, ascertained referendum vote intention via identically worded questions, and were conducted by the same company, this means we can be relatively confident that any divergence must arise out of the two different ways of conducting the polls rather than as a result of any other consideration.

In both cases the overall results replicated the divergence between phone and internet polls in their estimates of referendum vote intentions. In April, the phone poll (once Don't Knows are left to one side) reported a 54% vote for Remain, with 46% backing Leave. The internet poll, in contrast, credited both sides with 50% each. In May the divergence was somewhat greater. The phone poll put Remain on 55% and Leave on 45%, while the online poll put Leave slightly ahead of Remain by 52% to 48%.

Meanwhile Table 3 compares the results of the two pairs of polls for two social groups that every polling company uses in its weighting scheme, age and social grade. The latter is an occupational class scheme that is widely used in the market research industry and in which AB = professional and managerial occupations, C1 = clerical and junior managerial positions, C2 = skilled manual workers and DE = semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers.

Table 3 Support for Remain by Age and Social Grade in parallel internet and phone polls conducted by ICM in April and May 2016.

	Age Groups			
	18-34	35-64	65 plus	
	% Remain	% Remain	% Remain	
15-17.4.16				
Internet	70	44	39	
Phone	66	52	44	
13-15.5.16				
Internet	61	47	37	
Phone	66	50	54	
	Social Grade			
	AB	C1	C2	DE
	% Remain	% Remain	% Remain	% Remain
15-17.4.16				
Internet	56	50	48	42
Phone	68	56	43	42
13-15.5.16				
Internet	58	50	42	37
Phone	66	61	41	49

Source: ICM

First of all, we can see that in both pairs of polls, respondents were for the most part more likely to say in the phone poll that they would vote to Remain irrespective of their age group. Thus, for example, in the second pair, while 66% of those aged 18-34 who participated in the phone poll said that they would vote to Remain, in the internet sample 61% did so. Not all of the differences are in this direction; in the first pair the younger voters who participated in the online poll were rather more likely than those in the phone poll to say they would vote to Remain, but then it should be borne in mind that, given the sample sizes in question, all of these statistics are potentially subject to quite considerable variation simply as a result of chance.

Meanwhile we can see a similar tendency when we look at the pattern by social grade. Those who are interviewed by phone are in general more likely than those who participated in an internet poll to say they will back Remain, irrespective of their social grade. That said, we might note that the evidence for this appears to be rather stronger amongst those in the more middle class AB and C1 social grades than it is amongst the C2 and DE grades. Again, however, we need to be aware of the potential impact of chance variation given the size of the samples in question. Certainly, in a second systematic comparison of phone and internet polling that Populus conducted at the beginning of March (in this case not varying the way in which Don't Know is presented to respondents), they found a higher level of support for Remain in the phone poll than in the internet sample in all four social grades (see Table 4).

Table 4 Support for Remain by Social Grade in parallel internet and phone polls conducted by Populus in March 2016.

	Social Grade			
	AB % Remain	C1 % Remain	C2 % Remain	DE % Remain
Internet	61	55	42	47
Phone	65	62	55	50

Source: Populus/Number Cruncher Politics 4-6.3.16 (phone) and 2-10.3.16 (internet)

So what might be the missing ingredient in the polling companies' sampling strategies? It needs to be a characteristic that the companies are not currently taking into account in their weighting schemes, which makes a difference to the likelihood of people voting to Leave or Remain, and whose prevalence might differ between phone and internet polls.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

One characteristic that is known to be associated with voting intentions in the referendum is a respondent's level of educational attainment (Curtice, 2015). University graduates are keen on remaining in the EU, while those with few if any qualifications are inclined towards Leave. The 2015 British Social Attitudes survey, for example, found that as many as 77% of those with a university degree wanted Britain to continue to be a member of the European Union while just 17% wanted it to withdraw. Conversely, only 45% of those without any educational qualifications wanted Britain to continue to be part of the EU, while 43% wanted it to withdraw. This division proved to be rather sharper than the differences by social class.

The British Election Study has uncovered a similar pattern. In interviewing it conducted shortly after last year's general election as part of a very large internet survey that has been returning to the same respondents on a regular basis ever since the beginning of 2014, it found that 58% of graduates wanted Britain to stay in the EU, while 26% wanted to leave. In contrast, amongst those without any educational qualifications, only 29% said they wanted Britain to stay, while 52% backed leaving.

Europe is not the only issue on which graduates have distinctive views. They have also long been more inclined to hold more liberal views on social issues such as sexuality, race and immigration. For example, according to the most recent British Social Attitudes survey, no less than 69% of graduates say that there is nothing wrong at all about same sex relations, a view shared by just 39% of those without any qualifications. Equally 56% of graduates are inclined to the view that Britain's cultural life is enriched by immigration, a view that is shared by just 17% of those without any educational qualifications. Given the prominence of the debate about immigration in the EU referendum campaign, it is perhaps not surprising that attitudes towards Europe are associated with educational attainment in much the same way as many social issues.

However, details of a respondent's educational qualifications are not routinely collected by polling companies. In truth, given the myriad of possible educational qualifications that exist, to do so properly is a complicated exercise in which respondents are presented with a long list of qualifications and asked which they have. Such a comprehensive approach is impossible to administer over the phone and potentially tiresome to do so over the internet, though a less systematic approach that simply asks respondents which of the more common kinds of qualifications represents their highest level of educational attainment can be attempted. Still,

failure to try to take educational attainment into account would seem to be a potential lacuna in the weighting strategies being employed by many polling companies, irrespective of whether they are polling over the internet or via the phone.

What, however, is less clear is whether we should expect there to be a systematic difference between the educational profile of respondents to a phone poll and those to an internet one. That, however, has not stopped there being two attempts to assess whether phone polls do contain more graduates or more people with socially liberal views than do internet polls.

The first such attempt came in the form of the second systematic comparison between phone and internet polling undertaken by Populus to which reference has already been made. Whereas their first exercise focused on the possible impact of offering Don't Know as a response option versus not doing so, the second tried to assess the relative accuracy of the two approaches by seeing how well they approximated the distribution of responses to a number of questions about social issues that were carried on a high quality post-election survey that was conducted on behalf of the British Election Study (BES). The BES survey in question was administered face to face to a sample of people who had been selected for interview entirely at random and, unlike the opinion polls, did succeed in largely replicating the outcome of the 2015 general election when respondents were asked how they voted, thereby lending credence to its estimates of public opinion on other measures.

The results were intriguing. The sample of people who were interviewed by phone proved to be more socially liberal than the BES sample, while those who participated in the internet poll were more conservative. Thus, for example, whereas 32% of the BES sample had said that attempts to introduce equal opportunities for Black and Asian people had 'not gone far enough', as many as 40% of the phone sample expressed that view, while just 25% of those who participated in the online exercise did so. Adjusting the two polls for the difference between their results for the social issue questions and those obtained by the BES survey helped account for around half of the difference between the two polls' estimates of the level of support for Remain and Leave.

This was not an unproblematic exercise. It is possible that one of the reasons why the internet sample appeared to be more socially conservative than that conducted by phone is that in the absence of an interviewer respondents were more willing to give what they thought might be socially unacceptable answers on a social issue such as race. Populus attempted to take this possibility on board in the way in which they adjusted the internet sample, though it is inevitably impossible to be sure how successful they were in doing so.

In contrast, although the information may be difficult to collect, there is less reason to anticipate that perceptions of social desirability should affect people's reports of the educational qualifications that they have. In the last and most recent of the attempts to compare systematically the results of internet and phone polling on the EU, YouGov attempted to address directly whether phone polls contain more graduates than internet polls, and whether this can account for the divergence in the polls' estimates of referendum vote intentions (Morris, 2016).

YouGov's analysis is informed in part by the results of the previous exercises conducted by Populus and ICM. First YouGov note that, while those in the AB social grade of professionals and managers are over-represented in both the phone polls and the internet polls that have been conducted by ICM, this over-representation is more marked in the phone polls than in the internet polls. Before the first pair of ICM polls were weighted, 43% of those in the phone sample were classified as belonging to the AB social grade, while the proportion in the internet sample was 37%. The equivalent figures in the second pair of polls were 44% and 38% respectively. In each case the AB respondents were downweighted so that they eventually constituted just 27% of the sample, but YouGov speculate that perhaps not only does this discrepancy mean that ICM's

phone samples contain more AB voters but also that such polls are at greater risk of containing an atypical sample of AB respondents, viz. graduates. If that were to be the case, the atypicality would not be corrected by the subsequent weighting of the data.

Seemingly more direct evidence that phone polls are likely to contain graduates than internet polls was, however, also to be found in the two sets of systematic comparisons of phone and internet polling conducted by Populus. Uniquely, all four of these polls (two internet, two phone) did present respondents with a summary of four different kinds of qualifications and asked which was the highest that they had. The accuracy of the information collected by this approach is unclear, but we might reasonably assume that any inaccuracy would affect the phone and internet polls similarly. In any event, YouGov note that in the second pair of Populus' polls, even after weighting as many as 46% of those who participated in the phone sample said that they had a degree level qualification, compared with just 31% in the online sample. This gap in itself perhaps helps explain why the phone sample proved to be much more socially liberal than the online sample, while it is the 31% figure that is much closer to the true proportion in the general population – for example, just 24% of those who participated in the 2015 British Social Attitudes survey said that they had a degree (although that survey draws a sharp distinction between those with a degree and those with a higher educational or professional qualification at below degree level).

As a company that only undertakes internet surveys, YouGov are not in a position to undertake parallel internet and phone surveys themselves. In order to pursue their own attempt at a systematic comparison of the merits of the two approaches, they therefore commissioned a separate agency to undertake a phone poll at the same time (in late April and early May) as they themselves undertook an internet poll. This phone poll did not ask respondents their educational qualifications, but did ask them what might be regarded as a not unreasonable surrogate, that is, at what age they finished their full time education. This information is also available for the internet sample, but in this case so also is relatively detailed information on respondents' highest educational qualification. This reveals that two-thirds of the sample who said they finished their full-time education at age 20 or older held a degree (while over 80% of those with a degree said they finished their education at that age), suggesting that the age at which people left full-time education will help to identify those with different levels of educational attainment.

Both samples were weighted by the age the respondent finished their full-time education alongside many another demographic and political characteristic. At first glance the results are startling. Once the Don't Knows are left to one side, the internet poll produced figures of Remain 49%, Leave 51%, well in line with the results of many another such poll. In contrast, the phone poll produced estimates that are very different from the norm for such polls; Remain were credited with 48%, Leave with 52%. In short, the exercise would seem to suggest that, when conducted and weighted to take account of the educational experience of respondents, the divergence between phone and internet polling disappears – in such a way that it would seem that internet polls are producing the more accurate estimates of vote intentions.

However, there is a problem. YouGov's work started from the premise that phone polls contain too many graduates. However, far from containing too many people who finished their full-time education at age 20 or older, the phone poll that was conducted on the company's behalf actually contained too few such respondents. Just 22% of the sample said that they finished their education at that age, a proportion that was then weighted up to as much as 34%. As a result, far from reducing Remain's estimated share of the vote, the overall impact of the weighting of the phone poll was to increase it from 43% to 48%. In short, what in fact the exercise really demonstrated is that, contrary to YouGov's supposition, phone polls do not necessarily contain too many graduates after all.

Indeed, further evidence in support of that proposition is also to be found in the first pair of phone and internet polls that Populus conducted at the end of February. In contrast to the position in the second pair, there was relatively little difference between the internet and phone polls in the proportion of graduates that they contained. While 44% of the phone sample were identified as having a degree or its equivalent, so also were 40% of the online sample. While questions might be raised about the validity of either figure, the gap is too small to confirm the proposition that phone polls necessarily contain too many graduates.

YouGov have undoubtedly raised an important issue about the potential importance of ensuring that polls of EU referendum vote intentions contain the right balance of those with different educational qualifications and experience. Education is one of the major demographic divides in this referendum, and weighting samples by social grade may well not be an adequate substitute for weighting by educational attainment. However, the claim that phone polls contain too many graduates and that it is this characteristic that accounts for the divergence between phone and internet polls remains not proven – not least because we have relatively little firm evidence as to how many graduates polls do contain.

POLITICAL COMMITMENT


One of the criticisms that is sometimes made of internet polls is that because they are based on securing responses from people who have signed up to participate in such surveys, they contain more people who are politically interested and committed. Meanwhile, nearly all of the polling evidence in this referendum, both from internet polls and from phone ones, is that those who say they wish to Leave the EU are more likely than those who back Remain to say they will vote. So perhaps there is a risk that because they contain more committed voters, internet samples also contain more Leave supporters.

The evidence from ICM's systematic comparison of internet and phone polling certainly suggests that those who participate in an internet poll are more likely to say they will vote than are those who respond to a phone poll. The company ascertains respondents' likelihood of voting by asking them to place themselves on a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 means they are 'absolutely certain to vote' and 1 implies they are 'certain not to vote'. In the first pair of polls conducted by the company in April, those who participated in the phone poll gave themselves a score on average of 8.34, whereas those who took part in the internet poll gave themselves a score of 8.81. The equivalent figures for the second set of polls in May were 8.39 and 8.98 respectively.

However, whether this makes any difference to the polls' estimates of support for Remain and Leave is far from certain. It may simply be the case that online samples contain both more Remain and more Leave voters who are committed to voting than do phone polls. Certainly, Remain supporters in ICM's online polls are more likely to say they will vote than Remain supporters do in their phone polls (while the same is true of Leave voters). The issue must therefore inevitably remain a speculative one.

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

The divergence between phone and internet polls in the EU referendum is, in truth, not an entirely new phenomenon. Despite the relative similarity of their estimates of Conservative and Labour support in the 2015 general election, the two kinds of polls do tend to exhibit a similar divergence in their estimates of the level of support for UKIP. Polls conducted via the internet have tended to report higher levels of support for UKIP than have those conducted via the phone.



Perhaps, then, given that UKIP's raison d'être is to secure Britain's withdrawal from the EU, we should look to the relative success of the two types of poll in estimating UKIP's performance in the 2015 general election for guidance as to which might be the more reliable in the referendum. On average those polls that were conducted by phone immediately before polling day anticipated that UKIP would win 11% of the vote, while those undertaken via the internet credited the party with 14%. In the event UKIP won just under 13% of the vote, in between the two sets of estimates. That suggests that internet polls have been inclined to overestimate UKIP support and phone polls to underestimate it – much as Populus' experimental work suggested that internet polls tend to underestimate social conservatism and phone polls to overestimate it.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that there are a number of possible reasons as to why phone polls have been painting a different picture of the state of the referendum race from that provided by internet polls. This inevitably makes it difficult to ascertain why the divergence has arisen, let alone be sure as to which picture is correct.

However, some progress can be made. Given the lack of a link in the internet polls between the level of support for Remain and Leave on the one hand and the incidence of Don't Knows on the other, it seems unlikely that the divergence can be accounted for by the supposed relative ease with which reticent Remain supporters simply say Don't Know in response to an internet poll. Meanwhile it is not easy to uncover evidence that some Leave supporters may be reluctant to declare themselves to an interviewer over the phone.

In short, it seems unlikely that the divergence between internet and phone polls can be accounted for by the differences in the way in which they administer a poll to a respondent. Rather it seems more likely that the explanation lies in differences in the kinds of samples that the two approaches obtain. It has been suggested that phone samples contain more socially liberal graduates than do internet polls, and given that graduates are more likely to favour remaining in the EU, this helps account for the divergence. However, we have seen that the evidence on this point is far from consistent – but equally importantly is also relatively limited. Given the extent to which educational background is associated with voting intention in this referendum, the fact that information on that background is not regularly being collected and used by the polls is arguably an important lacuna in the methodology that is being employed, irrespective of whether the polls are being conducted over the phone or via the internet.

In the absence of further evidence as to which approach is currently the more accurate, it may be that the best we can do is to look to relevant past performance, that is how well the two approaches estimated UKIP support in 2015. Unfortunately, doing so fails to present us with a clear steer either – for one set of polls underestimated UKIP support while the other overestimated it. Perhaps that means that the best judgement we can make at the moment is that the truth on where the public stands on the EU referendum is somewhere in between the picture painted by the internet polls and the estimates being obtained by their phone counterparts. In any event, we shall find out in a month's time whether that proves to be the case or not.

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