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# The Politics of Polling

everyday practices of political opinion polling

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## **Abstract**

Public opinion has long been held as an important concept in politics. Consequently, its measurement, particularly through public opinion polls, is valuable both as a point of democratic principle and of political practicality. Whilst a rich literature exists on opinion polls and opinion data is regularly used for a variety of analyses, there is little available information on the everyday, human activities which drive the production of polling.

In this thesis, I present a different view of political polling by engaging with polls at the site of their production and asking the question: what are the everyday practices of political public opinion polling, and what is their significance in understanding political polls? In answering this question, I use an ethnographic approach to provide a narrative account of qualitative data on political polling.

This thesis is an exploratory study. It produces empirical data on the practices of polling, and theoretical analyses of how this data can further inform our understandings of political polls. Throughout the thesis, I put forward the argument that the human agency of pollsters is an important, but often overlooked facet of understanding political polls. Significant individual decisions are found to be commonplace in everyday practice, and affect the wording, the type, and the nature of available polls. By providing an account of everyday practices, I am able to demonstrate the ways in which this influence on polling output manifests. I focus on the norms, traditions and values which are mediating forces on everyday practice to present theory with which polling practices can be evaluated and understood.

The ethnographic perspective developed throughout the thesis is used to evaluate the scrutiny of political polling. This illustrates the utility of this qualitative approach, its application to broader questions about political polling, and the role of a perspective of everyday activity in a better understanding of this key political tool.



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## Glossary

**AAPOR:** American Association of Public Opinion Research

**BPC:** British Polling Council

**CATI:** Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing

**MRP:** Multi-level regression and post-stratification

**MRS:** Market Research Society

**PPDM:** House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media

**RDD:** Random-digit Dialling



# 1 | Chapter 1 - Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

Public opinion is woven throughout our narratives of politics. One can easily imagine the scene, a tough choice has a government minister at an impasse and there's no clear route forward. Having finished briefing on the issue, their adviser makes a suggestion: "Let's get some numbers on this shall we?" An overnight poll is conducted and the next day, with the benefit of the public view, a decision is made. These scenes may be common in our stories of how politics works but they can equally be found within the actual accounts of working within government; they are an important reality of the political process.<sup>1</sup> Parties will, often obsessively, research the perspectives of voters on proposed policy, campaign messaging, and a variety of other issues. It is no stretch of the imagination to picture election strategists expressing concerns with what 'Workington man' will make of it all (i.e. will this be popular amongst the people we need to be popular with).

Though this may be seen in a negative light, indicating governors without conviction chasing popularity, it might equally be seen as a healthy process. Public opinion is central to politics. As Hume asserted, "it is... on opinion only that government is founded".<sup>2</sup> It is a core principle of democratic theory that governments and representative institutions should be "responsive to the polity".<sup>3</sup> Indeed, for Dahl, "a key characteristic of democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens".<sup>4</sup> The suggestion that elites should be responsive to public opinion is a long-held belief. Bryce described public opinion as the "master of servants who tremble before it", and Birch - considering public opinion in relation to British government - claimed that "[n]o supporter of representative institutions would deny that the reflection of public opinion is one of their most important functions".<sup>5</sup> Yet this raises some challenging questions – if the public's view is so important to politics, how should it be measured, who should do this, and what politics (in all senses of the word) affect the process by which we gauge opinion? This thesis takes up these questions.

Opinion polling has become a major method for measuring and communicating public opinion. Public opinion polling in the UK has developed from its origins in the 1930s to become one of the most prevalent forms of measuring public opinion, and is an approach that claims substantial scientific

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, Phillip Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, (London: Abacus, 1999), pp. 326-332.

<sup>2</sup> David Hume, *Political Essays*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Williams and Jill Edy, *Basic Beliefs, Democratic Theory, and Public Opinion* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999) p. 214.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy, Participation and Opposition*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971) p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, (New York: MacMillan, 1888) p. 296. ; Anthony Birch, *Representative & Responsible Government: an essay on the British Constitution*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964) p. 171.

legitimacy.<sup>6</sup> However, the means by which citizens' ideas and preferences are translated to political leaders is by no means straightforward.<sup>7</sup> Overcoming this difficulty is an important challenge, as an accurate understanding of public opinion is important in modern democracy. This responsiveness is important both from a position of political principle (it helps governors to be responsive to the public) and from one of political utility (it can inform strategic political decision making).<sup>8</sup>

As I explore in this thesis, our understanding of public opinion polling is incomplete; not only is the concept of public opinion both difficult to define, and challenging to measure, but the literature on opinion polling has few contributions which focus on the organisations and individuals who produce polls. Indeed, there is a surprising lack of information about how polling organisations operate and reflect on their role in the challenging and political environment that they inhabit. The crucial role that public opinion plays in democratic politics, both for governors and citizens, make an investigation into these behaviours important.

Whilst this presents us with a straightforward gap in the documented accounts of polling, it also poses a more complex challenge in terms of our understanding. Though the prominence and use of polls suggests their significance in British politics, they are held in varying regard. An optimistic account might see polling as a scientific, clinical endeavour, while a pessimist's view is of polling which is fixed; a scam to get the results that are wanted. In reality, neither of these positions are likely to reflect the messy, human realities of polling. This thesis produces a perspective of polling based in an understanding of everyday practices and demonstrates that such practices have significant impacts on the nature of the polling that is produced.

An examination of the literature on polling reveals that polling is a contested activity.<sup>9</sup> The hegemonic view within the industry and amongst psephologists is straightforward: properly conducted, opinion polls serve to provide a representation of the public's opinions for a variety of informing purposes – “reporting... analytical... and (least effective...) predictive”.<sup>10</sup> Traugott and Kang argue that polls “may be valued because the public recognizes their function in representing public opinion to the elite decision-makers in a democracy”.<sup>11</sup> But Hogan sees it very differently, arguing that “Polls have become ‘news events’ in and of themselves. As a result, they substitute for substantive information about

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Roodhouse, “‘Fish and Chip Intelligence’: Henry Durant and the British Institute of Public Opinion 1936-1963”, *Twentieth Century British History*, 24.2 (2013) 224-248 (p. 229.)

<sup>7</sup> Hanna Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972) pp.219-220.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Birch, *Representative & Responsible Government: an essay on the British Constitution*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964) p. 171.

<sup>9</sup> Explored in Chapter 2.3

<sup>10</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) p. 121.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Traugott and Paul Lavrakas, ‘Why Election Polls are Important to a Democracy: An American Perspective’, in *Elections Polls, The News Media, and Democracy* ed. by Paul Lavrakas and Michael Traugott (New York, Chatham House Publishers, 2000), pp. 1-21. (p. 16.)

political issues and stifle debate.”<sup>12</sup> With the existence of such divergent views on polls’ role(s), and a dearth of information about the beliefs of pollsters, we are again presented with an opportunity to evaluate the extent to which pollsters’ conceptual view of their democratic role impacts on their work and practice.

Further still, polling has faced significant scrutiny in the UK, following a number of elections and referendums which have challenged the industry. With inquiries into polling being driven by shortcomings in the performance of the polls in these events, this scrutiny tends to focus on technical questions. Without an understanding of the impact of everyday practices in the production of polls, it is difficult to ascertain their importance to the significant questions facing polling, its scrutiny, and the regulation of the industry. These questions are raised in more detail in chapter 2.

In light of these varied challenges, in this thesis I ask the following research questions:

*What are the everyday practices of political public opinion polling, and what is their significance in understanding political polls?*

To explore and answer these questions, which are primarily concerned with the everyday practice of pollsters, I produce an ethnographic, insider account of political polling. In doing so, I will demonstrate that such an account highlights a facet of analysis which has been previously overlooked. This is because it reveals behaviours which have tangible impacts on the political polls which are produced and informs contemporary questions around how we scrutinise the polling industry. The details of this ethnographic approach are explored in Chapter 3. This account is primarily informed by participant observation undertaken by the author, working alongside the political team in the polling organisation YouGov. However, the analysis is also supported with interviews from across the polling industry that are used to triangulate findings and incorporate the verbatim voice of pollsters and their reflections. Participant observation fieldwork was conducted in an iterative-inductive manner. This approach builds theory and understandings of ongoing phenomena, tests them in the research space, and adapts accordingly. This is an approach with the capacity for flexibility when encountering novel or unexpected observations – particularly useful in the exploration of an otherwise undocumented space.

To provide a comprehensive overview of this account and how it will be addressed, this chapter is structured as follows. First, it shows the importance and timeliness of the research by placing it in a wider context and discussing the contribution to be made in answering the research question. Second, it discusses the history of political opinion polling in the UK. It charts the outset of polling, paying specific attention to pollsters’ perspectives on the development of political polling, its role and its future in politics. This historical narrative contextualises the contemporary account given in this thesis. Finally

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<sup>12</sup> J Michael Hogan, ‘Gallup and the Rhetoric of Scientific Democracy’, *Communication Monographs*, 64:2, (1997) 161-179 (p. 177.)

this chapter establishes how decisions of scope and definition are made and outlines the structure of the thesis.

Before progressing into a thesis concerned with polling, it is important to clarify a key piece of terminology used within this thesis. Whilst the Market Research Society (in its guidance to those wishing to understand polls) defines a poll as questions asked to a national audience or “significant defined section of it”, and surveys as questions to much smaller sub-audiences, this distinction was not encountered in practice.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, so as to keep the nomenclature used in the thesis consistent with material from observations, literature, and quotations from those involved with polling, the terms poll and survey are used interchangeably.

## 1.2 Thesis Contribution

Academic exploration of polling traditionally comes in two forms: conceptual and mechanical. Conceptual approaches primarily focus on the nature of public opinion and of polls, the role they play in a democracy, and the theoretical concerns raised by the interplay of those two factors. In contrast, mechanical approaches focus on the practical methods for more effective polling or on post-facto analysis, idealised or problem-solving accounts of how polling should be conducted, how its results should be interpreted, and how challenges to the measurement of opinion can be overcome. These approaches are not exclusive of each other, with many notable works being combinations of the two.<sup>14</sup>

Whilst these types of analyses are significant to understanding polling, the aspects of polling they cover alone do not constitute polling in its entirety. In exploring the research question, this thesis presents a different perspective. Polling is not a rote activity, but rather a human one, conducted by individual actors making regular and significant decisions and holding particular beliefs and perspectives on what they are doing and the ways in which it should be done.<sup>15</sup> Within these beliefs and their organisational culture, these actors interpret their role, and that of their work, and navigate the demands, events and decisions which are placed on them, and which in turn affect their practices.<sup>16</sup> The everyday events, from the straightforward, banal and routine, to the exciting and unusual, though less documented than the technical details, are as constitutive of polling as any other aspect. Accordingly, they have the potential to have a material impact on the nature, type and quality of polling available. Polls are the

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<sup>13</sup> Market Research Society, ‘Using Surveys and Polling data in your journalism’, Market Research Society, November 2019 < <https://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/IMPRESS%20MRS%20Guidance%20FINAL1.pdf> > [accessed 14 December 2019] p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

<sup>15</sup> Interview 11-3

<sup>16</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: selected essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) pp. 10-13.



output of individual actors, acting within specific organisational cultures and practices interacting with the technical and statistical business of what a poll should be.

It is these everyday aspects which this thesis focuses upon, and by doing so shines a light on how the otherwise innocuous everyday elements are an important factor in improved understanding of polling. This thesis is therefore a contribution to the wider ‘everyday turn’ in political science, approaching familiar political phenomena from unfamiliar vantage points. In doing so, it aims to “add texture, depth, nuance and authenticity to our accounts”.<sup>17</sup> Further, it “produce[s] detailed evidence of the sort that can flesh out, or call into question, generalizations produced or meanings assigned by other research traditions” and develops new understandings of how everyday practices affect the polls.<sup>18</sup>

By addressing the research question, I provide a particular contribution in this thesis. I argue that beyond the science of polling, there is an art found in everyday polling practices. These everyday practices, constituted as they are by human interactions, decisions and judgements are a significant component of political polling. They affect the type, nature and availability of political polls. Though individual discretion is influential, pollsters are not acting in isolation. Their work is guided by norms, traditions, and values (concepts discussed in chapter 3.2.2) that mediate the practice of polling. Drawing on existing research which identifies cultural components as important aspects of ethnographic study, I cast light on those norms, traditions, and values and how polling therefore works.<sup>19</sup> Through the analysis of these features I generate means with which to understand and explain everyday practice. These analyses equip us with a richer understanding of political polls developed from the site of their production. Though mindful of the scope presented by this research’s focus on a singular organisation, (discussed in chapter 3.2) the exploratory, theory generating approach of this study engages with issues of broad relevance to the polling industry and produces valuable insights on these which contribute to our understanding of political polls.

This type of contribution is important because political polls themselves are important. As will be argued throughout this chapter, and with reference to wider literature in chapter 2, political polls are an influential part of British politics, affecting political parties, policy and media coverage. Despite this importance, until now we have had little understanding of how polling works and what drives the production of polls. The contribution made in this thesis is important not only because it facilitates this type of understanding, but also because it speaks to a need for accountability. Given the importance of

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<sup>17</sup> John Boswell and others, ‘What can political ethnography tell us about anti-politics and democratic disaffection’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 58 (2019) 56–71, p. 68.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Schatz, ‘Introduction’ in *Political Ethnography, what immersion contributes to the study of power*, ed. By Edward Schatz, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) pp. 1-23 (p. 10)

<sup>19</sup> See for instance, Marc Geddes, *Dramas at Westminster: Select Committees and the quest for accountability* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2020)

polls, and the significance of everyday activities of pollsters, the need for scrutiny and accountability in these activities is demonstrated.

This contribution comes at an opportune time. The UK polling industry has been in a period of self-reflection. In the wake of the 2015 General Election result (which represented the most pronounced failure of the polls to correctly predict a UK general election since 1992), a sector-wide inquiry was conducted, commissioned by the British Polling Council (BPC) and the Market Research Society (MRS) into the “difficulties that beset the polls”.<sup>20</sup> A broader Select Committee inquiry into political polling was carried out by the House of Lords in 2017-2018 (discussed in more detail in chapters 2 and 7). These inquiries continued the theme of being primarily concerned with the statistical aspects of opinion polling, and left a number of unanswered questions about the practice of individual pollsters (how do pollsters navigate pressure from clients, how do they approach question wording on political topics, etc.). The research for this thesis was conducted throughout 2018-2019, overlapping the final stages of the House of Lords’ inquiry, with participant observation taking place at the time of the publication of the inquiry’s report. As such, this thesis contributes to the conversation about the practice of opinion polling in the UK, and its empirical chapters will link directly to these key events.

### 1.3 Polling in the UK: development of the industry

An understanding of the polling industry in its formative years provides important context for the account of contemporary political polling developed in this thesis. This is not a complete history of the industry, for which many more pages would be required, and for which comprehensive accounts of the development of polling in the UK and the USA already exist.<sup>21</sup> Instead, this concise account presents the beginnings of political polling in the UK. This is done because from the outset, (scientific) political polling caused a discussion about what this new tool should be for, how it impacted the relationship between governors and the governed, and how it should be used.<sup>22</sup> These are still significant questions for political polling, and through an assessment of their history it is possible to identify questions that will be explored throughout the remainder of the thesis.

Political opinion polling in the UK, as it would be recognised today, can be traced back to the establishment of the British Institute of Public Opinion (BIPO, later Gallup) in 1937. Surveys had taken

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<sup>20</sup> Patrick Sturgis and others, *Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British General Election opinion polls*, (London: Market Research Society and British Polling Council, 2016) p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion, a Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) ; Nick Moon, *Opinion Polls: History Theory Practice*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999)

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Igo, “‘A Gold Mine and a Tool for Democracy’ George Gallup, Elmo Roper and the Business of Scientific Polling 1935-1955”, *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 42:2 (2006) 109–134.

place before this, notably Booth and Rowntree’s work on the experiences of poverty.<sup>23</sup> However, these endeavours had a focus on the material conditions of poverty, and did not contain the scientific, technical features present in polling as it is understood today (considered in more detail in Chapter 4) with sampling strategies absent.<sup>24</sup> BIPO was founded as an expansion of the work of American pollster George Gallup who, with the Gallup organisation in the USA, had helped popularise the idea of what he would describe as “scientific opinion polls” – polls characterised by the technical features noted above.<sup>25</sup> Gallup, alongside pollsters Elmo Roper and Archibald Crossley, secured fame for their approach to polling by successfully pitting the predictive capacity of their polls in the 1936 US presidential election against the *Literary Digest* poll. The *Literary Digest* poll, a longstanding poll with a large sample, suffered from issues with sample representativeness and, though it had millions of respondents, “low response rates combined with non-response bias”.<sup>26</sup> Though Gallup was 6% off the final result, he called the correct winner of the 1936 contest.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, the *Literary Digest* called the race astonishingly wrong (predicting an overwhelming victory for the Republican candidate, for them to only take 8 electoral college votes), and the scientific polls were poised to become the dominant approach.<sup>28</sup>

The prominent US pollsters of the 1930s were often businessmen or closely linked to the developing field of market research, rather than originating from a background of academic inquiry. BIPO polls in the early days in the UK were predominantly focused on political work rather than market research “covering such topics as divorce, mercy killings, compulsory military training, and recognition of Franco’s junta in Spain”.<sup>29</sup> All these topics would be considered as political work in a modern polling agency.<sup>30</sup> This focus on the political was not just a consequence of the interests of the primary client for these early polls, most often the print media, it also reflected the express views of BIPO’s founder, and the most prominent proponent of scientific polling, George Gallup.

Roper, Crossley, and most vociferously, Gallup declared that polls represented a great democratic innovation – a way for Governments to meet the requirements described at the outset of this chapter by Hume and Dahl – that they be responsive to public sentiment. Though the comments of early pollsters could be read as bluster for publicity (these same pollsters also viewed scientific polling as a very

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<sup>23</sup> David Broughton, *Public Opinion Polling and Politics in Britain*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995) p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p.4.

<sup>25</sup> J Michael Hogan, ‘Gallup and the Rhetoric of Scientific Democracy’, *Communication Monographs*, 64:2, (1997) 161-179 (p. 162.)

<sup>26</sup> Peverill Squire, ‘Why the 1936 Literary Digest Poll Failed’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 52:1 (1988) 125-133 (pp. 131-132)

<sup>27</sup> George Gallup and Claude Robinson, ‘American Institute of Public Opinion – Surveys, 1935-1938’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 2:3 (1938) 373-398 (p. 398.)

<sup>28</sup> Sharon Lohr and J. Michael Brick, ‘“Roosevelt Predicted to win”: Revisiting the 1936 Literary Digest Poll’, *Statistics, Politics, and Policy*, 8.1 (2017) 65-84 (pp. 65-66)

<sup>29</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion, a Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Discussed in Chapter 5.4

profitable endeavour) their claims translate into serious arguments about the nature of democracy.<sup>31</sup> Current scholars, such as Pearson, describe Gallup's most famous work 'The Pulse of Democracy' in serious terms, as "more than a defense of public opinion polling, it is also a model for a particular understanding of democracy that may be inseparable from opinion polling itself. It would be appropriate to think of the work as a model for the behavioral theory of democracy."<sup>32</sup> These early claims can therefore be read as more than good advertising. They were a statement of intent by pollsters of what their work was, why it was important, and how it was carried out. With the Gallup organisation recently stating that they are "still working to fulfil the mission laid out in that first release: providing scientific, nonpartisan assessment of American public opinion", it is worth identifying these historical claims to see the context they provide for an account of contemporary polling in the UK.<sup>33</sup> Such claims can be assessed to determine whether they remain influential or accurate descriptions of political opinion polling today.

Synthesised from his own writings and public statements, Gallup's principle claims can be summarised in simple terms:

1. Polling is a Science
2. Polls are a powerful democratic tool

#### *Polling is a science*

Though the early polls to which Gallup and his contemporaries referred were not as rigorously tested/scientific as modern polls, the presentation of polling as a science is superficially uncontroversial – polls are based on tested statistical principles.<sup>34</sup> However, the claim to be a science was more than just that, with individual pollsters described by Gallup as scientists, with minds prepared for the laboratory, and trained scientifically.<sup>35</sup> In doing so, Gallup contributed to the traditionally technically focused discourse surrounding polling discussed earlier in this introduction, but also made the claim that pollsters were statistically focused scientists. This claim can be assessed against the discussions of the background, recruitment and training of contemporary pollsters in later chapters. Furthermore, whilst scientific polls could claim greater statistical rigour than other approaches to measuring opinion, Igo's recent analyses of these claims suggest that the extent to which polls were scientific was exaggerated. She notes that an understanding of why polls "fell short of their... ambitions" requires a

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<sup>31</sup> Sarah Igo, "A Gold Mine and a Tool for Democracy" George Gallup, Elmo Roper and the Business of Scientific Polling 1935-1955', *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 42.2 (2006) 109–134, (pp. 112-117.)

<sup>32</sup> Sidney Pearson, 'Public Opinion and The Pulse of Democracy', *Society*, 42.1 (2004) 57-71 (p. 57.)

<sup>33</sup> Frank Newport, '75 years ago, the first Gallup poll', Gallup, 2010 <<https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/169682/years-ago-first-gallup-poll.aspx>> [accessed 18 August 2019]

<sup>34</sup> Mark Roodhouse, "'Fish and Chip Intelligence': Henry Durant and the British Institute of Public Opinion 1936-1963', *Twentieth Century British History*, 24.2 (2013) 224-248 (p. 248.)

<sup>35</sup> Sarah Igo, "A Gold Mine and a Tool for Democracy" George Gallup, Elmo Roper and the Business of Scientific Polling 1935-1955', *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 42:2 (2006) 109–134, (p. 111.)

broad view of polling, considering other factors, such as the commercial pressures faced by Gallup and Roper.<sup>36</sup> The detail of these factors has shifted significantly since mid-twentieth century polling, with polling mode, method, and financing having changed in the intervening years. In this thesis I will reflect on polling in light of these claims, and its position as a science and as an art in a contemporary setting – including how the commercial, reputational and cultural pressures impact on the practice of political polling.

*Polls are a democratic tool*

Gallup explicitly described the political opinion poll as a tool that could be used to “bridge the gap between the people and those who are responsible for making decisions in their name.”<sup>37</sup> The early claims of pollsters have led contemporary scholars such as Beers to interpret political polls as being pitched by early pollsters as providing potential for “true democratic government”.<sup>38</sup> The use of polls to fulfil this function could be expected to have implications for what issues polls covered. Understanding this historical position is still relevant: even if it was for marketing purposes, polling was presented as a democratically significant breakthrough.<sup>39</sup> This account has remained influential. In addition to the earlier noted comments of the Gallup organisation as “still working to fulfil” Gallup’s early mission, compare for instance, a recent public statement from the polling organisation YouGov, with a summary of George Gallup’s view of polls in the 1930s (first and second quotes respectively).<sup>40</sup>

“As Rousseau put it: “The English people believes itself to be free; it is gravely mistaken; it is free only during election of members of parliament; as soon as the members are elected, the people is enslaved; it is nothing.” Our polling data could be used to change this”.<sup>41</sup>

“offer[ing] a ‘scientific’ understanding of public opinion on political and social issues, and hence the possibility of true democratic government”.<sup>42</sup>

The foundations of the polling industry contain valuable information for a study of its present. As has been shown in this section, early pollsters set out a number of positions on their work, from its scientific nature to its democratic significance. These positions might be expected to influence that nature of polling work, and recent statements from pollsters indicate that these early positions remain influential

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 110.

<sup>37</sup> George Gallup and Saul Rae, *The Pulse of Democracy: The Public Opinion Poll and How it works*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940) pp. 14-15.

<sup>38</sup> Laura Beers, ‘Whose Opinion?: Changing Attitudes Towards Opinion Polling in British Politics 1937-1964’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 17.2 (2006) 177-205 (p. 183.)

<sup>39</sup> For instance, George Gallup and Saul Rae, *The Pulse of Democracy: The Public Opinion Poll and How it works*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940)

<sup>40</sup> Frank Newport, ‘75 years ago, the first Gallup poll’, Gallup, 2010 <<https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/169682/years-ago-first-gallup-poll.aspx>> [accessed 18 August 2019]

<sup>41</sup> Ali Unwin, ‘Why daily polling really matters’, Yougov, 2011 <<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2011/05/16/why-daily-polling-really-matters>> [accessed 5 February 2018]

<sup>42</sup> Laura Beers, ‘Whose Opinion?: Changing Attitudes Towards Opinion Polling in British Politics 1937-1964’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 17:2 (2006) 177-205 (p. 183.)

to current practice. This brief historical reflection therefore provides both contextual and comparative information for an empirical account of polling and strengthens the rationale for such an account. It also raises significant questions about what pollsters perceive as their role in relation to a democratic society – a question pursued in chapter 6.

## 1.4 Definitions and Structure

Thus far in the chapter, I have provided an overview of the rationale of the thesis and the significance of its research question. I have made clear the contribution offered within the thesis and provided a contextual exploration of the foundations of the polling industry. Before progressing to the content of subsequent chapters, here I define the scope and structure within which the work of those chapters is arranged. I address the definition of ‘political polling’ which entails reviewing both constitutive elements, ‘political’ and ‘polling’. I then outline the structure and approach in which the research is presented within this thesis, noting the contribution of each chapter, and the key questions that are addressed.

### 1.4.1 Defining a political poll

Modern polling organisations utilise varying classifications for the work that they do. What one organisation considers a political poll, another might not, classifying it as a social poll, or not deploying a political weighting. Whilst a more thorough examination of the differences between organisations is conducted in chapter 4.2, this particular issue of definitions, necessary as it is to the scope of the thesis, is addressed here. As the research in this thesis raises questions for the understanding of political polling more generally (noted in this chapter’s discussions of contribution in 1.2), a definition is useful beyond ‘that which the fieldwork observed’ in order to frame these implications, and these questions. This subsection outlines this definition in the two constituent parts of a political poll – ‘polls’, and then ‘political’.

For the purposes of this thesis, a definition for political polls is informed by practicality. The imperative for the research question derives from the importance of polls in relation to their engagement with governors and the public. Though this research is framed around an account of polling conducted in one polling organisation, as the thesis progresses it unavoidably discusses polling and pollsters more generally. In this thesis I use Nick Moon’s (BPC Secretary and experienced industry insider)

perspective on this question and focuses on a subset of the definition. Moon argues that the modern definition of a public opinion poll:

“has come to mean measuring opinion, but in doing so it has taken on a connotation of scientific method. A journalist going into a pub and asking a dozen locals whom they intend to vote for in the forthcoming by-election is unlikely to write up his findings as a public opinion poll. However, he or she may describe it as a ‘straw poll’, which has come to mean almost any small-scale measuring of opinion which lacks the basis and sampling and question design present in a public opinion poll, but which in its original form ‘straw vote’ was the precursor of modern polls.”<sup>43</sup>

In this thesis I therefore see polling as a scientific method and approach to survey design and choose to focus on this polling as it is conducted by members of the BPC. This narrowing is justified within the context of this enquiry’s concern with polling organisations. The concern with BPC polling, as well as focusing the scope of this analysis, allows the thesis to more easily engage with the ongoing discourse around polling in the UK which tends to focus on polling by BPC members.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, these organisations include some of the best known pollsters by media coverage.<sup>45</sup> These organisations’ polls are more often covered by major media outlets, and are therefore widely communicated to the public. Membership of the BPC shows a publicly expressed agreement to a set of principles about polling and transparency, which provides baseline similarity between organisations. Finally, the group also reflects a view of the political polling industry which pollsters relate to; they see other BPC-affiliated organisations as their colleagues and their competitors, and they think that as a group they face challenges on the same ‘universal themes.’<sup>46</sup> This should not be taken as implying that these are the only polling organisations which conduct scientific polling or produce accurate results. There are many examples of organisations outside of these groupings producing well performing pre-election polls.<sup>47</sup>

The second question, ‘what counts as political?’ is more difficult than it might first appear, indeed a rich literature exists debating the nature of politics and the political.<sup>48</sup> Addressing this in relation to polls is a narrower question, but with the huge array of polling which takes place on a large number of topics across the UK, and the varied interpretations of pollsters as to the definition of political work, it is still necessary to define the position taken in this thesis. Moon argues that “when people talk about opinion polls, they are usually talking about political opinion. There are probably many people who, faced with

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<sup>43</sup> Nick Moon, *Opinion Polls: History Theory Practice*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> See for instance, Patrick Sturgis and others, *Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British general election opinion polls* (London, Market Research Society and British Polling Council, 2016) p. 10.

<sup>45</sup> FN508

<sup>46</sup> Bobby Duffy, ‘Foreword’, in *Understanding Society The Death of Polling*, (London: Ipsos Mori Social Research Institute, 2016) p.1.

<sup>47</sup> For instance SurveyMonkey.

<sup>48</sup> See for instance, Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics*, (London, Bloomsbury, 1962) ; Adrian Leftwich, *What is politics? The activity and its study*, (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004)

the term ‘public opinion poll’, think only of polls that set out to predict the result of the next election, but this is too restrictive”.<sup>49</sup> Recent examples bear this out. For instance, the unsuccessfully proposed Regulation of Political Opinion Polling bill defining political opinion polling as that which seeks a respondent’s voting intention.<sup>50</sup> In this thesis I agree with Moon that this position is too narrow. Some literature on polling put forward a classification which includes voting intention polls, and polling on overtly political topics, but excludes “special studies of social problems.”<sup>51</sup> This perspective is similar to that held by a number of organisations which exclude social polls (for instance questions on health, or local matters) from public statements regarding their political work.<sup>52</sup> I take the broad view of political polling, utilising definitions as they were encountered in the day-to-day work of polling, incorporating what many organisations would describe as social polls: polling on any issue in which respondents’ political attitudes and voting behaviour may affect their response, or as Moon describes, polls which are about “Political or social topics... to make the definition circular, they must be about matters that are in the general public interest”.<sup>53</sup> This broad view is taken because these types of polls are politically significant, and it reflects terminology as it is used by the pollsters observed in this research.

It can be seen then that there is a great deal of diversity in regard to a number of factors within the polling industry. This is useful context for an account into one particular organisation and indicates individual pollsters’ capacity to make decisions on their own approaches to polling. Here, this variation has been discussed in order to establish the working definitions and scope for the research, whilst later in the thesis, Chapter 4 provides a further look at the variety of the polling industry so as to situate the empirical account of the research.

#### 1.4.2 Structure

With the research question contextualised, and the scope and definitions set, the remainder of the thesis is structured as follows.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature pertinent to conducting an exploration of the everyday practices of polling. Given the scarcity of qualitative accounts of polling, Chapter 2 is structured thematically,

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<sup>49</sup> Nick Moon, *Opinion Polls: History Theory Practice*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Discussed in Chapter 7

<sup>51</sup> Richard Hodder-Williams, *Public opinion polls and British Politics*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970) p. 10.

<sup>52</sup> Ben Page, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling, Evidence Session 20, Question 149, 5 December 2017

<sup>53</sup> FN605 ; Nick Moon, *Opinion Polls: History Theory Practice*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) p2



covering the key concepts of this research and the theoretical premises used for analysis. The chapter begins with an examination of literature on the nature and measurement of opinion, covering a variety of understandings of this central concept of opinion polling. I then review the literature on polling, specifically concerned with establishing the different ways polling is used so as to link this with the account of the ways in which polling is produced from this thesis. Finally I reflect on the available contributions of pollsters, and consider the insights and contextual information these accounts offer which are useful to ethnographic research of polling practices.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology employed in the thesis. I examine the contribution of the ethnographic approach in political study and detail the particular ethnographic approach adopted here. I will argue that an ethnographic approach is best suited to addressing the particular research concerns of this thesis. Further, I detail the fieldwork arrangements, the methods and analysis employed, and the challenges addressed.

Chapter 4 takes a step back before the empirical contribution of the thesis. I provide an overview of the modern polling industry, reviewing the differences between polling organisations. I then outline the ‘mechanical’ aspects of how polling is conducted; the science behind surveys. Having covered these two areas, I situate YouGov (the polling organisation in which participant observation took place) within each discussion. This establishes the *mise en scène* for the empirical work to come.

Chapter 5 begins the empirical contribution by producing a “thick” account of the practice of polling.<sup>54</sup> Using this account, I ask the question: how can we understand everyday polling practices? Influenced by the use of quasi-fictional accounts to describe real phenomena in other political literature, this chapter introduces a fictional pollster, Alex, whose experiences are drawn from the real accounts of polling produced through fieldwork. I then subject this account to close analysis, drawing out key insights. I focus on the different types of work undertaken by pollsters, the application of polling methods in practice, and the routines and customs of polling, providing “rich context” to our understanding of the operational business of polling.<sup>55</sup> Next I build frameworks through which we can understand pollsters’ interactions with their clients, and the factors which influence their practice when taking commissions.

Having produced a detailed account of the activities, events and practices which make up the everyday, in Chapter 6 I explore how pollsters think about their work. This is structured around the question: what do pollsters consider their role, and that of their work to be? In the chapter I use an existing framework of poll usage to assess the perspectives of pollsters on how polls are and should be used and explore the influence of these perspectives on their own practice. I then look at broader interpretations of what

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<sup>54</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: selected essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) pp. 10-13.

<sup>55</sup> John Boswell and others, ‘What can political ethnography tell us about anti-politics and democratic disaffection’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 58 (2019) 56–71 (p. 68.)

polling is for, identifying narratives around polling, and testing whether these narratives withstand the close inspection of an ethnographic account. In doing so I demonstrate that early pollster's understandings of their work as a democratic good are no longer consistent with the perspectives of contemporary pollsters, and that the conceptual question of polling's democratic role is something which materially affects the practice of polling and how we understand polls.

In Chapter 7 I use the work of the preceding two substantive chapters to ask a particular question: how does this research assist an assessment of the regulation and scrutiny of the polling industry? I review the legislation, and the scrutiny of polling (through inquiries), and the effects this has had on the practice of polling, suggesting that the findings and conclusions of polling inquiries are often reflective of change already occurring within the industry's practices, rather than the cause for the change in practice. I then demonstrate the value of ethnographic perspectives in questions of scrutiny and legislation by providing a close assessment of two issues: first, the perspective and reactions of pollsters to regulation and scrutiny; and second, a question raised in the House of Lords polling select committee, the ways in which pollsters navigate pressure during the conduct of political polls.

Finally, in Chapter 8 I conclude the thesis by reflecting on its contributions and highlighting a number of insights which reveal an overarching story about polling, and the significance of its practices. I also reflect on the relationship between academics and pollsters, before finally addressing what can be done next in this area of study.

Chapters 5-7 comprise the substantive empirical components of the thesis. Ethnographic research is known for producing substantial amounts of data.<sup>56</sup> In order to ensure that these chapters remain tightly focused they are structured around specific questions. These questions are constitutive of an assessment of the research question and ensure it is addressed in a systematic manner. They are not posed as sub-questions in themselves, rather they are a thematic approach to addressing each area (akin to foreshadowed problems – questions guiding the research fieldwork, noted in Chapter 3.3.1).

## 1.5 Conclusion

This introduction has set out an agenda for studying the everyday practices of polling to aid in our understanding of a number of challenging questions that relate to political polls. The ethnographic stall of the thesis has been set out, reflecting not only on the ways in which such an approach can enhance

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<sup>56</sup> Judith Goetz and Margaret LeCompte, 'Ethnographic Data and the Problem of data reduction', *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 12.1 (1981) 51-70 (p.52.)

existing accounts, but also how it can explore new questions and challenges in political polling. This derives from the central questions of this thesis:

What are the everyday practices of political public opinion polling, and what is their significance in understanding political polls?

The contribution to be made answering this question was summarised; identification of the importance of individual practices in the type, nature and availability of political polling, and providing theory with which to explain these practices and therefore better understand polling.

To provide context to the thesis, and identify important context for modern polling, the development of the UK polling industry was explored. By looking back, the founding conceptual claims of polling were identified alongside aspects of the culture and language of polling as it was then, which later sections of this thesis (Chapter 6.3) will compare to polling as it is now.

Finally, I detailed the scope and structure I will adopt in this thesis in order to address the research questions. This involved defining the key terms, and outlining the content covered in each of the chapters in this thesis.

In the next chapter, three key concepts for this thesis will be explored: opinions; polls; and pollsters. The discussion provides an informed basis on which for this research to take place and establishes the important theoretical premises upon which its analysis is conducted.

## 2 | Chapter 2 – Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

The field of public opinion research and research which incorporates public opinion polling is rich and varied. Yet, as noted in Chapter 1, there is not a body of existing ethnographic work relating to polls and polling. Literature tends towards research broadly categorised within this thesis as conceptual or mechanical. Whilst these types of research are important in their own right, they also provide a valuable basis upon which to conduct an ethnographic study of polling. To produce and understand an account of polling practices, the key elements of polling must first be understood: opinion, polls, and pollsters. Through approaching these aspects in turn, and engaging with the existing literature on each, these key elements can be outlined and clarified for the purpose of the analysis in this thesis. To retain a focus, the mechanics and practicalities which underpin polling and surveys (e.g. how samples are put together, and how polls are fielded) and the current state and scope of the polling industry are addressed separately in Chapter 4. This leaves this chapter free to focus on the principles and theory upon which the subsequent analysis in the thesis rests.

This chapter demonstrates the following;

- Opinion and public opinion are robustly contested concepts, different understandings of which can result in theoretical and substantive differences in how they may be approached by pollsters. Further, small changes in polling practices can influence the opinion gathered.
- Opinion polls are politically significant products which are used in a variety of ways, including some which are unintended by the organisations who produce them.
- Finally, there are few accounts of polling practices that reveal how pollsters navigate the challenges presented by the above. What literature we have provides limited insight on practice, but does reveal questions for this research to pursue, and context for the ethnographic account provided in this thesis.

To demonstrate this, the chapter will explore three areas; the nature of opinion, the function of opinion polls, and the accounts of pollsters.

To expand, the chapter is structured as follows: First, I give an overview of the theoretical debate regarding the nature of public opinion. Here I will reflect upon opinion at the individual level, how it is characterised, formed, and how it might be influenced by polling practices. Following this, mass opinion will be reflected upon – assessing the differing ways in which the concept can be categorised and operationalised. This provides a basis to later determine if theories of public opinion influence the

practice of pollsters (discussed in Chapter 6.3.1). Additionally, this section establishes the core concepts of public opinion and notes the ways in which practice may influence opinion.

Second, attention turns to the ways in which public opinion polls are used, using Worcester's assessment of the functions of polls as a framework. With reference to this framework, the ways in which polls are used will be identified, and the literature on these uses assessed. In addition to being contextually valuable to an understanding of polling, this section also provides a basis to determine the ways in which the known functions of polls impact the practices of those who produce them and a framework to structure this analysis (conducted in Chapter 6.2).

Finally, the chapter provides a critical overview of the available insights into pollsters' practices. In this section I gather the insights provided by existing accounts of polling practice and consider the questions these accounts raise which can be pursued through this research. This involves identifying the tensions that exist between perspectives and findings from the literature throughout the chapter and identifying which areas of polling practice are not well documented. This section explores the existing accounts of polling practices to situate my own account and identify valuable areas to which I can contribute.

By doing so this chapter will provide contextual understanding of the concepts significant to this area, existing theory to later compare against practice, and targeted lines of enquiry for the fieldwork to pursue.

## 2.2 The Nature of Public Opinion

Though the concept of public opinion is a cornerstone of democratic theory, it is understood differently by different authors, and its definition resists consensus.<sup>57</sup> As will be explored in this section, there is no single, universally agreed, collective 'public opinion' on an issue. Furthermore, even the nature of individual opinion is a contested concept. To begin exploring how we might define public opinion we must first understand both how individual opinions are produced, and how they are held - as stable or inconsistent phenomena. This section shall therefore begin with the perspectives of two of the most influential students of the nature of public opinion, Converse and Zaller. These authors constitute the primary focus because their contributions have sparked prolonged debate on public opinion and raise questions for the practice of polling. This section follows that debate.

To guide an exploration of this rich area of literature, this section shall ask the following questions of the literature:

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<sup>57</sup> David Broughton, *Public Opinion Polling and Politics in Britain*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995), p. 15.

- How is individual opinion:
  - characterised?
  - formed?
  - influenced?
- What are the ways in which mass opinion can be understood?

In considering these questions, this section shall also reflect on the implications for pollsters.

### 2.2.1 How is opinion characterised?

Public opinion might appear to provide a lens through which to gain an unmediated view into people's political ideas and preferences. But, as Converse demonstrated, this view is not warranted by the evidence.<sup>58</sup> Individuals' opinions are often neither consistent nor well-thought through and stable, and hence the answers they give when interviewed for opinion polls may be volatile and poor indicators of what people might really think. As Chong and Druckman summarise, "the survey question at best elicits an imperfect representation of a person's feelings based on the subset of beliefs that are accessible at that moment".<sup>59</sup> What is more, Converse demonstrates that the tendency to be inconsistent and hold poorly conceptualised opinions is not random - the less informed an individual is, the more contradictory and unstable their opinions are likely to be.<sup>60</sup> He theorised various types of logical, social, and psychological constraints as tests of the consistency of an individual's beliefs. In providing an example of what a logical constraint might be, Converse stated: "One cannot believe that governments should increase public expenditures while at the same time believing they should also decrease government revenues".<sup>61</sup> Social constraints refer to the correlations between one's views and one's social group memberships, while psychological constraints refer to, for instance, religious belief systems. These constraints notwithstanding, Converse points out that individuals can and frequently do hold contradictory and unstable opinions. His explanation is that the constraints become weaker as individuals become less politically informed and well educated: the "contextual grasp of 'standard' political belief systems fades out very rapidly".<sup>62</sup> With individuals' general opinions no longer guided by such constraints, their opinions may be much less consistent. In addition, he demonstrated that

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<sup>58</sup> Philip Converse, 'The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics', *Critical Review*, 18.1-3, (1964) 1-74 (pp. 1-66.)

<sup>59</sup> Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, 'Framing Theory', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10, (2007), 103-126 (p. 105.)

<sup>60</sup> Philip Converse, 'The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics', *Critical Review*, 18.1-3, (1964) 1-74 (pp. 1-66.)

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* (p. 5.)

<sup>62</sup> Philip Converse, 'The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics', *Critical Review*, 18.1-3, (1964) 1-74 (p. 10.)

amongst those with fewer constraints, opinions, even on substantial issues, were more unstable from one asking to the next.<sup>63</sup> This research has been replicated in more recent times. Indeed, Achen and Bartels argue that “Converse’s argument is, if anything, even better supported half a century later than when he wrote it.”<sup>64</sup>

Many political scientists, most influentially Zaller, have added further conceptual sophistication to Converse’s account. In addressing the topic of opinion uncertainty, Zaller noted the strong influence of any immediately salient information an individual has in mind. “Most people really aren’t sure what their opinions are on most political matters, even... their level of interest in politics”.<sup>65</sup> Broughton agreed that individuals do not have an archive of opinions on all possible topics from which their answer is delivered when pollsters ask questions. As he put it, “opinion polls are largely made up of opinions, but opinions are largely made up”.<sup>66</sup> Broughton was not discarding polls as a means of measurement, (if ‘made up’ opinions are randomly spread, these responses should cancel out, leaving a central tendency) but is rather reflecting on individuals’ spontaneous production of opinions upon request. Rather than considering this as a feature of polling, Zaller considered it instead to be:

“a fundamental property of mass political preferences – a tendency for people to be ambivalent... and to deal with this ambivalence by making decisions on the basis of the ideas that are most immediately salient”.<sup>67</sup>

In proposing the “ambivalence deduction” Zaller is suggesting that people don’t necessarily have “true attitudes”.<sup>68</sup> Whilst that conclusion is not inevitable (being asked their opinion could be a legitimate part of the process by which individuals form true attitudes), he argues that true opinions do not exist for many citizens on many issues, and indeed the transience of opinion (decisions made on immediately available information) could suggest they only exist in the moment of asking.<sup>69</sup> It is important to note that Zaller does not think this about all opinion, just ‘ambivalent’ opinion.

Achen effectively summarises the issue raised by Converse and Zaller in the following terms:

“Whatever else students of public opinion find unsettled, agreement is widespread that citizens have, at most, a general grasp of political issues without having well-developed opinions on every question of public policy. Indeed, no public opinion surveys are necessary to establish

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. (pp. 44-52.)

<sup>64</sup> Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, *Democracy For Realists*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016) p. 12.

<sup>65</sup> John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) p. 76.

<sup>66</sup> David Broughton, *Public Opinion Polling and Politics in Britain*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995) p. 194.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p. 79.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. 92., p. 93.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p. 50.

the point. The sheer volume of business in a large nation makes it impossible for even the most studious voter to follow more than a fraction of it”.<sup>70</sup>

Though noted as unnecessary by Achen, Ipsos MORI surveys on public perceptions demonstrate a majority of individuals are often substantially incorrect on information regarding key political issues (such as crime rates, economic figures, and climate change) which would be significant factors when matched with their predisposition to form opinions.<sup>71</sup>

These perspectives on the nature of individuals' opinions have implications for the polling industry. They are a caution against expecting too much from opinion polls, particularly on issues which require complex or uncommon knowledge. As shown above, opinion can be transient, unstable, or even untrue. Though issues of instability skewing poll results are potentially mitigated by the previously noted central tendency, as unstable opinion would still follow a normal distribution, these perspectives on the nature of opinion still raise issues for those involved with opinion polls. The concern of low information opinions, temporality of opinion, and the ‘realness’ of many opinions raise fundamental questions as to how to effectively present and communicate opinion polls to audiences.

### 2.2.2 How is opinion formed?

Having reviewed perspectives on how opinion should be characterised, I now consider perspectives on how opinions are formed. Zaller defines opinion as “a marriage of information and pre-disposition... information to form a mental picture of the given issue and predisposition to motivate some conclusion about it”.<sup>72</sup> Though this definition is widely accepted and reproduced in the academic literature, the nature of the process by which information and predisposition form opinion, and the implications of that process are much debated.<sup>73</sup> Zaller proposed a receive, accept, sample (RAS) model of opinion formation. To summarise this model, individuals receive political communication or information on an issue, and accept and engage with it to an extent proportional with their cognitive engagement with the issue.<sup>74</sup> Arguments that go against an individual’s political predispositions (such as the constraints

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<sup>70</sup> Christopher Achen, ‘Mass Political Attitudes and the Survey Response’, *The American Political Science Review*, 69.4 (1975), 1218-1231 (p. 1218.)

<sup>71</sup> Ipsos Mori ‘Perils of Perception Survey 2017’ 2017 <<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/perils-perception-2017>> [accessed 01/01/18]

<sup>72</sup> John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) p. 6.

<sup>73</sup> See for instance, Carroll Glynn and others, *Public Opinion*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999) p. 106. ; Daniel Katz, ‘The Functional Approach to the Study of Attitudes’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 24.2 (1960) 163-204 (pp.163-168.)

<sup>74</sup> John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) pp. 42-43.



suggested by Converse) may be resisted.<sup>75</sup> This constitutes the opinion formation element of the RAS model. Zaller proceeded to explain the way in which this influenced how individuals responded to surveys. The more recently an individual has encountered or considered an issue, the more accessible their view is to their memory and recall.<sup>76</sup> When prompted to provide an opinion, for instance by answering a survey or poll, individuals respond from their sample of accessible considerations.<sup>77</sup> This model suggests elite messaging is extremely important in the opinion formation process.<sup>78</sup> Elite messaging through, for instance, the media is able reinforce the accessibility of their particular claims on issues.<sup>79</sup> If opinion formation is dependent on issue recall, then reinforcement of certain claims can influence the information used by an individual to reach judgement.<sup>80</sup>

A concern which arises from this model is that citizens occupy a passive role, simply assessing elite claims, and that elite influence could therefore manipulate opinion.<sup>81</sup> Page and Shapiro detail the implications of elite influence on the authenticity of opinion:

“To the extent that the public receives... useful information and interpretations that help it arrive at the policy choices it would make if fully informed – the policy preferences it expresses can be considered ‘authentic’... to the extent that the public is given erroneous interpretations or false, misleading, or biased information, people may make mistaken evaluations of policy alternatives “<sup>82</sup>

When read in conjunction with the earlier discussion of the character of opinion, the manipulation by elites may result in opinion which is not ‘real’ or authentic.<sup>83</sup> As discussed earlier, many citizens remain largely uninformed on many political issues – which would make them vulnerable to the effects noted above by Page & Shapiro.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Philip Converse, ‘The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics’, *Critical Review*, 18.1-3, (1964) 1-74 (pp. 1-66.) ; John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) pp. 44-48.

<sup>76</sup> John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) pp. 48-49.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. pp. 49-51.

<sup>78</sup> John Zaller, ‘What Nature and Origins misses out’, *Critical Review*, 24.4 (2012), 569-642 (pp. 570-573.)

<sup>79</sup> John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) (pp.8-49.)

<sup>80</sup> Andre Blais and Agnieszka Dobrzynska, ‘Testing Zaller's Reception and Acceptance Model in an Intense Election Campaign’ *Political Behavior*, 30.2 (2008) 259-276 (p. 260.)

<sup>81</sup> John Bullock, ‘Elite Influence on Public Opinion in an informed electorate’, *American Political Science Review*, 105.3 (2011) 396-515 (p. 496.)

<sup>82</sup> Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) p. 356.

<sup>83</sup> John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) pp.312-313.

<sup>84</sup> Ipsos MORI ‘Perils of Perception Survey 2017’ 2017 <<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/perils-perception-2017>> [accessed 01/01/18] ; Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) p. 356.

Blais and Dobrzynska were critical of the centrality of elite influence in opinion formation models, as its supporting evidence was “ambiguous”.<sup>85</sup> Feldman et. al. demonstrated, for instance, that elite influence was limited “on political issues which are broadly accessible to the public” either through experience or effect.<sup>86</sup> Zaller too would soften his position on the significance of elite influence, acknowledging that individuals also factor in other issues, such as politician’s performance, when formulating opinion.<sup>87</sup>

The picture presented of the character and formation of opinion is a challenging one for those whose business is presenting the view of the public. Even if the impact of elite messaging is set to one side, due to the inherent challenge in tracking its impact, and its potential limitations, the question of authenticity for low information opinion is still an important challenge for pollsters.<sup>88</sup> It asks pollsters to reflect on whether the opinions they collect are stable, volatile, ‘real’ and indeed whether this is important or not in the communication of public opinion.

### 2.2.3 How is opinion influenced?

Having considered the nature and formation of individual opinions, a final point significant in the discussion of opinion is the ways in which individual opinions might be influenced. There are many ways in which we might conceive of opinions being swayed, changed or otherwise influenced (through for instance, debate and discourse, new information, or indeed the elite influence discussed previously). Here we are concerned with the ways in which opinion might be influenced by the practices of pollsters. This is considered not only because such influences demonstrate the principles of opinion formation and character as discussed above, but because they contextualise later discussions of how pollsters operate and allow us to identify where working practices may impact polling outputs. It should be noted that influence is not used to imply pernicious or deliberate action – here we are less interested in normative claims on pollsters (the preserve of later chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this thesis) and more in a theoretical discussion which outlines the capacity for influence to occur.

Interested as we are in political opinion polls, there are several ways in which we might identify the work of pollsters as influencing reported opinions. Here we address two ways in which the practices of pollsters might influence the opinions they capture. These are question wording effects, and survey

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<sup>85</sup> Andre Blais and Agnieszka Dobrzynska, ‘Testing Zaller's Reception and Acceptance Model in an Intense Election Campaign’ *Political Behavior*, 30.2 (2008) 259-276 (pp. 261-272 p.262.)

<sup>86</sup> Stanley Feldman, Leonie Huddy, and George E. Marcus, ‘Limits of Elite Influence on Public Opinion’, *Critical Review*, 24:4 (2012) 489-503 (p. 501.)

<sup>87</sup> John Zaller, ‘Monica Lewinsky’s Contribution to Political Science’, *Political Science & Politics*, 31.2, (1998) 182-188

<sup>88</sup> Stanley Feldman, Leonie Huddy, and George E. Marcus, ‘Limits of Elite Influence on Public Opinion’, *Critical Review*, 24:4 (2012) 489-503 (p. 501.)

design effects. Though there are other ways in which we might view polls and pollsters as influential, (for example in the reporting and framing of news stories) this tends to be related to the way in which their product is used, and as such is discussed separately in Chapter 2.3 and 6.2.

### 2.2.3.1 Question Wording Effects

Question wording effects have long been a subject of interest and inquiry, included in Cantril's early work on the emergent field of public opinion research in the 1940's.<sup>89</sup> That the wording of a question might affect the responses it receives seems self-evident. Explicitly biased question design will clearly have an impact – asking “Dogs are famously man’s best friend, in light of this, do you prefer dogs or cats?” will not reward you with unbiased results. Though it might be possible to find real, published questions similar to the example, question wording effects are often more complex to identify.

Schuldt et. al. provide an example of how apparently legitimate changes to question wording can have an effect on response, in relation to the use of either “global warming” or “climate change”:

“the choice of term strongly affects the obtained answers and does so differentially, giving rise to pronounced differences in the apparent partisan divide on this policy issue. Given that political engagement with regard to global climate change requires one to assume that it is real, citizens’ existence beliefs play a crucial role in the public policy process”.<sup>90</sup>

Here terminology which is used in common parlance significantly affects survey response – and by the authors’ implication, may affect policy on the matter.<sup>91</sup> We might hypothesise similar effects of the use of different nomenclature in a domestic UK context. For instance, the use of “People’s Vote” or “Second Referendum” (though this is more explicitly partisan terminology) in relation to EU membership or “equal marriage” or “gay marriage” in relation to the Marriage (same sex couples) Act 2013, may affect the way in which respondents give their opinion. Further to the terms used having an impact, the ways in which key issues are presented can also be influential, demonstrated here by Greenwood’s work on public opinion towards votes at 16:

“When asked about ‘giving 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote’, net support is +11%. By contrast, when asked about ‘reducing the voting age from 18 to 16’, net support is -19%... When

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<sup>89</sup> Hadley Cantril, *Gauging Public Opinion*, (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1944) pp. 3-73.

<sup>90</sup> Jonathon P. Schuldt, Sara H Konrath, and Norbert Schwarz, “Global Warming” or “Climate Change”? Whether The Planet is Warming Depends on Question Wording”, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 75.1 (2011) 115-124 (p.123.)

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* p.123.

asked about extending the right to vote net support was -15%, whilst reducing the voting age produced net support of -27%”.<sup>92</sup>

These examples demonstrate that the context and phrasing of questions can alter the value judgements made by respondents. Though this sub-section has focused on a number of different elements of question wording (nomenclature and presentation) the same underlying principle is at work. These are often described in the literature as ‘framing effects’ (a second type of framing theory, pertaining to media presentation will be discussed in later sections of this chapter: many of the principles are similar).<sup>93</sup>

Framing rests upon the perspective of opinion previously discussed in the chapter (2.2.2). Reflecting on question wording in the context of Zaller’s ambivalence deduction (that individuals form opinion based on immediately salient information), question wording can be linked to judgements of salience, and thus the ultimately stated opinion.<sup>94</sup> Chong and Druckman describe framing theory in these terms:

“The set of dimensions that affect an individual’s evaluation constitute an individual’s ‘frame in thought.’ ... one’s frame in thought can have a marked impact on one’s overall opinion... For example, if a speaker states that a hate group’s planned rally is ‘a free speech issue,’ then he or she invokes a free speech frame. Straightforward guidelines on how to identify (or even define more precisely) a frame in communication do not exist”.<sup>95</sup>

Whilst the given example of a speaker invoking free speech might reflect intent to frame an issue in their preferred terms, no such intent is required for framing effects to be influential. This influence is well documented and the subject of a wealth of literature.<sup>96</sup> An assessment of this literature concerning question wording effects reveals significant implications for this research in relation to an assessment of polling practices. Pollsters’ actions do not need to be malicious, nor their intent sinister, for their practices to influence the opinions they gather. Question wording effects may arise from subtle, and superficially neutral, decisions.

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<sup>92</sup> Joe Greenwood, ‘Public Opinion and Votes at 16’, in *The All Parliamentary Group on Votes at 16 Campaign Report*, (London: APPG, 2019) p. 11.

<sup>93</sup> Dietram Scheufele, ‘Framing as a theory of media effects’, *Journal of Communication*, 49.1 (1999) 103-122

<sup>94</sup> John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) (p. 92.)

<sup>95</sup> Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, ‘Framing Theory’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10 (2007) 103-126 (pp. 105-106.)

<sup>96</sup> See for instance, Peter Kellner, ‘Why Question Wording Matters’, YouGov, <<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2011/10/24/why-question-wording-matters>> [accessed 15 January 2020] ; Tom W. Smith, ‘That which we call welfare by any other name would smell sweeter: an analysis of the impact of question wording on response patterns’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 51.1 (1987) 75-83

### 2.2.3.2 Question Order Effects

Further to the wording of questions, the structure and design choices of an overall survey can produce changes to response values. There are straightforward ways in which question order can affect responses through the provision of information. For instance, a question seeking to find out what proportion of the population know the total number of MPs might elicit a very different set of responses where an earlier question has already provided, for context, the number of MPs and where no such earlier question was asked. Clearly, were this not identified, and the order changed, the ordering of these questions would influence and may invalidate the findings of the latter question. Yet, as with the question wording effects discussed above, order effects can be more nuanced than this example indicates. Bradburn and Mason identify four question ordering effects – saliency, redundancy, fatigue and consistency.<sup>97</sup>

The saliency effect is in line with the discussion of framing theory conducted above. Previous questions might create “frames of thought” which influence later questions. This assessment is consistent with Zaller’s perspectives on the character and formation of opinion through information which is most immediately salient.<sup>98</sup> As these concepts have been previously discussed, they will not receive further attention.

Redundancy refers to a respondent’s worry that they are appearing repetitive, and will therefore avoid providing superfluous information. As a result, a respondent may not include information they have already provided in subsequent questions even if it is relevant.<sup>99</sup> For example, if a respondent has noted that their job contributes to their stress in one question, they may neglect to raise this in a subsequent question which asks for all sources of stress in their lives. Schwarz et. al. explain this as an extension of “conversational norms” to surveys:

“speakers... make their contribution as informative as is required for the purpose of the conversation, but not more informative than is required. In particular, speakers are not supposed to be redundant, providing information that the recipient already has.”<sup>100</sup>

This is particularly of note for professional pollsters who field a variety of questions for different clients in a single survey. Though the likelihood of topic overlaps may be low, the effects could be significantly detrimental.

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<sup>97</sup> Norman Bradburn and William Mason, ‘The Effect of Question Order on Responses’, *Journal of Marketing Research*, 1.4 (1964) 57-61 (p. 58.)

<sup>98</sup> John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) pp. 40-52.

<sup>99</sup> Norman Bradburn and William Mason, ‘The Effect of Question Order on Responses’, *Journal of Marketing Research*, 1.4 (1964) 57-61 (p. 58.)

<sup>100</sup> Norbert Schwarz, Fritz Strack, and Hans-Peter Mai, ‘Assimilation and Contrast Effects in Part-Whole Question sequences: A Conversational Logic Analysis’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 55.1 (1991) 3-23 (p. 5.)

The consistency effect describes the “influence of prior commitment” and the proclivity of individuals to respond consistently with previous judgements they have made in a survey.<sup>101</sup> Previous responses to similar questions can have significant impacts on questions which might otherwise appear to be a matter of principle. In an experiment Falk and Zimmermann demonstrated this effect by testing the influence of a question about whether “everybody deserves a second chance...” before a question on life imprisonment:

“political statements can be extremely volatile, depending on survey design. In one survey we were able to manipulate the number of people that agreed that a murderer should be imprisoned for the rest of his life by more than 20 percentage points, simply by adding one additional question”.<sup>102</sup>

The desire for consistency is clearly a powerful effect. It is well described by Falk and Zimmermann, and was popularly demonstrated in an episode of the political satire *Yes Prime Minister*, in which an individual is encouraged in a survey, alternately, to support and then oppose national service in order that they remain consistent with their previous responses:

“Do you think young people welcome some authority and leadership in their lives? Do you think they respond to a challenge? Would you be in favour of reintroducing national service? ... of course you would... after all you’ve said you can’t say no to that”.<sup>103</sup>

These effects are well identified by professional pollsters, indeed the *Yes Prime Minister* clip is used as a cautionary lesson in the training of pollsters at Ipsos MORI.<sup>104</sup> However, both the academic and entertaining examples of consistency effects raised here imply the effect to be an active manipulation in which the respondent is “tempt[ed]” into bias.<sup>105</sup> Tourangeau et. al. note this tendency to focus on “manufacture[d]” consistency, but through experimentation identify that these effects are also “naturally” occurring.<sup>106</sup> They argue:

“the safest conclusion to draw is that when there are theoretical grounds for suspecting that context effects might occur, the chances are high they will actually be found.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Norman Bradburn and William Mason, ‘The Effect of Question Order on Responses’, *Journal of Marketing Research*, 1.4 (1964) 57-61 (p. 58.)

<sup>102</sup> Armin Falk and Florian Zimmermann, ‘A Taste for Consistency and Survey Response Behavior’, *CESifo Economic Studies*, 59.1 (2013) 181-193 (p. 186. p. 191.)

<sup>103</sup> ‘The Ministerial Broadcast’, *Yes Prime Minister*, BBC2, 16 January 1986

<sup>104</sup> David Spiegelhalter, *The Art of Statistics: How to Learn from Data*, (New York: Basic Books, 2019) notes. 3.3

<sup>105</sup> Armin Falk and Florian Zimmermann, ‘A Taste for Consistency and Survey Response Behavior’, *CESifo Economic Studies*, 59.1 (2013) 181-193 (p. 181.)

<sup>106</sup> Roger Tourangeau, Eleanor Singer and Stanley Presser, ‘Context Effects in Attitude Surveys’, *Sociological Methods and Research*, 31.4 (2003) 486-513 (p. 487.)

<sup>107</sup> Roger Tourangeau, Eleanor Singer and Stanley Presser, ‘Context Effects in Attitude Surveys’, *Sociological Methods and Research*, 31.4 (2003) 486-513 (p. 509.)

The final identified effect, fatigue, is a straightforward one. The longer a respondent has taken to complete a survey, and the more questions that they have answered, the more they are likely to be quicker and less thoughtful in their responses.<sup>108</sup> This phenomenon is well identified, and for polling organisations, easily avoided through hard limits on survey length.<sup>109</sup>

These effects are varied in both their impact, and the ease with which they might be identified. The literature presents a complex picture of effects which can occur from minimal changes to wording or design and produce significant alterations to the resulting opinions given. It further demonstrates that such changes can occur through unintended or legitimate approaches to question wording. This is significant to research into polling practices, as an assessment of the ways in which the work of pollsters is important or influential does not equate to identifying impropriety. It is important to understand what effects, influences and pressures are involved in question design and order so that we might better understand the decision making and processes behind these identified phenomena. It is also important to understand these aspects of wording and design to be able to identify what to be aware of when judging, interpreting or even using opinion poll data.

#### 2.2.4 What are the ways in which public (mass) opinion can be understood?

Having considered the literature relating to the question of how opinion is formed and its nature, here I explore the ways in which mass opinion is characterised and the implications of these characterisations for polling organisations. Whilst nuanced debate on the nature of public opinion is not an aspect upon which subsequent analysis later in the thesis depends, it is nevertheless of huge contextual significance. Public opinion, in the collective sense, is central to the work of polling organisations, and by extension this thesis. Whilst we might not expect pollsters to embrace varying conceptions of collective opinion (as their work is firmly rooted in a particular view, as will be identified), the critiques offered by each perspective provide a basis to later identify and assess the ways in which pollsters respond to the potential limitations of their work, both in terms of practice, and in terms of their reflections on the concept they work with.

Reflecting on the contested views of the literature on individual opinion discussed above, it is unsurprising that mass opinion is conceived of in a number of complex and competing ways. A number of authors have catalogued the differing ways in which the collective concept of public opinion is approached. Of the varying categorisation exercises, the most apposite for addressing the practicalities

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<sup>108</sup> Norman Bradburn and William Mason, 'The Effect of Question Order on Responses', *Journal of Marketing Research*, 1.4 (1964) 57-61 (p. 58.)

<sup>109</sup> See for instance, A. Regula Herzog and Jerald G. Bachman, 'Effects of Questionnaire Length on Response Quality', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 45.4 (1981) 549-559

of this question is that posed by Herbst. Her model provides an effective practical means of grouping and charting substantive differences between approaches and considering their polling implications (in comparison to approaches such as Childs' which provide 57 discrete categories of opinion).<sup>110</sup>

Herbst identifies four approaches to public opinion:

- “Aggregation – public opinion as an aggregation of the individual or group attitudes
- Majoritarian – public opinion as the opinions expressed by the largest number of citizens
- Discursive/Consensual – public opinion as a communication of the general will & social norms
- Reification – public opinion as a fiction”.<sup>111</sup>

#### 2.2.4.1 Aggregation

Converse, Zaller, and Achen argue that though low-information voters tend to have more inconsistent and unstable attitudes than those who engage more with political information, public opinion is best understood as “the totality of responses in a jurisdiction equally weighted” - an aggregation of individually expressed opinions.<sup>112</sup> The aggregation approach, opinion as an enumerated expression of all views, is one of the most commonly held perspectives of public opinion and is so for several reasons.<sup>113</sup> It reflects elements of public decision-making processes – elections, referendums, and more informal processes, such as a show of hands. It also reflects the most prevalent means of measurement, opinion polling. This understanding provides a relatively simply and commonly used way of measuring public opinion - with opinion polling providing a means by which to draw together and then describe what the public think. It also provides a means for elites to assess the distribution of differing views within the public. In light of discussions above, there are clear issues regarding precisely what is being aggregated. Though it can be tempting to see this approach as enumerating and communicating pre-formed opinions, as previously shown in this chapter (2.2.1), opinions can be far from informed or stable. An aggregated view of public opinion, especially on an issue of low salience and on which many of the public have little information may not provide the concrete insight into public attitudes that it might initially appear to.

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<sup>110</sup> See for example, Harwood Childs, *Public Opinion: Nature, Formation and Role* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1965)

<sup>111</sup> Susan Herbst, *Numbered Voices, How Opinion Polling has shaped American Politics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) p. 174.

<sup>112</sup> Philip Converse, ‘Changing conceptions of public opinion in the political process’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 51.2 (1987) 12-24 (p. 15.); John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) pp. 6-40.; Christopher Achen, ‘Mass Political Attitudes and the Survey Response’ *The American Political Science Review*, 69.4 (1975), 1218-1231

<sup>113</sup> Carroll Glynn and others, *Public Opinion*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999) p. 17.



### 2.2.4.2 Majoritarian

A majoritarian perspective is one which perceives public opinion as that held by the majority of a given population. Though, as mentioned above, the majority of polling is conducted as aggregative, it can still be presented (especially in headlines) in a majoritarian fashion, (e.g. ‘the will of the British people’).<sup>114</sup> Though a majoritarian approach might be assumed to be similar to an aggregative, there are significant nuances that distinguish it. Noelle-Neumann’s definition of public opinion represents a majoritarian perspective, and describes public opinion as “opinions on controversial issues that one *can* express in public without isolating oneself”.<sup>115</sup> Though Noelle-Neumann acknowledges varying definitions of public opinion, she sees her majoritarian approach as how public opinion should be understood at the point when “opinions vie with one another”.<sup>116</sup> In this understanding, the principle concern is with the largest voice, rather than the enumeration of all voices.

Though they discuss the distinct effects of majority opinion, Noelle-Neumann’s theories could also be interpreted as subverting a majoritarian perspective. Though the description of public opinion she gives is one in which majority opinions are understood to constitute public opinion, her theory of a “spiral of silence” is critical of this. This idea describes conditions in which opinions may be suppressed or changed because of “the fear of isolation” individuals experience when they consider expressing a non-majority opinion.<sup>117</sup> Noelle-Neuman disagreed with aggregation perspectives on public opinion due to the focus on the individual as the sole “unit of analysis” because it “neglected the social nature of the individual”.<sup>118</sup>

Examples which the spiral of silence effect describe would include the “shy Tory effect” in which individuals do not disclose voting intention for a party when they expect social isolation as a consequence. This might lead to a difference between reported behaviour in polls and actual behaviour in practice. This phenomenon arose before the 1992 General Election, in which the polls significantly underestimated the Conservative vote. The MRS inquiry into the polling failures identified Conservative voters were more likely to give inaccurate responses to their voting intention, and were also more likely to not provide responses at all.<sup>119</sup> Such a phenomenon could be explained by the effects proposed by Noelle-Neumann, with individuals assessing the public mood towards the Labour and Conservative parties at the time, and expressing an opinion which they perceived to be of lesser social

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<sup>114</sup> See for instance, YouGov, ‘Nicola Sturgeon Wins Leaders’ Debates’, YouGov, <<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/04/02/leaders-debate/>> [accessed 15 August 2018]

<sup>115</sup> Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence, Our Social Skin*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) p. 62.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* p. 63.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* p. 218.

<sup>119</sup> Fred Smith, ‘Public Opinion Polls: The UK General Election, 1992’ *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 159.3 (1996), 535-545 (p. 537.)

risk. Consequently, polling on issues where dominant social norms exist may not provide accurate estimates of actual behaviour.<sup>120</sup>

The majoritarian literature carries significant implications for pollsters, speaking as it does to broad issues of social desirability bias, and having been mooted as a contributory factor in previous polling failures.<sup>121</sup> This is informative of an assessment of polling practices: are pollsters concerned with the ways in which polling is expressed and the effects this may have in creating perceptions of opinion norms? If so, what relationships do they develop with those who commission polls to address this?

### 2.2.4.3 Discursive/Consensual

For the discursive/consensual position, the problems inherent at the individual opinion level (instability, low-information, ambivalence) necessitate a shift from aggregative notions of public opinion. Many of these approaches can be found in the deliberative democracy literature. Informed opinion is an important element of discursive/consensual positions, because deliberation and the subsequent “transmission of public opinion to the state” is an activity “engaged [in] by competent citizens”.<sup>122</sup> In this view, public opinion arises through the process of deliberation between these “competent citizens” equipped with relevant and accurate information.<sup>123</sup> Fishkin (an influential scholar of deliberative democracy) considered a truly collective view of public opinion untenable in the contemporary state, as the scope of activity undertaken by the government makes it challenging, if not impossible for a citizen to hold informed opinions on diverse and complex matters.<sup>124</sup> Information and deliberation on these matters may alter individual’s views, as Fishkin and others suggested:

“[r]esponses manufactured on the spot are not necessarily what respondents would say in answer to the same questions if they had had some information and time to think or discuss with others what was involved”.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence, Our Social Skin*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) p. 199.

<sup>121</sup> David Butler and others, *The Opinion Polls and the 1992 General Election: A Report to the Market Research Society*, (London: Market Research Society, 1994) pp. 10-11.

<sup>122</sup> John Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond, Liberals, Critics, Contestations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 167. p. 1.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. p. 1.

<sup>124</sup> Robert Worcester, ‘Public Opinion: Why it is important and how to measure it.’ Ipsos MORI, <<https://www.ipsos-mori.com/newsevents/ca/33/Public-Opinion-Why-it-is-important-and-how-to-measure-it.aspx>> [accessed 05/01/17] ; James Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation, New Directions for Democratic Reform*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) pp. 1-5.

<sup>125</sup> James Fishkin, Robert C. Luskin, and Roger Jowell, ‘Deliberative Polling and Public Consultation’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 53 (2000) 657-666 (p. 658.)

Fishkin proposed that measuring public opinion would therefore require new techniques, specifically deliberative polls, which bring people together not just to record their opinion, but to engage in an active process of deliberation.<sup>126</sup> Commonly, these approaches are criticised for not being practicable on a large scale.<sup>127</sup> By identifying public opinion as produced through deliberation, discursive/consensual approaches exclude opinions not developed through discursive or deliberative means.

This discursive/consensual approach is somewhat antithetical to the practice of the polling industry – contending that conventional polling does not measure reasoned or considered opinion. Its concern with opinion vs. informed opinion offers, alongside the theoretical concerns surrounding individual opinions discussed earlier in the chapter, considerations for an assessment of polling practices. Specifically, are there concerns that pollsters may hold as to whether the opinion they gather is informed and deliberated, and should such considerations inform their practice, or is deliberation viewed as an artificial act? With an electorate unable to deliberate on a large scale and unlikely to undertake the research that Fishkin’s polls are dependent on, traditional polls might appear to offer a better guide to opinions which actually exist.<sup>128</sup>

#### 2.2.4.4 Reification

Herbst’s final category of public opinion, reification, considers public opinion in part, or completely, as fictional – seeing the collecting together of discrete opinions to express a collective view as such a contrivance that it is essentially meaningless.<sup>129</sup> Elements of the reification approach can be found in the work of people like Zaller, who question the reality of volatile individual opinions. However, reification approaches take this idea further, considering public opinion in its entirety a fiction. Bourdieu, for instance, explained:

“‘public opinion’ which is stated on the front page of the newspapers in terms of percentages... is a pure and simple artefact whose function is to conceal the fact that the state of opinion at any given moment is a system of forces, of tensions, and that there is nothing more inadequate than a percentage to represent the state of opinion”.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> James Fishkin, *When the People Speak, Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009) pp. 9-13.

<sup>127</sup> See for Example, Philip Converse, ‘Democratic Theory & Electoral Reality’, *Critical Review*, 18.1-3 (2006) 297-329 (p. 316.)

<sup>128</sup> John Parkinson, ‘Of Scale and Straw Men: A Reply to Fishkin and Luskin’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 36.1 (2006) 189-191 (p. 189.)

<sup>129</sup> Carroll Glynn and others, *Public Opinion*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999) p. 22.

<sup>130</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Public Opinion does not exist’, in *Communication and Class Struggle*, Ed. by Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelau ( New York, International General 1972) 124-130 (p. 125.)

Reification positions are often criticised for taking a hyper-critical position, and in rejecting public opinion, discarding the validity of individuals' opinions.<sup>131</sup> Though these positions reject public opinion as a meaningful concept, some who hold the perspective, such as Bourdieu, accept some measures of public opinion, if it is collected in such a way that overcomes their core postulates regarding polling's shortcomings.<sup>132</sup> These are that polls wrongly suppose all are capable of giving an opinion, assume all opinions are of equal value, and imply that such questions are worth asking.<sup>133</sup> It is left unclear as to how this may be achieved.

Given the possibility that these concerns can be overcome is dubious, reification perspectives are unlikely to be reflected in polling practices (lest pollsters suffer an existential crisis). However, the critiques presented by such perspectives encourage reflection on pollsters' philosophical perspectives of opinion polling and its limitations. What do pollsters think polls are useful for, when can they make "useful contributions", and what "precautions" should be taken in light of these concerns?<sup>134</sup> Indeed, reviewing Bourdieu's critique of polling, Herbst notes that with further work it "could be extended, refined, and put to some empirical tests. Under what conditions do respondents' conceptualizations of poll questions match those of pollsters?"<sup>135</sup> Whilst this research does not address the process of respondents' conceptualisation, it does assess the ways in which pollsters approach this issue and square their own understanding of polling questions with that of their respondents.

### 2.2.5 Summary

This section has explored and contextualised the core concept of public opinion polling – opinion. From this overview, it is evident that public opinion is a contested concept. The significance of these competing perspectives is not purely theoretical. Both at the level of individual opinion and mass opinion, differing conceptual positions present complex challenges for pollsters to consider.

Assessing the literature on individual opinions and the ways in which they are formed raised questions for what pollsters actually measure. An exploration of the influences of question wording and survey design demonstrated that even small well-intentioned changes can be influential on the response to a survey question. This indicates that research into the practices of polling and their significance should

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<sup>131</sup> Carroll Glynn and others, *Public Opinion*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999) p. 22.

<sup>132</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'Public Opinion does not exist', in *Communication and Class Struggle*, Ed. by Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelau (New York, International General 1972) 124-130 (p. 125.)

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. p. 125.

<sup>135</sup> Susan Herbst, 'Surveys in the public sphere: applying Bourdieu's critique of opinion polls', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 4.3 (1992) 220-229 (p. 228.)

be concerned with not just the principles of polling but also the smaller aspects of practice which, individually and cumulatively, can produce real impact, and are therefore significant to understand.

Finally, the categories of collective public opinion, as provided by Herbst, were reviewed. This assessment was primarily conducted to contextualise the concept at the heart of political opinion polling. Yet in addition, it also revealed a number of critiques of polling, including the capacity of respondents to make informed judgements and the impact of polls on forming perceptions of social consensus. In addition, it identified areas in which this research could contribute to these debates, by recording the ways in which pollsters account for difference between respondents and their own conceptualisations of survey questions.

### 2.3 The Function of Public Opinion Polls

BPC members produce polling on an incredibly diverse set of topics, from one of polling's key activities and its main public test of validity, election polling (pre-campaign, during, and post result) to more novelty polling on topics in popular culture, entertainment, or seasonal themes.<sup>136</sup> With such a broad scope of activity, discerning what polls are for and how they are used is not straightforward. However, an understanding of the functions that polls perform is significant for this research as it demonstrates the political importance of pollsters, and may have implications for how pollsters view their role and conduct their work. Worcester, a founder of polling organisation MORI (later Ipsos MORI) identifies three primary functions of polls, "reporting... analytical... and (least effective...) predictive".<sup>137</sup> It should be noted that Worcester identified these areas in relation to the "presentation of findings of... polls in the media". However these categories also provide an effective structure for exploring the functions of polling more broadly.<sup>138</sup> Worcester's assessment will be utilised in this section to explore the current perspectives within the literature and identify examples of these functions, as well as exploring the consequences and implications of each for pollsters.

Worcester's identified functions can be easily paraphrased:

'Reporting – What is happening?

Analytical – Why is it happening?

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<sup>136</sup> Paul Cantrell, 'Opinion Polling and American Democratic Culture', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 5.3 (1992) 405-437 (p. 428.)

<sup>137</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 121.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.* p. 121.

Predictive – (in the case of some type of contest) Who is going to win?’.<sup>139</sup>

A number of these functions, particularly the first (reporting), focus on how polls are used by the media, and the effects they might have when reported through media sources. This focus is representative of the wider literature pertaining the use of polls, and as such will be addressed, but in such a way that our objects of concern are the implications for pollsters, and an identification of the areas where an assessment of everyday polling practices can contribute.

### 2.3.1 Reporting

*“Recent polls conducted online tend to show the race neck and neck, while polls conducted by telephone show a substantial lead for staying”.*<sup>140</sup>

*“Brits are more likely to prioritise funding for cyber security over armed forces spending (42% vs 34%)”*<sup>141</sup>

Reporting is the most straightforward of functions – presenting an overview of the findings produced by a poll or group of polls. Worcester considers reporting as polling’s “raison d’être” and most from within the polling industry and academia would acknowledge the reporting function of polls.<sup>142</sup> Even if there is disagreement on the accuracy of the reflection of opinion which the reports provide, the frequent use of polls in journalism makes this function clear. The capacity to cover political events through the lens of public opinion is an important tool for news media.<sup>143</sup> Though the focus group and the vox pop are other means to do so, “public opinion... is taken by most people... to mean poll findings”.<sup>144</sup> There are clear incentives for the media to fund and cover polls, as Stromback identifies “sponsoring and covering their own polls gives the news media access to exclusive news”.<sup>145</sup>

<sup>139</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 121.

<sup>140</sup> Freddie Sayers, ‘Polls suggest Brexit has (low) turnout on its side’, *The Guardian*, 26 February 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2016/feb/26/brexit-low-turnout-on-side-eu-referendum-older-vote>> [accessed 9 August 2018]

<sup>141</sup> YouGov, ‘Brits are more likely to prioritise funding for cyber security over armed forces spending (42% vs 34%)’ (tweet, @YouGov, 22 January 2018)

<sup>142</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 123.

<sup>143</sup> Roger Mortimore and Anthony Wells, ‘The Polls and Their Context’ in *Political Communication in Britain*, Ed. by Dominic Wring and others, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) pp.19-38

<sup>144</sup> Sandra Bauman and Paul Lavrakas, ‘Reporters’ use of causal explanation in interpreting election polls’, in *Election Polls, the News Media, and Democracy* ed. by Michael Traugott and Paul Lavrakas, (New York, Chatham House, 2000) 162-182 (p. 162)

<sup>145</sup> Jesper Stromback, ‘The Media and Their use of opinion polls: reflecting and shaping public opinion’, in *Opinion Polls and the Media*, ed. by Christina Holtz-Bacha and Jesper Stromback (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 1-22 (p. 13.)

Given the role of the media in commissioning polls which feature in their coverage, and the regular use of polls commissioned by others, reporting is not necessarily a neutral function. This can be identified through assessing the role of polls in “media effects” as outlined by Scheufele and Tewksbury.<sup>146</sup> Assessing an array of communication literature, they describe three means by which coverage can influence an individual: by heightening their awareness of an issue and increasing its salience in their mind (agenda setting);<sup>147</sup> by raising an individual’s awareness of certain issues which then affects how that individual “react(s), broadly defined, to some subsequent stimulus” (priming);<sup>148</sup> or by presenting issues with contextual information which “promote(s) a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (framing).<sup>149</sup>

These modelled effects are primarily concerned with the ways in which the media (and more recently social media) operate. However, since polls have the capacity to be used instrumentally in the production of these media effects, it is significant to an understanding of polls’ reporting function to briefly reflect upon this. Here this is done in relation to the first two effects – agenda setting and priming, which operate on the basis of issues receiving attention, rather than the third, framing, which centres on the journalistic content in which an issue is presented.

There are evident ways in which polls can be used in agenda setting and priming within media communication. Many polls are commissioned and produced because the information they provide is potentially newsworthy – as such, polls can produce additional media coverage where otherwise little or none might exist. Polling that shows shifts in public sentiment on certain issues, (or no shift at all where one might have been expected) may produce media coverage. Agenda setting theory would indicate that this increased attention will result in such issues being identified as more important.<sup>150</sup> As a hypothetical example, a poll which shows a public majority in favour of marijuana/cannabis legalisation may be reported by a number of media outlets which find this interesting. The increased coverage of the story produces an agenda setting effect, which results in legalisation becoming a more important issue to the public.

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<sup>146</sup> Dietram Scheufele & David Tewksbury, ‘Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effect Models’, *Journal of Communication*, 57 (2007) 9-20

<sup>147</sup> David Weaver, ‘Issue Salience and Public Opinion: Are There consequences of Agenda-Setting’, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 3.1 (1991) 53-68

<sup>148</sup> David R. Roskos-Ewoldsen, Mark R. Klinger, and Beverly Roskos-Ewoldsen, ‘Media Priming: a Meta-Analysis’, in *Mass Media Effects Research*, ed. by Raymond Preiss and others, (New York: Routledge, 2011) 53-80 (p. 53.); For example of polling in this effect, see R. Kent Weaver, ‘Polls, Priming, and the Politics of Welfare Reform’, in *Navigating Public Opinion*, ed. by Jeff Manza and others, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 106-123 (pp. 119-120.)

<sup>149</sup> Robert M. Entman, ‘Framing: Towards Clarification of a fractured paradigm’, *Journal of Communication*, 43.4 (1993) 51-58 (p. 52.)

<sup>150</sup> Maxwell McCombs, Donald L. Shaw and David H. Weaver, ‘New Directions in Agenda Setting Theory and Research’, *Mass Communication and Society*, 17.6 (2014) 781-802 (pp. 786-787.)

Media groups are involved in both the commissioning and reporting of polls, by extension incorporating polling directly into agenda setting effects.<sup>151</sup> For instance, Sobolewska and Ali demonstrated that in the opinion polling of Muslims following security related events, poll questions and the specific data reported from those polls are more likely to conform to existing media narratives.<sup>152</sup> Further, these commissions are demonstrative of the capacity of polling to be used to create priming effects which may influence how individuals react to these narratives. “Integration (including culture) and security constituted an overwhelming majority of issues asked of Muslims”.<sup>153</sup> Focus on integration as an area of concern effectively primes the issue of integration to be used as an assessment of security or terrorism incidents to negative consequence, “conflating terrorism with issues of integration as it creates a generally more negative picture of Muslims.”<sup>154</sup>

Beyond its use in media effects, polling data may also influence individuals’ opinions by presenting evidence of a social consensus. Mutz noted that perceptions of social consensus are more influential than personal experiences in affirming opinion. “While personal concerns may result in changes in personal behaviours or attitudes, perceptions of collective problems are more likely to lead to social and political action”.<sup>155</sup> Further research suggests that opinion polls can change individual level opinion on issues which individuals do not already have strong convictions or constraints against, leading to the growth of opinion “majorities, in a cascading manner”.<sup>156</sup>

The public may also use reported poll figures to legitimise their perspectives. Donsbach and Traugott argue “perceiving a social consensus, for example, with regard to a candidate or a referendum, is taken as a cue indicating that one’s own standpoint is ‘correct’”.<sup>157</sup> Hogan, as noted in Chapter 1, goes further, and argues that polls have an influence in shutting down political debate:

“Polls have become “news events” in and of themselves. As a result, they substitute for substantive information about political issues and stifle debate. Indeed, as Herbst (1993) has observed, polls often make political debate seem “superfluous,” since “they give the illusion that the public has already spoken in a definitive manner”.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Discussed in Chapter 5

<sup>152</sup> Maria Sobolewska and Sundas Ali, ‘Who speaks for Muslims? The role of the press in the creation and reporting of Muslim public opinion polls in the aftermath of London bombings in July 2005’, *Ethnicities*, 15.5 (2015) 675-695 (p. 690.)

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. p. 690.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. p. 690.

<sup>155</sup> Diana Mutz, *Impersonal Influence, How perceptions of Mass collectives affect political attitudes*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 103.

<sup>156</sup> David Rothschild and Neil Malhotra, ‘Are Public Opinion Polls self-fulfilling prophecies’, *Research & Politics*, 1.2 (2014) 1–10 (p. 1.)

<sup>157</sup> Wolfgang Donsbach and Michael Traugott, ‘The effects of published polls on citizens’ in *SAGE Handbook of Public Opinion Research*, ed. by Wolfgang Donsbach (London, SAGE Publications, 2008) 504-512 (p. 509.)

<sup>158</sup> J Michael Hogan, ‘Gallup and the Rhetoric of Scientific Democracy’, *Communication Monographs*, 64.2 (1997) 161-179 (p. 177.)



This assessment is extreme – though polls are considered newsworthy, they also form part of a ‘meaningful discourse’ through which information is iteratively passed between elites and the wider citizenry.<sup>159</sup> Furthermore political debate remains commonplace and unthreatened by the ever increasing numbers of polls which the public are exposed to.<sup>160</sup>

Reporting on polls is not the sole purview of journalists. Polling organisations promote their own findings. This is done both for pollsters’ own polling or that commissioned for other organisations where they might provide additional publicity and field queries from the public on social media, but also promoting general interest polls which can tend to be used as public relations work.<sup>161</sup> This means that the same concerns once solely directed at the media are now applicable to polling organisations.

### 2.3.2 Analytical

*“What these polls tell us is the size of the electoral bounty available to either party if they can ... increase the number of people who see their candidate as the best available Prime Minister”*<sup>162</sup>

Often seen alongside the reporting function of polls, is their analytical function. Separate from the agenda setting effects considered above, where polling may increase the salience of specific issues, the analytical function is the active use of the content of a poll to derive further insight. Examples of this can be found in a study of American election reporting. For instance, during elections “a total of 85 percent of the news stories contained at least one causal explanation connected to a reported poll finding, and the majority of these were in the reporter’s own ‘voice’ (i.e., not from another quoted source)”.<sup>163</sup>

In addition to attributing causal explanations, there are also concerns that polls may be used to present certain narratives. This is of particular concern during elections, where the portrayal of polls by the media focuses on “the framing of politics as a strategic game or horse race” and in doing so crowds out considerations of other areas, such as policy detail or leader competence.<sup>164</sup> Misrepresentation can be

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<sup>159</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse’ (Birmingham, University of Birmingham, 1973)

<sup>160</sup> Charlie Cook, ‘The Meaning and Measure of Public Opinion’ in *Political Polling in the Digital Age* ed. Kirby Goidel, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011) 1-8 (p. 1)

<sup>161</sup> See for instance Ben Page @benatipsosmoi ; Yougov. Twitter, @Yougov

<sup>162</sup> Stephen Bush, ‘What the polls do and don’t tell us about the battle between Jeremy Corbyn and Theresa May’ *The New Statesman*, 2 February 2018

<sup>163</sup> Sandra Bauman and Paul Lavrakas, ‘Reporters’ use of causal explanation in interpreting election polls’, in *Election Polls, the News Media, and Democracy* ed. by Michael Traugott and Paul Lavrakas, (New York, Chatham House, 2000) 162-182 (p. 162)

<sup>164</sup> Jesper Stromback, ‘The Media and Their use of opinion polls: reflecting and shaping public opinion’, in *Opinion Polls and the Media*, ed. by Christina Holtz-Bacha and Jesper Stromback (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 1-22 (p. 13.)

attributed both to the incentive towards producing compelling narratives (around, for instance outlying polls), but also inability to interpret polling data.<sup>165</sup> Despite the risks of misrepresentation, Worcester opined that it is “the interpretation of their meaning [which is] the essential product”.<sup>166</sup>

Beyond the groups we might expect to analyse polls, for instance the media and academics, polls are engaged with analytically by a broad range of users. Examples of this can be found in research on political campaigns which, for instance “suggest[s] that communication strategies on Facebook and Twitter are significantly related to how well candidates are performing in the polls” and on political decision making, where the utility of polls in the judgements of representatives has long been identified.<sup>167</sup> Further examples of significant analytical use can also be found amongst commercial and charitable organisations (who rely on polling analysis to develop campaigns and commercial strategy) but even more broadly amongst the general public through social media. Clearly polls, most notably voting intention polls, are engaged with and analysed across the board.

With the rise of social media, individuals and groups can communicate their own analysis of polling to a far greater extent than they might have when Gallup, Cantril and Worcester were identifying these functions. This development poses serious limitations for the capacity of pollsters to encourage responsible use of their work – educating journalists on polling interpretation is one matter, expanding this to the wider public appears largely out of the question. The response of pollsters to this challenge is unclear and of interest: what steps do pollsters take (if any) to encourage the responsible use of their work?

### 2.3.3 Predictive

*“Given that Labour are currently still behind in the polls... it seems almost inevitable that Labour will lose council seats on May 5th.”<sup>168</sup>*

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<sup>165</sup> Thomas Petersen, ‘Regulation of Opinion Polls: A Comparative Perspective’, in *Opinion Polls and the Media*, ed. by Christina Holtz-Bacha and Jesper Stromback (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 37-68 (pp. 47-48.)

<sup>166</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 130.

<sup>167</sup> Patricia Rossini and others, ‘Social Media, Opinion Polls, and the Use of Persuasive Messages during the 2016 US Election Primaries’, *Social Media + Society*, 4.3 (2018) 1-11 (p. 8.) ; Lewis A. Dexter, ‘The Use of Opinion Polls by Political Party Organisations’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 18.1 (1954) 53-61

<sup>168</sup> John Curtice, in Ben Riley-Smith, ‘Labour Set for Worst Council Defeat in Opposition for 34 Years’ *The Telegraph* 25 April 2016 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/24/labour-set-for-worst-council-defeat-in-opposition-for-34-years/>> [accessed 5 September 2017]

Worcester identified prediction as the least effective function of polls, viewing polls as a snapshot of opinion at the time of asking, and noting that opinions can change.<sup>169</sup> Accordingly, pollsters have a cautious relationship with the predictive use of their work. However, in some instances it is embraced by pollsters, with YouGov's website promoting their methodology stating that they have "a strong history of accurately predicting actual outcomes across a wide range of different subjects".<sup>170</sup> Broughton noted that the *mea culpas* of pollsters following polling failures in the 1992 election implied an acceptance of a predictive role.<sup>171</sup> Indeed, though pollsters might often publicly distance themselves from making predictions about future events, Wlezien et. al. note that a "significant amount of information about parties' prospects in Britain's parliamentary system is contained in polls conducted even a year or more before election day".<sup>172</sup>

Following this lead, especially so during elections and referenda, polls tend to be used predictively by both the media, public, and politicians.<sup>173</sup> Clear examples of this with significant political impact exist: two weeks before voting took place in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, a YouGov poll indicated for the first time that the Yes camp were ahead by voting intention. Lord Foulkes of Cumnock later argued that this caused panic in government, leading to a series of devolution concessions, stating: "It is not right that the real issues of democratic politics should have been so materially affected by a statistical prediction that turned out to be so wrong."<sup>174</sup> Peter Kellner, then president of YouGov, argued that their poll wasn't wrong – but that views had changed in the two weeks following the poll.<sup>175</sup> Kellner's view is a reasonable one, indeed, the YouGov poll was broadly in line with other polling at the same time, and was simply the first in which the winning outcome had changed.

The predictive use of polls may influence voter behaviour, by for instance facilitating tactical voting. Tactical voting is where an individual "votes for a party they believe is more likely to win than their preferred party, to best influence who wins in the constituency".<sup>176</sup> Whilst literature on the topic identifies tactical voting as an "important feature" of UK elections, the extent of polling's role in this

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<sup>169</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p121

<sup>170</sup> YouGov, 'Panel Methodology', YouGov, <<https://yougov.co.uk/about/panel-methodology/>> [accessed 18/01/19]

<sup>171</sup> Peter Kellner, 'We Got it Wrong. Why?' YouGov, 11 May 2015, <<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/05/11/we-got-it-wrong-why/>> [accessed 05/09/17] ; David Broughton, *Public Opinion Polling and Politics in Britain*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995) p. 84.

<sup>172</sup> Christopher Wlezien and others, 'Polls and the Vote in Britain', *Political Studies*, 61.S1 (2013) 66-91 (p. 85.)

<sup>173</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 121.

<sup>174</sup> Lord Foulkes of Cumnock, *Hansard*, HL Deb. Vol.762 Col. 1336, June 2015

<sup>175</sup> Peter Kellner, 'Has Rogue Journalism cost the Mail on Sunday its Reputation?' YouGov, 21 September 2014, <<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/09/21/has-rogue-journalism-cost-mail-sunday-its-reputati/>> [accessed 5 September 2017]

<sup>176</sup> Stephen D. Fisher 'Definition and Measurement of Tactical Voting: the role of rational choice', *British Journal of Political Science*, 34.1 (2004) 152-166 (p.157)

process is challenging to isolate, as voters make use of a variety of sources to inform these decisions.<sup>177</sup> Johnston and Pattie identify that individuals making calculations as to parties' likelihood of success in their constituencies (and therefore whether tactically voting was an option available to them) would turn to sources of information such as: "only the lib dems can win here" leaflets (which often have little or no relation to constituency polling) or their own "evaluations of the local situation".<sup>178</sup> Hartman et. al. note that "voters can be influenced by what they learn from opinion polls, in terms of both how they seek out information, and how they might vote".<sup>179</sup> National polls, (though not always the best source of tactical information) and more recently, tactical voting campaigns (based on polling data) may therefore contribute to the local calculations of some tactical voters.

The substantive political impacts from the predictive use of polls discussed here raise questions about polling practices – in what ways do polling organisations work to ensure comprehension of the results they produce, both with clients and the public?

#### 2.3.4 Summary

In this section, the functions of opinion polls have been explored. Using a framework of poll usage articulated by Worcester, the ways in which polls are used was assessed. This is important for this thesis in a number of ways; contextualising polling practice, raising significant questions for the research and providing a means to later structure findings.

It was shown that producing polling that is newsworthy is not an inherently neutral act, as it may contribute to effects which either increase issue salience or alter the ways in which other issues are assessed. This, in combination with earlier discussions of opinion influence in this chapter, establish an important point of principle for how we deem polling practices as 'significant'. Polling practices need not be dramatic practices which cause significant impact in isolation: small well intentioned practices on a number of issues from question design, topic selection, and the acceptance of commissions can have cumulative significance on the ways issues are presented and engaged with through polls. The assessment of polling's functions also raised fruitful lines of inquiry which inform the observations undertaken for this research. Specifically, looking to identify what role pollsters have (or perceive themselves having) in ensuring the understanding and responsible use of polling data.

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<sup>177</sup> Stephen D. Fisher and John Curtice, 'Tactical Unwind? Changes in Party Preference structure and tactical voting in Britain between 2001 and 2005', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 16.1 (2006) 55-76

<sup>178</sup> Ron Johnston and Charles Pattie, 'Tactical Voting at the 2010 General Election: Rational Behaviour in Local Contexts', *Environment and Planning*, 43.6 (2011) 1323-1340 (pp. 1326-1332)

<sup>179</sup> Todd Hartman, Charles Pattie and Ron Johnstone, 'Learning on the job? Adapting party campaign strategy to changing information on the local political context', *Electoral Studies*, 49 (2017) 128-135

## 2.4 The Accounts of Pollsters

In the preceding sections of this chapter I have examined the literature in order to assess key concepts in this research – opinion, and polls respectively. In this final section the same task is undertaken with the concept of pollsters and their practices in mind. As noted in Chapter 1, there are few accounts of polling practices, and similarly few of the experiences of pollsters. As such, in this section I appeal to a variety of sources in which pollsters have presented themselves and their work, for instance in public inquiries, rather than the more comprehensive literature available in previous sections. With this different approach, the section performs the same task as those before it – examining available materials to explore a relevant concept. Specifically, in this section I ask: what insights on polling practices or contextualisation can be drawn for this research from existing sources? This allows for current accounts of polling practice to be assessed, and questions for this research to explore to be identified.

Given the varied ways in which pollsters have contributed information about their work, this question is addressed in two parts. These parts are arranged by source of information, rather than theme. First, I address a structured incidence of numerous pollsters discussing their work – evidence given to the House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media (PPDM). Second, I provide illustrative examples of the other diverse contributions made by pollsters and the insights they provide for this research.

### 2.4.1 Testimony

Following the perceived failings of the polls in the 2015 General Election, an ad hoc House of Lords select committee was established on Political Polling and Digital Media (PPDM). Though the committee had a primary concern with polling methods and accuracy, it was also concerned with practice within the industry and how polling organisations self-regulate.<sup>180</sup> As such, though not comprehensive, the evidence given from pollsters does provide some insight into the behaviours and concerns of pollsters, as well as emphasising areas where understanding is incomplete, and hence demonstrates the importance of further enquiry. Those areas which do provide insight on practice are discussed here.

Individual decision making was a topic of interest for the PPDM. Oral evidence given by pollsters noted the prevalence of human agency in polling practices at all stages of polling. During the House of Lords Select Committee hearings, pollsters acknowledged that, to an extent, they make judgements and

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<sup>180</sup> House of Lords, *New Investigative Committees in the 2017-2018 Session*, (London: House of Lords, 2017) pp7-8

decisions relating to their data before, during and after data collection (for instance how to interpret a respondent's likelihood to vote).<sup>181</sup> This testimony was not a revelation, but did serve to situate the decision making of pollsters within a range of other tensions. For instance, these decisions are often made whilst navigating political and interest group pressure, "you are working for a certain campaign group that wants to promote a particular issue, it will want to ask the question in a particular way".<sup>182</sup> Testimony indicated that in these situations, good polling sense prevails, and that clients asking for 'bad' questions are resisted, or rejected.<sup>183</sup> This account deserves assessment by this research as to whether it is reflective of the reality of polling, or an idealised version of practice.

Though, as noted in the previous section, predictive use is considered an intended function of polls, evidence from pollsters provides mixed messages on this front.<sup>184</sup> As Johnny Heald (CEO of polling organisation ORB) told the House of Lords Select Committee, "When you have hedge funds calling you up on Brexit on a weekly basis saying, 'Give me data; give me data', they are trying to tempt us into the prediction game, which is a big mistake to get involved in, I would say, for this industry."<sup>185</sup> This creates uncertainty as to precisely how pollsters perceive their role in predictive work. Pollsters tout their success in predictions and forecasts, research suggests that polling data contains predictive value, and pollsters identify predictive uses as one of the key functions of polls – yet as seen through the select committees, they can also be seen to shy away from it.<sup>186</sup> This research will contribute to this discussion by ascertaining the views of pollsters on their role, and that of their work, in prediction.

In addition to receiving oral evidence, the PPDM invited written submissions. Many polling organisations provided individual responses to this call, whilst some also produced a joint response to the PPDM's questions. Due to the nature of questions asked by the PPDM, responses provided limited insight into polling practices, but did cover a number of areas particularly relevant to practice. The first, similar to the points discussed in relation to oral evidence above, discussed client influence, here pollsters again noted their resistance to such influence, though acknowledged that many clients have 'a political axe to grind'. The written submission also pointed to the fact that "the BPC's requirement for

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<sup>181</sup> Ben Page, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 20, Question 150, 5/12/17

<sup>182</sup> Johnny Heald House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 20, Questions, 148-154, 5/12/17

<sup>183</sup> Damian Lyons Lowe, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 20, Questions, 148-154, 5/12/17

<sup>184</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 121

<sup>185</sup> Johnny Heald House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling, Evidence Session 20, Questions, 148-154, 5/12/17

<sup>186</sup> Joe Twyman, 'Getting it right: 'YouGov and Online Survey Research in Britain', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 18.4 (2008) 343-354 (p. 343.) ; Christopher Wlezien and others, 'Polls and the Vote in Britain', *Political Studies*, 61.S1 (2013) 66-91 (p. 85.) ; Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 121

transparency means that fair-minded observers draw their own conclusions.”<sup>187</sup> This further establishes the potential tensions between client and pollster noted above, an area this research will consider closely.

Finally, evidence from many pollsters, and in particular the joint submission, demonstrated in strong terms a resistance to the “dead hand” of statutory regulation.<sup>188</sup> Though resistance to regulation in one’s area of work is not unexpected, the forceful rejection of regulation and its impacts on polling competition and innovation is noteworthy. However, this rejection of regulation is often formulated in a broad sense against prescriptive demands on practice, or bans of polling in advance of elections. This raises the question as to the particular views of pollsters on individual areas of regulation, and the ways in which they view regulation as interacting with their work at an everyday level.

#### 2.4.2 Other Sources

Outside of the evidence provided to this recent example of polling scrutiny, we have a variety of sources of information from pollsters across a range of topics. These contributions invite particular questions of this research in its assessment of everyday practices. A number of pollsters (or former pollsters) have discussed issues relating to polling in a variety of mediums. Some, such as Roger Mortimore (a former senior political analyst for Ipsos MORI) and Worcester hold positions astride both polling and academia – and as such their contributions provide an insider perspective to the literature, if not an everyday account.<sup>189</sup> For instance Mortimore and Anthony Wells (a senior political pollster at YouGov) have written on polling organisations and production of polls, though these accounts focus on organisational level issues, and not everyday practices.<sup>190</sup> The number of contributions to the literature made by former or current pollsters are indicative of the close relationship between polling and academia. In some cases this is a transactional relationship – the ability to commission survey research is evidently of value to academics. Pollsters, often those holding significant roles in BPC organisations, also engage with the academic debate on public opinion and survey research. Other pollsters such as Kellner, a former journalist, produce articles, blogs, and often provide live analysis and their perspective on election night coverage. In most instances, these contributions relate to other topics, with polls used instrumentally in such discussions. Where discussion does encompass polls, it tends to be explanatory, focused on the

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<sup>187</sup> ComRes and others, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Written evidence (PPD0014), p. 187.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid. p. 187.

<sup>189</sup> See for instance, Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991)

<sup>190</sup> Roger Mortimore and Anthony Wells, ‘The Polls and Their Context’ in *Political Communication in Britain*, Ed. by Dominic Wring and others, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) pp.19-38

science, rather than the practice, of polling. Given the wide range (though narrow relevance) of different contributions discussed, here I address three examples which illustrate certain areas of insight that can be drawn out; pollsters views on influence and responsibility, individual decision making, and regulation.

Throughout a range of media, pollsters have discussed their views on the potential influence their work has on politics. Though Worcester did not identify voter influence as a function of polls in the same way as prediction, he was confident that it was a consequence; “Do polls influence voting behaviour? I believe they do, and I believe this to be a good thing” (indicative as it might be of informed decision making).<sup>191</sup> Kellner, though noting that polls can influence some aspects of politics, (for instance informing the actions of representatives, in a way that is often overstated), suggests that this influence is because pollsters’ work reveals the state of opinion on an issue and is not an influence that pollsters wield deliberately.<sup>192</sup> Jane Frost, the head of the MRS, an organisation which holds a modest regulatory capacity and works closely with polling organisations, provides a strong disagreement with Worcester’s assessment, denying an influencing role and stating that “frankly, we have seen no hard evidence that the polls influence individual voter behaviour”.<sup>193</sup> These are a range of varied perspectives from senior figures which can be gathered on the influence of polls. It is therefore not clear how pollsters perceive the effects of their work, and the concomitant responsibility.

Other accounts indicate the pressures involved in decision making in relation to polls. David Moore (formerly of Gallup) provided some aspects of an ‘insider’ perspective of a polling organisation.<sup>194</sup> In his writing, Moore discusses a Gallup tracker poll which asked the question “do you feel that homosexuality should be considered acceptable, or not?”<sup>195</sup> He notes that in 2005, based on criticism and feedback, Gallup tested a split sample in which the existing version of the question, and a modified version “do you feel that gay and lesbian relations should be considered acceptable or not” were asked<sup>196</sup>. The difference in the results was an increase of 9% stating it was acceptable with the new formulation. This caused “Gallup to face a major dilemma... critics could now justifiably claim that Gallup was biasing the results... on the other hand, Gallup was concerned not with the specific percentage it measured in 2005, but with the overall trend.”<sup>197</sup> Ultimately the decision was made to keep

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<sup>191</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 203.

<sup>192</sup> Edward Platt, ‘Living by numbers: YouGov and the power of the pollsters’, *New Statesman*, 16 April 2015 <<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/04/living-numbers-yougov-and-power-pollsters>> [accessed 5 August 2018]

<sup>193</sup> Jane Frost, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 21, Question 157, 12/12/17

<sup>194</sup> See David Moore, *The Opinion Makers, an insider exposes the truth behind the polls* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009)

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.* p. 153.

<sup>196</sup> David Moore, *The Opinion Makers, an insider exposes the truth behind the polls* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009) p. 154.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.* p. 154.



the original wording, despite the concern of critics that static wording across long stretches of time did not equate to static meaning, with culture and interpretations shifting.<sup>198</sup> Moore uses this example to illustrate wording effects on polling – but it is significant for additional reasons. Though Gallup made their decision based on what they viewed to be best for the data series, this decision was made against a backdrop of external pressure from critics. The pressures and tensions that pollsters feel in regard to their decision making, though in this instance resisted, are not well understood.

Finally, and as noted in the evidence pollsters provided to the PPDM, there are further accounts that indicate that pollsters are resistant to further regulation. Similarly to evidence in the PPDM, Wells and Mortimore focus on the most commonly mooted regulation, polling bans, noting that “a ban on polls will simply create a vacuum which will be filled by other information sources, with no likelihood that they will be more reliable”.<sup>199</sup> On issues of best practice Heald notes that “The sheer volume of polls conducted now in the UK on a daily basis would require an army of qualified experts checking each poll, methodology and analysis.”<sup>200</sup> These specific responses provide some explanation as to why pollsters are resistant to certain types of regulation.

### 2.4.3 Summary

In this section of the chapter, existing accounts of polling practices have been explored in order to identify depictions of polling practices and other contextual insights beneficial to the research.

Covering both accounts of pollsters provided in an occasion of structured scrutiny, and the dispersed contributions of pollsters more broadly, a number of issues were highlighted. Client relationships and pressure were identified as an area of interest, with an account being presented within the PPDM which can be compared against observed practices. Accounts from numerous sources painted a varying picture of the influence and responsibility involved in producing political polling. Furthermore, whilst there is consensus on the issue of regulation, the regular interest in this topic, (being as it was central, though largely rejected in the PPDM) invites this research to explore perspectives to regulation in practice.

Overall this section has shown that whilst there are few accounts against which the empirical contributions of this thesis can be directly compared, the information from pollsters which does exist provides valuable context and direction to this research.

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid. p. 155

<sup>199</sup> Roger Mortimore and Anthony Wells, ‘The Polls and Their Context’ in *Political Communication in Britain*, Ed. by Dominic Wring and others, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) pp.19-38

<sup>200</sup> Johnny Heald, ‘Does the UK Polling Industry require more regulation’, WAPOR, 19 December 2018, <https://wapor.org/does-uk-polling-industry-require-more-regulation/> [accessed 15 December 2019]

## 2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, several diverse topics have been addressed, and in doing so, a number of key concepts established.

The nature of public opinion has been explored, in order that the key concept of public opinion polling is well understood, and the ways in which practices may influence opinion be understood. The contested nature of public opinion has been established, both at the individual level, and at a collective level.

The function of opinion polling has been explored through the structure put forward by Worcester.<sup>201</sup> Through this exploration, the importance of polls has been explored, along with the concepts, for instance media effects, which assist in our identification of the ‘significance’ of polling practices. This exploration provided a framework which can be returned to in order to structure research findings.

Finally, existing accounts of pollsters were explored to determine what perspectives on polling practices, and contextual insights they provide which can inform this thesis. This also allowed for the identification of areas in which an account of everyday practice would be beneficial.

This chapter raised a great number of unresolved questions relating to our gaps in understanding of the operation of polling organisations which are of academic interest. These questions range from the foundational – how are polling organisations structured and run – to the more specific questions which sit in the gaps of the existing literature: how do pollsters conceptualise public opinion; to what extent do they determine their role and responsibility in the functions of opinion polls; what goes in to the process of commissioning and delivering a poll – and what pressures are exerted on this and how are decisions reached; and how do polling organisations regulate and equip themselves to approach the challenges facing the industry. These questions will be taken forward throughout the thesis.

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<sup>201</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991)

## 3 | Chapter 3 – Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

Within this chapter, attention turns to the methodological considerations of the research. The research questions for this thesis are: “What are the everyday practices of political public opinion polling, and what is their significance in understanding political polls?” This chapter will address how these questions were answered, and why it was done in such a way.

With its focus on the everyday, the research is exploratory, providing a “purposive, systematic, prearranged undertaking designed to maximize the discovery of generalizations leading to a description and understanding of an area”.<sup>202</sup> Exploratory research in political science has a strong history, but has often faced the charge of being presented in a way which does not make clear its methodological robustness.<sup>203</sup> As discussed in the introduction, the research approach adopted here builds on an ethnographic tradition, immersing the researcher in the daily life of the community being studied. Though this approach is adopted by an increasing body of political work, it has not yet been applied to the study of political opinion polling. This chapter therefore describes the robust methodological grounding on which this approach to research is built, and the specific ways in which it was applied in this research.

In order to achieve this goal, this chapter shall be structured in the following way: First, the theoretical premises on which the research is grounded will be explored. The implications for how data are identified, collected, and interpreted are discussed and comparable work which has utilised similar approaches is considered. The claim of the thesis to be ethnographic will be explained, and in the context of this tradition, strategies for ensuring research is valid and trustworthy will be outlined. Second, the research methods being applied, participant observation and interviews, will be detailed. I discuss and consider the methods used in this thesis in detail, to provide a clear picture of the conduct of the research. I then reflect on my own positionality, and the effect of the author on qualitative work.

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<sup>202</sup> Robert Stebbins, *Exploratory research in the social sciences*, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2001) p. 3.

<sup>203</sup> Robert Stebbins, *Exploratory research in the social sciences*, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2001) p. 1.

## 3.2 Theory and Tradition

### 3.2.1 Theory

This sub-section articulates the ontological and epistemological grounding which has informed the work undertaken in this thesis – its guiding research logic. The exploration of these concepts is conducted for two principle reasons. Firstly, it is part of a process of reflexivity to make clear my research logic and conceptual foundations. As noted by Harding:

“The beliefs and the behaviours of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of the research...[which]...must be open to critical scrutiny no less than what is traditionally defined as relevant evidence”.<sup>204</sup>

Secondly, it clarifies not only the way in which certain assumptions are embedded in the research, and the answers that this thesis provides (as above), but also the way in which they are embedded in the research question and methods. The research questions of the thesis are closely linked to a specific methodology and understanding of research. A concern with everyday practices is both informed by and informs a specific research logic and methods toolkit which can be leveraged to produce findings in this area. The research question of the thesis is therefore built on a “logic of knowing” of both what can be reliably researched and how, which must be open to critical scrutiny.<sup>205</sup> As noted by Yanow, this also assists the reader in establishing their “expectations about the logic of research” which is adopted in this thesis.<sup>206</sup>

The research design for this thesis is grounded in an interpretivist perspective. This approach understands structures, actions and meanings as situated within the social world, which is understood contextually.<sup>207</sup> Knowledge and facts are “constructs based on regularities in a subject’s experience”.<sup>208</sup> Rather than viewing facts or knowledge about the social world as external concepts which can be captured, interpretivists see concepts which are socially produced. They are valuable for research, but a well-rounded comprehension requires an engagement with the social world in which they are produced. This view sees value in understanding everyday practices. In this instance, to understand the

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<sup>204</sup> Sandra Harding, ‘Is there a feminist method?’, in *Feminism and Methodology*, ed. By Sandra Harding, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987) p. 9.

<sup>205</sup> Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow, *Interpretative Research Design* (New York: Routledge, 2011) p. 24.

<sup>206</sup> Dvora Yanow, ‘Dear Author, Dear Reader: The Third Hermeneutic in Writing and Reviewing Ethnography’ in *Political Ethnography, What immersion contributes to the study of power* ed. by Edward Schatz, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 275-302 (p. 275.)

<sup>207</sup> Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow, *Interpretive Research Design concepts and processes*, (New York: Routledge, 2011) pp46-47

<sup>208</sup> Ernst Von Glaserfeld, ‘Facts and the self from a constructivist point of view’, *Poetics* 18.4-5 (1989) p. 31.

practices of pollsters, and the significance of their practices, the thesis favours a “thick” ethnographic account which explores the context and culture in which practices are found.<sup>209</sup>

Though rooted in older philosophical work such as Kant, interpretive inquiry in political science has not been popularised until more recently.<sup>210</sup> In 2004, Finlayson noted that “interpretivism does not have a secure footing in British political studies” with few studies adopting this approach.<sup>211</sup> Since that claim, this “footing” has become more robust, with an increase in explicitly interpretive and ethnographic approaches deployed in political science.<sup>212</sup> Schatz noted this increase as in line with a shift towards methodological pluralism within the discipline, from the early 2000s onwards.<sup>213</sup>

Consistent with an ethnographic approach to qualitative research, this research utilises a combination of participant observation (conducted with the political team at polling organisation YouGov) and interviews to gather its empirical data. These methods will be addressed in further detail in the second part of this chapter. With interpretive research, and the use of methods such as participant observation (a method detailed in sub-section 3.3.1), there are various challenges to ensuring robust research. Positivist critiques in particular raise concerns regarding subjectivity, capacity for generalisation, validity and reliability.<sup>214</sup> These wider epistemological challenges are discussed in the existing literature.<sup>215</sup> However, the issues of validity and generalisation shall be addressed here in terms of how they affect this research.

Validity (the “appropriateness” of the “research tools, processes and data” being used) and reliability (“the replicability of the research”) are longstanding principles of robust quantitative research.<sup>216</sup> Yet their applicability to interpretive and indeed qualitative research is contested. As noted by Kitto et. al. these principles do not match well to qualitative strategies of research (for instance Leung notes that straightforward replicability is “epistemologically counterintuitive”) and therefore should not be

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<sup>209</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: selected essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) pp. 10-13.

<sup>210</sup> See for instance, Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, (London: Bohn, 1855)

<sup>211</sup> Alan Finlayson, ‘The Interpretive Approach in Political Science: a Symposium’ *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 6 (2004) 129-164 (p. 129.)

<sup>212</sup> Alan Finlayson, ‘The Interpretive Approach in Political Science: a Symposium’ *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 6 (2004) 129-164 (p. 129.) ; See for instance, Edward Schatz, *Political Ethnography, What immersion contributes to the study of power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009)

<sup>213</sup> Edward Schatz, *Political Ethnography, What immersion contributes to the study of power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) pp. 1-2.

<sup>214</sup> Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow, *Interpretive Research Design concepts and processes*, (New York: Routledge, 2011) p. 92.

<sup>215</sup> See for Instance, Gillian Rose, ‘Situating knowledges: positionality, reflexivities and other tactics’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 21.3 (1997) 305-320 ; Clifford Geertz, *Works and lives: the anthropologist as author* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988) ; Malcolm Williams, ‘Interpretivism and Generalisation’, *Sociology*, 34.2 (2000) 209-224

<sup>216</sup> Lawrence Leung, ‘Validity, reliability, and generalizability in qualitative research’, *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, 4.3 (2015) 324–327. (p. 326.)

applied.<sup>217</sup> Despite this, interpretive work is invariably subjected to the challenge that research centred on the subjective observations and interpretations of the researcher cannot easily be generalised.

This limitation is not regarded in this thesis as a weakness. Hammersley notes that we should reject the idea that there is one valid account of a social situation from which we might generalise, stating: “[d]escriptions do not capture reality; at best they simply represent those aspects of it that are relevant to the purposes motivating the inquiry.”<sup>218</sup> This position is embraced from both a sense of that same research logic, and from research practicality. A single case study, YouGov, was the focus of the participant observation of this thesis, with ethnographies of multiple organisations being out of the reasonable capacity of this research to process. This has implications for the scope of the claims made in the thesis; the research provides rich insights in one particular polling organisation and its context rather than broader generalisable claims. These insights are valuable not only because the organisation is substantial (claiming to be the most quoted research company in the UK) but because this depth of focus allows for an exploratory, theory generating study.<sup>219</sup>

Bevir and Rhodes argue that “it is still possible for ethnographers to generalise.” Other authors, such as Mitchell, reframe generalisation as “inferences” which can be made “not because the case is representative but because our analysis is unassailable”.<sup>220</sup> This view is held in this thesis in a limited sense – not that the particular approaches to issues observed should be generalised as a faithful depiction of the industry, but that there is often good reason (noted where applicable) to infer that the issues themselves are general to the industry. The use of a second data source, interviews, which includes interviews with a small number of pollsters outside of YouGov, combined with reference to existing materials produced by pollsters from across the sector permits this sort of inferential generalisation. However, as will be considered in the subsequent methods discussions of this chapter, these triangulation strategies are undertaken with a primary focus of ensuring reliability in the data and analysis produced. In each empirical chapter the question of generalisability will be returned to in order to make the scope of the findings clear.

These responses to concerns notwithstanding, this research and its approach is not advanced in opposition to other methodologies. Rather, it is presented as part of the same move towards methodological pluralism referred to at the outset of this sub-section. The interpretive ethnographic approach to research is adopted because of the specific concerns of the research question. As noted by

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<sup>217</sup> Lawrence Leung, ‘Validity, reliability, and generalizability in qualitative research’, *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, 4.3 (2015) 324–327. (p. 326.) ; Simon Kitto, Janice Chesters and Carol Grbich, ‘Quality in Qualitative Research’, *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 188.4 (2008) 243-246 (p. 243.)

<sup>218</sup> Martyn Hammersley, ‘Some Reflections on Ethnography and Validity’ *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 5.3 (1992) 195-203 (p. 199.)

<sup>219</sup> YouGov, ‘Political Research’, YouGov, <<https://yougov.co.uk/solutions/sectors/political>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

<sup>220</sup> Karen O’Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012) p. 225

Spencer and Snape, “qualitative and quantitative research should not be seen as competing and contradictory, but should instead be viewed as complementary strategies appropriate to different types of research questions or issues”.<sup>221</sup>

In summary, an interpretive paradigm is adopted as this research’s epistemological position. This methodological position is compatible with the research aims of the thesis and the theoretical discussion considered here is useful in grounding the research logic adopted in the thesis.

### 3.2.2 Tradition

In the introduction to this thesis, it was made clear that the research question would be addressed through the production of an ethnographic account. However, ethnography and ethnographic approaches are not crisply delineated concepts whose use implies a uniform research sensibility and application of methods. Here, I address what is meant in this thesis by the claims to be ethnographic. I outline the ethnographic sensibility adopted, why this approach was used, how the challenges of ‘authentic’ research are met by this ethnographic approach, the implications for the methods selection and use (covered in more detail in 3.3 of this chapter) and the implications for how analysis is conducted.

Though there are varying conceptions of what ethnography is, (my own perspective is established throughout this sub-section), we can broadly understand ethnography to be the involvement of a researcher in the everyday life of those being researched and an according collection and analysis of data.<sup>222</sup> The tradition was a mainstay of anthropological research, and offered new perspectives on the study of culture and people through immersion.<sup>223</sup> However, authors responsible for popularising these approaches, such as Malinowski, “considered to be the founder of contemporary ethnographic fieldwork” have since been critiqued for their colonial approach.<sup>224</sup> Modern ethnographies, though often employing the methods pioneered by the early anthropologists have, as noted by Uddin, tended towards being “more empathetic with the people they study, morally more sensitive to the topic of study, professionally more concerned with the social crises and intellectually more aware of power

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<sup>221</sup>Dawn Snape and Liz Spencer, ‘The Foundations of Qualitative Research’ in *Qualitative Research Practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*, ed. by Jane Ritchie and John Lewis (Thousand Oaks, SAGE, 2003) 1-23 (p. 15.)

<sup>222</sup> Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography Principles in Practice*, (Routledge, New York, 2007) pp.1-19.

<sup>223</sup> Roy Ellen, *Ethnographic Research: A Guide to General Conduct*, (Cambridge: Academic Press, 1987) p. 14.

<sup>224</sup> Karen O’Reilly, *Key Concepts in Ethnography*, (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009) p. 138. ; Nasir Uddin, ‘Decolonising ethnography in the field: an anthropological account’, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 14.6(2011) 455-467 (p. 459.)

relations”.<sup>225</sup> In the study of politics, ethnographies are often used to explore the experiences of small groups and their relationship to the wider political processes alongside the narration or confessions of the researcher in the field (demonstrating the significance of everyday activities to politics).<sup>226</sup> This thesis is an exploration of this sort.

Schatz suggests two core principles that qualify a work as ethnographic, and this research contains both.<sup>227</sup> The first principle is presence of participant observation as the primary research tool.<sup>228</sup> Often considered synonymous with ethnography itself, participant observation “highlights the centrality of immersion” to the particular study of an area (as will be discussed at greater length in the methods section of this chapter, 3.3).<sup>229</sup> Second is a sensibility that aims to “glean the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality”.<sup>230</sup> This is a sensibility which runs throughout this work, with its focus on everyday practices, immersion alongside the people of interest (political pollsters), and the use of interviews to incorporate authentic voice alongside observations.

Why is an ethnographic approach adopted? The research question addressed in this thesis is concerned with practices of organisations and actors of which we have few accounts, but whose work is politically significant. The approach is well suited to the types of exploratory research this demands, as Wedeen described:

“ethnographic observations can generate counterintuitive findings or confirm previous research. They can raise questions about the concepts and paradigms currently informing social science projects and invite novel ways of imagining the political.”<sup>231</sup>

The absence of, and potential contribution from insights into everyday practices in this area, also contributes to ethnography being an apposite approach for this research. As Auyero and Joseph argue:

“ethnography is uniquely equipped to look microscopically at the foundations of political institutions and their attendant sets of practices, just as it is ideally suited to explain why

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<sup>225</sup> Nasir Uddin, ‘Decolonising ethnography in the field: an anthropological account’, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 14.6(2011) 455-467 (p. 459.)

<sup>226</sup> See for instance, Edward Schatz, *Political Ethnography, What immersion contributes to the study of power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) ; John Van Maanen, ‘Ethnography then and now’, *Qualitative Research in organisations and management*, 1.1 (2006) 13-21 (p. 15.)

<sup>227</sup> Edward Schatz, ‘Ethnographic immersion and the study of politics’ in *Political Ethnography, What immersion contributes to the study of power* ed. by Edward Schatz, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) p. 5.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>231</sup> Lisa Wedeen, ‘Ethnography as Interpretive Enterprise’, in *Political Ethnography, What immersion contributes to the study of power*, ed. by Edward Schatz (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009) p. 90



political actors behave the way they do and to identify the causes, processes, and outcomes that are part and parcel of political life”<sup>232</sup>

Ethnographic approaches are able to offer rich accounts of their subject area at the time of study. Bevir and Rhodes note that the value of ethnographic research is that “it gets below and behind the surface of official accounts by providing texture, depth and nuance, so a story has richness as well as context”.<sup>233</sup> Part of the process of “getting behind the surface” comes from the exploration of subtle concepts.<sup>234</sup> Previous ethnographic accounts have shown the importance of looking at the “tacitly known, everyday “rules” at work in various communities of meaning”.<sup>235</sup> Terminology for these concepts varies within interpretive research. In this thesis, drawing on previous political ethnographic and sociological enquiry, I identify these concepts through reference to norms, traditions and values.<sup>236</sup> Norms refer to the common sense situated within a community, traditions the practices and other aspects of culture that “exist[s] in the present but... [were] inherited from the past”, and values the beliefs and preferences of individuals (here specifically relating to polling practice).<sup>237</sup> Uncovering and identifying these aspects of working culture in relation to mediating effects on polling practices is both present through the empirical work of this thesis, and articulated explicitly in Chapters 5.4 and 6.3. This process is also an important component of the analysis of this research (discussed further in 3.3).

For ethnographic approaches to be successful, they must be trusted by the reader, and such trust may be cautious, due to the subjective authorial claims central to ethnography. If, as suggested in the previous sub-section (3.2.1), validity, reliability, and generalisability are not principles which map well to the assessment of qualitative work, how should this be approached? A great number of alternative principles have been posited for the assessment of ethnographic work in particular.<sup>238</sup> This chapter briefly discusses ethnographic validity.

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<sup>232</sup> Javier Auyero and Lauren Joseph, ‘Politics under the Ethnographic Microscope’, in *New Perspectives in Political Ethnography*, ed. by Lauren Joseph and others (New York: Springer, 2007) pp1-13 (p. 2.)

<sup>233</sup> Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes, ‘Interpreting British Governance’, in *The Interpretive Approach in Political Science: a symposium*, ed. by Alan Finlayson, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 6 (2004) 129-164 (pp. 135-136.)

<sup>234</sup> Ibid. pp. 135-136.

<sup>235</sup> Dvora Yanow, ‘Dear Author, Dear Reader: The Third Hermeneutic in Writing and Reviewing Ethnography’ in *Political Ethnography, What immersion contributes to the study of power* ed. by Edward Schatz, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 275-302 (p. 286.)

<sup>236</sup> See for instance, Marc Geddes, *Dramas at Westminster: Select Committees and the quest for accountability* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2020)

<sup>237</sup> Wendy Wolford, ‘From Confusion to Common Sense: Using Political Ethnography to understand social mobilization in the Brazilian Northeast’, in *New Perspectives in Political Ethnography*, ed. by Lauren Joseph and others (2007) 14-36 (p. 18.) ; David Gross, *The Past in Ruins*, (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1992) p. 8. ; Roy D’Andrade, *A Study of Personal and Cultural Values*, (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2008) pp 7-12.

<sup>238</sup> See for instance, Yvonne Lincoln and Egon Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, (Newbury Park: SAGE, 1985) pp.289-332.

Chan notes that there are varying conceptions of qualitative validity, and that “validity issues arise as a result of the material structures and methodological conventions that shape the practice of ethnographic research”.<sup>239</sup> Ethnographic validity issues are questions of the “extent to which data accurately reflects the phenomena being studied or that the research aims to guarantee ‘truthfulness’.”<sup>240</sup> Robust triangulation strategies (including multiple and varied sources of data) are widely identified across the methodological literature as the most effective means of ensuring these qualities, and therefore producing ethnographic validity.<sup>241</sup> Furthermore, O’Reilly argues that the nature of the methods commonly used in ethnographic approaches are well placed to address validity concerns as they involve “direct and sustained contact with human agents in the collaborative co-construction of an account; it is the result of a combination of rigorously applied scientific principles and artistic prose.”<sup>242</sup>

Beyond the theoretical sensibilities adopted for this research, methods are used in such a way as to reinforce credibility and authenticity. Qualitative research is strengthened through the use of multiple types and sources of data.<sup>243</sup> On individual topics, data is deployed from observations alongside data from interviews. This allows observational findings to be tested and verified, attesting to the credibility of empirical claims and brings forward authentic voices alongside author analysis. This is both a methodological choice to enhance validity, and a part of the ethnographic sensibility described by Schatz previously in the chapter. If contradictory claims are identified (an uncommon occurrence within the thesis), these contradictions are noted within the thesis and the research is couched with those reservations. Adopting this triangulation strategy, I am able to build an accurate representation of activity and analysis which can be assessed by the reader.

### 3.3 Methods and Application

As noted throughout this chapter, this thesis was conducted with the use of two research methods; participant observation, and interviews. This section shall provide an overview of each method in turn, explaining first its tradition and use in other research and then the specific application of the method from preparation, data gathering, through to analysis. Finally, this section will reflect on my own positionality within this research and the steps taken to acknowledge or mitigate this.

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<sup>239</sup> Janet Chan, ‘Ethnography as practice: is validity an issue?’ *Current issues in Criminal Justice*, 25.1 (2013) 503-516 (p. 505.)

<sup>240</sup> Annabel Teusner, ‘Insider Research, Validity Issues, and the OHS professional: One person’s journey’, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 19.1 (2014) 85-96 (p. 87)

<sup>241</sup> See for instance Janet Chan, ‘Ethnography as practice: is validity an issue?’ *Current issues in Criminal Justice*, 25.1 (2013) 503-516

<sup>242</sup> Karen O’Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, (Abingdon, Routledge, 2012) p. 227.

<sup>243</sup> Janet Chan, ‘Ethnography as practice: is validity an issue?’ *Current issues in Criminal Justice*, 25.1 (2013) 503-516 (p. 505.)

### 3.3.1 Participant Observation

#### 3.3.1.1 Overview

Participant observation is a method strongly associated with ethnography. Traditionally a tool of anthropologists, it entails a researcher entering an environment and their observations and experiences being the empirical basis for research and analysis.<sup>244</sup> Contemporary participant observation is used across disciplines, most commonly to produce ethnographic work.

Participant observation is characterised by two distinct practices: participation, in which the researcher takes part in the activities of a defined group rather than framing themselves as a spectator; and observation, the systematic recording of the experiences, activities, and on-goings in the research space. Though research participants may be initially wary of a researcher, their presence becomes increasingly normalised, and thus some proponents of participant observation argue that authentic behaviour can be observed. For instance, Watts suggests that “with the ‘newness’ of the researcher’s presence still to the fore, participants may deliberately alter their behaviour but as time goes on this presence becomes lost from view”.<sup>245</sup>

The sustained act of participation involves the researcher taking an active part in the culture and practices of a group in order that the researcher’s understanding moves from an etic perspective (that of an outsider) to an emic perspective (that of an insider). For a researcher of, for instance, the media, this might mean working in the newsroom: for a researcher of political polling, this would mean working as a political pollster alongside the research subjects. This is done to allow a researcher’s accounts and analysis of an area to be informed by the authentic culture and practices which might otherwise be hidden to an outsider. Participation and observation are described by many authors as being concurrently incompatible activities. This view is derived from the idea that an observer is removed and objective, and a participant involved and subjective. Consequently, the more one participates, the less one observes. This account is accurate in relation to practicalities; insofar as it is not possible to be recording written observations whilst fully participating, but is otherwise not in line with my epistemological and theoretical presuppositions. Participant observation as part of an interpretive ethnography embraces the subjective role of the researcher in both practices. From this perspective it is unconvincing to expect that a researcher would oscillate between an objective and subjective position.

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<sup>244</sup> See, for instance Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London, Routledge, 1922)

<sup>245</sup> Jacqueline Watts, ‘Ethical and practical challenges of participant observation in sensitive health research’, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 14.4 (2011) 301-312 (p. 303.)

Participation is not a binary, with a researcher either as participant, or not. Jorgensen presents participation as a spectrum in which the researcher participates to greater or lesser degrees.<sup>246</sup> Participation varies depending on the immersion and “otherness” of the researcher and how comfortable those being researched are with including the researcher in their activities.<sup>247</sup> Equally, the community or research focus can impact the extent to which a researcher is able to participate: participation in dangerous acts clearly would be ethically challenging. It is “between the extremes” on this spectrum that participant observation is most securely balanced. As noted by O’Reilly, “The complete participant is covert, and runs the risk of going ‘native’ and therefore losing any sense of objectivity”.<sup>248</sup> Alternatively, the complete observer loses that boon of insider authenticity in their account which participation provides.

Empirical data is gathered through observation and the production of fieldnotes, notes taken by the researcher documenting their observations, often contemporaneously. Over time, the production of fieldnotes results in a wealth of “thick” textual information. Though there are exceptions where, for instance, memory or recordings are used, fieldnotes are the typical approach to data gathering in participant observation.<sup>249</sup> This textual information, alongside any other items collected, from “photographs or lists, to the memories and impressions of the ethnographer” constitute the data available for analysis.<sup>250</sup> Observation strategies vary, Phillippi and Lauderdale synthesised the following functions:

“Functions of Field Notes in Qualitative Research Within the Original Study.

Prompt researcher(s) to closely observe environment and interactions

Supplement language-focused data

Document sights, smells, sounds of physical environment, and researcher impressions shortly after they occur

Encourage researcher reflection and identification of bias

Facilitate preliminary coding and iterative study design

Increase rigor and trustworthiness Provide essential context to inform data analysis”.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Danny Jorgensen, ‘Participating in Everyday Life’ in *Participant Observation*, ed. Danny Jorgensen (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2014) p. 3.

<sup>247</sup> Jacqueline Watts, ‘Ethical and practical challenges of participant observation in sensitive health research’, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 14.4 (2011) 301-312 (p. 303.)

<sup>248</sup> Karen O’Reilly, *Key Concepts in Ethnography*, (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009) pp. 152-153 154

<sup>249</sup> Kathleen DeWalt and Billie DeWalt, *Participant Observation: A guide for fieldworkers*, (New York: Altamira Press, 2011) p. 83.

<sup>250</sup> Robert Pool, ‘The Verification of Ethnographic Data’, *Ethnography*, 18.3 (2017) 281–286 (p. 282.)

<sup>251</sup> Julia Phillippi and Jana Lauderdale, ‘A Guide to Field Notes for Qualitative Research: Context and Conversation’ *Qualitative Health Research*, 28.3 (2018) 381-388 (p. 382.)

The production of fieldnotes through participant observation is the first phase of this approach. The second is the translation of accrued material into a coherent and informative study.<sup>252</sup> Both of these phases are approached in a variety of ways by different scholars. Fieldnotes might first be taken as scratch-notes, shorter recollections whilst in the field, then rewritten into longer-form fieldnotes at the earliest opportunity, or reserved as ‘head notes’, memories from the field, later written up. The approach to writing up is even more varied, Van Maanen described these different approaches as the “narrative varieties” which observation can produce.<sup>253</sup> These range from the confessional and dramatic, to the critical.<sup>254</sup> Each approach entails a different approach to research in the field and subsequent analysis of data. Rather than pursuing an exploration of each, instead we will turn to the particulars of the approach taken in this thesis, which focuses on the production of a narrative account, and the interpretation of the data presented.<sup>255</sup>

### 3.3.1.2 Application

Participant observation in this thesis was conducted within the political and social team (commonly referred to as simply ‘the political team’) of the polling organisation YouGov. YouGov is the polling organisation which claims the largest political team, as well as the largest output of UK political polling.<sup>256</sup> Gaining agreement from the company to join and work in its political polling team therefore represented a prime research opportunity. From April to June of 2018, I was embedded alongside the political pollsters. I was given the nominal role of ‘political intern’ and took on and was delegated work from the political and social team as it arose. No remuneration was sought or received for the performance of this role.

Access was initially brokered as part of a White Rose-ESRC collaborative studentship, (a postgraduate collaboration with YouGov) arranged through my PhD supervisors. This collaboration ensured fieldwork access. Though collaboration at this early stage of the project is atypical, similar discussions surrounding collaboration and access would have been required for any ethnographic project being undertaken in a private space. Furthermore, staffing changes within the polling organisation meant that those involved in the early stages of setting up the PhD studentship opportunity were no longer present for the conduct of fieldwork, making the experience of negotiating access and entering the field more typical. In the lead up to fieldwork beginning in 2018, key contacts were developed within YouGov to

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<sup>252</sup> John Van Maanen, ‘An End to Innocence’, in *Representation in Ethnography*, ed. by John Van Maanen, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1995) pp. 6-10

<sup>253</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>255</sup> John Cresswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2013) p. 93.

<sup>256</sup> FN423

arrange access to a research site which was a functioning private workspace. This involved explaining and negotiating participant observation, the nature of fieldwork, fieldwork dates and exploring ethical issues.

Due to the commercial sensitivity associated with participant observation in a private commercial enterprise, a non-disclosure agreement was created between researcher and organisation. This agreement had in real terms no impact on research as it did not go beyond making confidential that which would already be required by ethical standards of a duty of care, and commercially sensitive information would not be used in the thesis.

There are specific ethical implications raised by the presence of a researcher in a large organisation amongst a large number of staff – the majority of whom were not included in the research. Steps were taken to mitigate this concern. Given the focus of the research on political polling, and my being given a role amongst that team, informed consent was acquired from all team members. To inform all other staff who were not the focus of participant observation, but who should nevertheless be aware of the presence of a researcher in their workspace, notice of my presence was broadcast through official channels to all staff. This notice was present on the front page of the staff portal for the duration of fieldwork. As participant observation continued, and organisational relationships and structures were better understood, consent was sought from additional individuals outside of the political team if their inclusion in participant observation would be beneficial to the study. This meant that during the participant observation, I was able to engage with the activities I was interested in and adapt my initial sampling of subjects to include staff involved in the communication of polls. Research participants were made aware that observations would be used in this thesis. Finally, cognisant of the difficulties of engaging with the regular enquiries of clients as a researcher, at no time was I the principle point of contact for commercial clients.

Fieldnotes were used to record events based on the principles listed by Phillippi and Lauderdale in the above observation discussion.<sup>257</sup> On the understanding that I, as the researcher, would often not know immediately which concepts will be “relevant to the developing analysis, or what aspects of the culture and community will be interesting to focus on” field notes were used to gather detail on all activities to which I was privy.<sup>258</sup> I participated in the conduct of all of the types of work undertaken by pollsters (with the exception of not being the principle point of client contact). The talkative and collaborative workspace of political polling made for productive active observations of the work of others, prompting discussion and reflection with pollsters whilst they went about their tasks. This resulted in long, textual accounts of events, activities, and their context, as well as of the attitudes and comments of those

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<sup>257</sup> Julia Phillippi and Jana Lauderdale, ‘A Guide to Field Notes for Qualitative Research: Context and Conversation’ *Qualitative Health Research*, 28.3 (2018) 381-388 (p. 382.)

<sup>258</sup> Karen O’Reilly, *Key Concepts in Ethnography*, (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009) p. 72.

involved. Beyond events and practices, the culture, debates, jokes and atmosphere that constituted daily working life were participated in and recorded through note taking. Fieldnotes were initially written on site, with a notebook kept constantly at hand, and then written up into ‘full notes’, adding additional detail and expanding out from the short-hand and abbreviation used, at the end of each working day. Reference to fieldnotes in this thesis is made with the notation FN, alongside a field note number assigned to that note. Fieldnotes, as a candid account of fieldwork, will remain unpublished. This follows a similar approach as to other studies which have used ethnographic approaches in which these records are not made available for secondary analysis.<sup>259</sup> This acknowledges not only the personal nature of the record, but a responsibility to the small number of individuals in an identifiable workspace whom I worked alongside.

Fieldwork was not initially set with a firm end date. The decision to leave the field was an active one, informed by two factors. First, data collection had reached “saturation” – no phenomena emerged that had not been previously documented or to which understanding had not been produced.<sup>260</sup> Continued observation was therefore no longer producing meaningfully different data. Second, my continued presence in the field was becoming more likely to produce “over-rapport”, where “the researcher may be so closely related to the observed that his investigations are impeded”.<sup>261</sup> Throughout the course of fieldwork, though my status as researcher was not forgotten, my presence was normalised as a member of the political and social team. This was indicated by my inclusion in office humour, the presence of newer staff making my presence more established by comparison and being sincerely referred to as a member of the team. The combination of these factors suggested that extended observation could begin to lead towards over-rapport, whilst no longer producing meaningful data.<sup>262</sup>

### 3.3.1.3 Analysis

The approach to analysis taken in this thesis was informed by Cresswell’s description of the analytical approach utilised in ethnography:

“the researcher relies on the participants’ views as an insider *emic* perspective and reports them in verbatim quotes, and then synthesizes the data filtering it through the researchers’ *etic* scientific perspective to develop an overall *cultural interpretation*. This cultural interpretation

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<sup>259</sup> Karen O’Reilly, *Key Concepts in Ethnography*, (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009) p. 71.

<sup>260</sup> Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for qualitative research*, (New York: Routledge, 1999) p. 61. ; Barbara DiCicco-Bloom and Benjamin F Crabtree, ‘The Qualitative Research Interview’, *Medical Education*, 40.4 (2006) 314-321 (pp. 317-318.)

<sup>261</sup> Seymour Miller, ‘The Participant Observer and “Over Rapport”’, *American Sociological Review*, 17.1 (1952) 97-99 (p. 98.)

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.* p. 98.

is a description of the group and themes related to the theoretical concepts being explored in the study”.<sup>263</sup>

This analysis was conducted with an iterative inductive approach.<sup>264</sup> This involves data collection and analysis occurring simultaneously, as the research may need to adjust, and pursue emerging threads of enquiry as noted in the discussion of application above. Collected data is coded into categories for analysis, and coding aims to:

“make the analysis more systematic and to build up an interpretation through a series of stages, avoiding the temptation of jumping to premature conclusions...avoiding the charge that qualitative researchers have simply selected a few unrepresentative quotes to support their initial prejudices”.<sup>265</sup>

As such there were two stages of coding. The first was an open coding – a preliminary coding effort which took place during research. This stage coded into descriptive categories to assist in identifying trends and produce new questions to pursue on observed phenomena. Coded notes were reviewed each week in relation to ongoing questions. On completion of fieldwork, notes were coded based on Axial Coding, identifying links and relationships between phenomena in order to produce robust theory.<sup>266</sup>

The analysis of the coded textual data sought to “make sense of how certain occurrences, phrases, phenomena fit together.”<sup>267</sup> This practice of sense making is informed by a “sophisticated inductivism, in which data collection, analysis, and writing up are not discrete phases, but inextricably linked.”<sup>268</sup> This adaptive approach to data analysis allows for greater flexibility on the part of the researcher as they become more immersed in the daily life of their area of study. It also incorporates research participants in analysis, seeking their feedback on the concepts and understandings produced.

This iterative approach constitutes a cycle of fieldwork and analysis that is “used to direct the next interview and observation”.<sup>269</sup> This is not a purely inductive approach. Rather, it embraces the research question and preparative work as a “foreshadowed problem”, guiding questions which allow focused observation which in turn iteratively generate further rounds of questions and observation.<sup>270</sup> This finally results in a body of work which is able to comprehensively address its questions of interest upon

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<sup>263</sup> John W. Cresswell, ‘Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches’, (SAGE, Thousand Oaks, 2018) p. 92.

<sup>264</sup> See for instance Karen O’Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, (Abingdon, Routledge, 2012) pp. 179-207.

<sup>265</sup> Peter Jackson, ‘Making Sense of Qualitative Data’, in *Qualitative methodologies for geographers: issues and debates*, ed. by Melanie Limb and Claire Dwyer, (London, Arnold, 2001) p. 202.

<sup>266</sup> Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, ‘Grounded Theory Research: Theory, Canons and Evaluative Criteria’, *Qualitative Sociology*, 13 (1990) 3-21 (p. 13.)

<sup>267</sup> Karen O’Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, (Abingdon, Routledge, 2012) p. 179.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.* p. 180.

<sup>269</sup> Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, ‘Grounded Theory Research: Theory, Canons and Evaluative Criteria’, *Qualitative Sociology*, 13 (1990) 3-21 (p. 6.)

<sup>270</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London, Routledge, 1922) p. 9.



completion, with an inductive approach which is robustly driven by theory, feedback, and continuous testing in the field.

Participant observation is often used to produce what Geertz described as “thick” textual accounts of their area of study.<sup>271</sup> These “thick” accounts are in-depth narrative depictions; stories that provide “richness and context” as noted by Bevir and Rhodes.<sup>272</sup> Whilst many ethnographies utilise a number of discrete textual accounts as vignettes, introducing specific observations before engaging with them analytically, a different approach is adopted in this thesis. The first empirical chapter (Chapter 5), provides a single long account of political polling. This account is a distinct way of presenting ethnographic work because it is ‘quasi-fictional’, that is to say it compiles real observations that might have constituted a number of isolated vignettes, into a single narrative, attributed to a fictional pollster. The observational detail is authentic, altering only the principle actor, clients (to preserve the anonymity of both) and timings, ensuring that an account of a single individual’s day includes a vertical slice of polling activity. The use of fictional elements in the presentation of ethnographic writing is used and advocated in a number of works.<sup>273</sup> However this quasi-fictional approach is far less of a departure than fictional techniques, as it amalgamates real accounts into one single account. This approach allows a single account to be constructed which is better positioned to “to get at both the affective feel of the experience and the cognitive ‘truth’” of political polling without impacting the principles of validity discussed in 3.2.2.<sup>274</sup> This results in an account which is representationally more informative.

In summary, participant observation was chosen as a method because of its close alignment with the aims of this research. Given the concern with everyday practices, participant observation provides a means of closer examination of practice than might be obtained through other approaches. Conducting participant observation encourages an analysis of the significance of these practices which is rooted in an ‘insider’ perspective of polling. Finally, it allows for the production of a rich, “thick” account of polling, a contribution which provides nuance and detail on the working practices of political pollsters. Whilst participant observation was the primary source of empirical data used in analysis, it does not provide a robust mechanism for verbatim reflections and contributions from the researcher participants (with speech being noted post-facto rather than contemporaneously). As such, interviews were used as a secondary research method.

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<sup>271</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: selected essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) pp. 10-13.

<sup>272</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: selected essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) pp. 10-13. ; Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes, ‘Interpreting British Governance’, in *The Interpretive Approach in Political Science: a symposium*, ed. Alan Finlayson, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 6 (2004) 129-164 (pp.135-136)

<sup>273</sup> Robert Rinehart ‘Fictional Methods in Ethnography: Believability, Specks of Glass, and Chekhov’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 4.2 (1998) 200-224 (p. 204)

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.* p. 204

### 3.3.2 Interviews

#### 3.3.2.1 Overview

Interviews provide the opportunity for specific enquiry and dialogue on matters of importance for the research, with key informants who, from position or experience, hold insights relevant to the research. They represent an opportunity for research subjects to provide information regarding their experiences and practices and add their authentic voice to the research. Mason identifies interviews as a key tool for research in which:

“people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions are meaningful properties of the social reality which your research questions are designed to explore. Perhaps most importantly, you will be interested in their perceptions”.<sup>275</sup>

Qualitative interviews are typically identified as either semi-structured, or unstructured/narrative in their approach.<sup>276</sup> Whereas a structured interview might be seen as a quantitative approach – providing both an exact question wording and a range of potential responses to the interviewee - semi-structured interviewing often has a core of pre-determined questions (from which deviations may be made depending on the context of the interview) but gives respondents freedom in their response.<sup>277</sup>

Unstructured interviews involve broad questions to explore areas of interest. This gives greater control of the interview's narrative to the interviewee. With fewer constraints on the nature of the interview, there exist a variety of approaches.<sup>278</sup> Of particular note to this research is the ethnographic variety. Ethnographic interviews are unstructured interviews which accompany participant observation. As described by Heyl, these interviews take place where:

“researchers have established respectful, on-going relationships with their interviewees, including enough rapport for there to be a genuine exchange of views and enough time and openness in the interviews for the interviewees to explore purposefully with the researcher the meanings they place on events in their worlds.”<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Jennifer Mason, ‘Qualitative Interviewing’, in *Qualitative researching*, ed. by Jennifer Mason, (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2002) 62-83 (p. 63.)

<sup>276</sup> Ibid. p. 63.

<sup>277</sup> Royce A. Singleton Jr and Bruce C. Straits, ‘Survey Interviewing’ in *A handbook of interview research*, ed. by Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2001) 50-79 (p. 69.)

<sup>278</sup> See for instance *Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein A handbook of interview research*, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE 2001)

<sup>279</sup> Barbara Sherman Heyl, ‘Ethnographic Interviewing’ in *Handbook of Ethnography*, ed. Paul Atkinson and others, (2011) 369-379 (p.369.)

Ethnographic interview questions and themes therefore vary between interviews depending on the contextual circumstances surrounding each. Whilst structured interviews maintain their trustworthiness through neutrality and standardisation, Gubrium and Holstein note that:

“Qualitative and in-depth interviewing are more exploratory, theory driven, and collaborative. The interviewer has greater freedom to raise topics, formulate questions, and move in new directions. The interviewer sees his or her relationship with the respondent as an extended, open-ended exchange, focused on particular topics and the related subject matter that emerges in the interview process. The exchange is designed not so much to collect the facts, as it were, as to gather information that meaningfully frames the configuration and salience of those facts in the interviewee’s.”<sup>280</sup>

These different approaches to trust/validity are indicative of a different approach to engaging with the resultant interview data. Structured interviews often aim to produce a data set which can be quantitatively analysed, whereas more qualitative interviews act as a collaborative endeavour between interviewer and interviewee, producing an account which can be thematically reviewed and compared to other such interviews.

### 3.3.2.2 Application

Two types of interviewing were used in this research. Ethnographic unstructured interviews, and semi-structured interviews. In total, 16 interviews were conducted, 7 ethnographic, 9 semi-structured. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author. Sampling for ethnographic interviews was taken from the subjects of participant observation. Sampling for semi-structured interviews was snowballed from those initial subjects – asking pollsters to identify colleagues or competitors.

Ethnographic interviews were carried out alongside participant observation fieldwork. Interviewees were, accordingly, the political pollsters or those who worked alongside them at YouGov. These interviews were used to explore concepts and ideas which occurred less frequently in observation, or to gain the interviewee’s perspectives on relevant issues. These unstructured interviews were loosely themed around the topic which had prompted them. As such, questions varied between interviews as each might be concerned with a different area of political polling. Interviews were an effective tool to augment participant observation and triangulate its findings. These interviews were also an effective way to incorporate the voice of the research subjects in the body of the research, being mindful of

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<sup>280</sup> Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein, *Handbook of Interview Research*, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2001) p. 57.

Schatz's ethnographic principle that research should take interest in the "meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality."<sup>281</sup>

Semi-structured interviews took place after participant observation fieldwork and analysis had taken place. The interviews were with a range of political pollsters, including original subjects from participant observation, political pollsters from different polling organisations, and former pollsters. These interviews had a core set of the same broad questions on the topic of polling practices but would deviate to pursue lines of interest raised by the interviewee. These interviews were conducted to fulfil three purposes. Coming after the main phase of analysis, they acted as triangulation, addressing and testing areas in which theory had been generated. They provided an additional opportunity to incorporate the voice of research subjects on these areas of analysis. With the inclusion of a broader set of interviewees from outside of those involved in the participant observation these interviews also helped to indicate which research findings resonated or diverged from practices elsewhere within the polling sector. Whilst additional interviews outside of those included in participant observation were useful in terms of identifying resonance and providing further triangulation, they do not provide nor were intended for coverage that presents claims of generalisability.<sup>282</sup> Interview transcripts were coded thematically. Ethnographic unstructured interviews were analysed alongside participant observation data. Semi-structured interviews were coded thematically to ensure their congruence with earlier analysis, but primarily used as a source of triangulation and commentary. In footnotes, ethnographic interviews are noted as such for identification purposes.

In summary, the choice of interviews as an additional method arose from the particular concern of allowing the authentic voice of those involved in polling into the thesis, and from providing a crucial means of triangulation for the findings of participant observation. Where participant observation as conducted in this research only allows for recalled conversation (often closely accurate, rarely verbatim), interviews allow the inclusion of verbatim speech. With interviews loosely structured around the themes of the research, they also provided means of triangulation of the account produced through participant observation.

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<sup>281</sup> Edward Schatz, 'Ethnographic immersion and the study of politics' in *Political Ethnography, What immersion contributes to the study of power* ed. by Edward Schatz, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) p. 5.

<sup>282</sup> Indeed, securing interviews with political pollsters proved challenging due to the small number of these individuals, high levels of non-response, and turbulent political events during the research.

### 3.3.3 Positionality

Before moving on from a discussion of methods, there must be a moment of reflexivity on an issue that applies to all. Given the relevance of the author in numerous aspects of the methodology laid out in this chapter, it is prudent to reflect on my positionality – the “stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study”.<sup>283</sup> Addressing positionality is done in advance of discussing the individual methods, because it affects each.

As a white, middle class male, my positioning is similar to that of the typical market researcher demographic.<sup>284</sup> The questions asked in this thesis, and the ways in which they were pursued will be influenced by this fact. My similarity to those most commonly involved in the industry being studied will also have influenced how I was received, and eventually accepted within my field of study. Positionality is influential “from the way the question or problem is initially constructed, designed and conducted to how others are invited to participate, the ways in which knowledge is constructed and acted on and, finally, the ways in which outcomes are disseminated and published.”<sup>285</sup> This is unavoidable, and whilst the methodological steps detailed in this chapter ensure that the research is conducted with a theoretically informed and transparent approach, positionality should nevertheless be acknowledged. From an interpretivist perspective, no account of a particular area is the “definitive account”, and so given that this account is my own, my presence and identity should be acknowledged within it.<sup>286</sup>

Another question of position arises from the use of participant observation – the effects of rapport and friendship on a researcher as a participant in the social world of others, and the impact this has on how I might interpret and write about research participants and their actions. Working closely alongside individuals, especially with a shared political interest, entails developing relationships. Regardless of whether relationships/interactions are friendly or unfriendly, they have the capacity to influence writing. The logistical concerns of fieldwork ensured some mitigation through distance. With long commutes to the site of the fieldwork each day, interactions were generally kept to the working hours and environment under study. Whilst my positionality (above) and stance meant that I enjoyed the company of, and respected the pollsters whom I worked alongside (and perhaps, vice-versa) – steps were taken, informed by existing accounts of ethnographic fieldwork, to ensure that my role of researcher was not

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<sup>283</sup> Wendy Rowe, ‘Positionality’, in *SAGE encyclopedia of action research*, ed. David Coghlan, Mary Brydon-Miller, (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014) p. 2.

<sup>284</sup> Discussed in Chapter 5

<sup>285</sup> Wendy Rowe, ‘Positionality’, in *SAGE encyclopedia of action research*, ed. David Coghlan, Mary Brydon-Miller, (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014) p. 2.

<sup>286</sup> Martyn Hammersley, ‘Some Reflections on Ethnography and Validity’ *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 5.3 (1992) 195-203 (p. 199)

forgotten by either research participants, or myself.<sup>287</sup> These ranged from subtle signals, such as the use of distinct and clearly labelled research notebooks, to the more obvious, encouraging jokes which acknowledged my presence as a researcher, and discussing the practices and processes of participant observation. As with the wider positionality question, the issue of rapport and friendship is not a research challenge to which there is an easy, or easily evidenced response, but it was an issue which was identified, and was actively addressed in data collection during the period of observation. Ethnographic approaches produce *an* account, not *the* account, of an area of study. Reflexivity encourages reflection on the influence of the factors of positionality and rapport on the research.

### 3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the core methodological questions of this research. It discussed the theoretical underpinning of the research, and how was it conducted.

Addressing methodological issues is a significant component of any research, but, as noted throughout this chapter, comprises a necessary element of interpretive, ethnographic research. That is to say, whilst providing clarity as to the specific decisions relating to methods and their application in the production of the research, methodological discussion also produces reflexivity on the broader theoretical concerns which have influenced those decisions.

A clear methodological position is articulated which is complementary to the research question of the thesis. Research was conducted as part of an iterative-inductive paradigm. This informed both the ontological and epistemological premises of the research, and the approach to analysis and the generation of theory. Its approach to qualitative research was detailed – providing both narrative account, and interpretation of a less known area.

Alongside reflections on positionality, the specific application of methods were detailed. This covered participant observation, ethnographic interviews taking place alongside this and subsequent semi-structured interviews with a wider range of pollsters. Though this presented a new approach to the study of political opinion polling, it is nevertheless a depiction of a well-trodden, and increasingly popular methodological approach in political science. The approach presented in this chapter is one which is able to produce robust and reliable research, designed specifically to engage best with the research questions of the thesis.

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<sup>287</sup> For instance, Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography Principles in Practice*, (Routledge, New York, 2007) pp. 63-96.

## 4 | Chapter 4 – The Context: Polls and Pollsters

### 4.1 Introduction

Though the focus adopted in this thesis is upon the everyday practices of political polling, an understanding of the underlying principles of polling and the structures of the polling organisations who conduct polls is contextually significant. This chapter provides the necessary grounding of contextual information: what are the principles of scientific polls, and who are the organisations conducting them?

Where in Chapter 1 I looked at the origins of the UK polling industry (Chapter 1.3) in this chapter I explore the state of the modern polling industry. This is necessary in order to situate the research, undertaken primarily in one organisation (as discussed in Chapter 3.3.1), within the wider industry. This provides some perspective on the idiosyncrasies of the organisation in which participant observation took place. In addition, I provide an overview of the ‘mechanics’ of polling – the principles and processes upon which polls are based. This includes covering different modes by which polling can be conducted, revealing the diversity within the industry, and providing context for the sampling and weighting principles which underpin the polling described in the account of subsequent chapters.

To do so, the chapter is structured as follows. First, it provides an overview of the organisations who conduct political polling in the UK, focusing on members of the BPC (as established in Chapter 1). This section demonstrates the varied nature of the sector and the work it undertakes. Second, it outlines the underlying principles of polling which are not afforded description in a day-to-day context. This covers, first, the core concepts of sampling and weighting, and, second, the different types of polling modalities (the means by which questions are asked of respondents) used by polling organisations. Finally, having looked at the landscape of the sector and the approaches deployed within it, this chapter situates YouGov, the organisation in which participant observation takes place. The focus on YouGov in particular provides both descriptive information, and the *mise en scène* of the observations in following chapters. This is done to set the scene for the empirical contribution of later chapters, contextualising the narrative and analysis offered within.

### 4.2 The Landscape of Professional Polling

The modern polling industry is large and diverse. There is no official audit of polling organisations which can be used to give a precise sense of this diversity, but it evidently varies in size and scale, approach and speciality. This diversity encourages the cautious approach taken to generalisability in this thesis (as discussed in Chapter 3.2.1). Though later empirical chapters in this thesis produce an

account of the practices of polling, they do not describe the state of the polling industry (in terms of size, scale, range of activity), and such a discussion is necessary to contextualise the research. This section outlines the sector in terms of the significant bodies, nature and scale of work, and the different types of organisation which exist. This allows for YouGov, the site of participant observation for this thesis, to be situated and understood within the polling industry. To do so, I first outline the professional bodies which are relevant to the polling industry before then addressing individual organisations in more detail, establishing a conception of the different types of polling organisations which exist in order to situate YouGov amongst these. A more detailed discussion of YouGov is provided towards the end of this chapter in order to set the scene for the empirical research in the following chapters.

The value of professionally crafted research is well recognised. Sector commissioned estimates in 2016 valued the market research industry in the UK at £4.8bn (with more recent informal estimates placing that figure closer to £7bn in 2018)<sup>288</sup>. In terms of research spend per capita of the population, the UK industry is proportionally the largest (“with £61 per capita in 2015... compared to £39 in the United States”).<sup>289</sup> The vast majority of this business is in traditional, product or service focused, market research. There are two professional bodies which are relevant to this substantial industry; the Market Research Society (MRS), and the British Polling Council (BPC). These organisations have already been mentioned in the thesis on a number of occasions. Here I will address their objects, membership and role in the context of understanding the industry.

The MRS is a professional body for market researchers and market research organisations. Membership, which is voluntary, is open to all and entails paying membership dues and agreeing to abide by the MRS code of conduct. The stated objects of the organisation are to promote the market research sector and its interests. Furthermore, it encourages (and in some instances adjudicates upon) good conduct and best practice amongst its members. More broadly, the MRS provides research training, accreditation and qualifications.

Whilst there are many private individuals who are members of the MRS, there are also over 500 company members. The MRS estimates around 80% of market research organisations in the UK hold MRS accreditation.<sup>290</sup> Amongst these accredited organisations, most tend to be market research companies whose business focuses on product or brand research.<sup>291</sup> Given the expansive scope, many of the MRS’s rules, aims and objects have little consequence on the everyday operations of most polling

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<sup>288</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers, *The Business of Evidence*, (London: Market Research Society, 2012) ; Jane Frost, Political Polling and Democracy, National Council for Voluntary Organisations [presented 06/06/19]

<sup>289</sup> House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, *Politics of Polling – HL Paper 106* (London: House of Lords, 2018) p. 99.

<sup>290</sup> Jane Frost, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 21, Question 155, 12/12/17

<sup>291</sup> Roger Mortimore and Anthony Wells, ‘The Polls and Their Context’ in *Political Communication in Britain*, Ed. by Dominic Wring and others, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) pp.19-38



organisations. Those which are relevant will be addressed in Chapter 7.2.1 alongside the discussion of polling regulations.

The BPC is a comparatively modest organisation. Established in 2004, at the time of writing, there are 23 members of the BPC (listed in table 1), with these members being in no way exhaustive of the organisations which conduct polls in the UK. Membership of the BPC is by application and restricted to organisations that “conduct published opinion polls using sampling methods and/or weighting procedures likely, in the view of the BPC, to provide an adequate distribution of the opinions of all people in designated groups”.<sup>292</sup> The BPC is an organisation primarily concerned with the transparent publication of polls and the methods used in their conduct. As such, its rules principally relate to disclosure.

British Polling Council Members		
BMG	Ipsos MORI	Panelbase
Savanta Comres	Kantar Public UK	Populus
Deltapoll	LucidTalk	Public First
Demos	Mindmetre	Qriously
Forefront Market Research	Moonlight Research	Sky data
Hanbury Strategy	Omnisis	Survation
Harris Interactive	Opinium	YouGov
ICM	ORB	

Table 1: Members of the BPC (as of December 2019).<sup>293</sup>

The BPC and MRS have a cooperative relationship, having together sponsored the enquiry into polling at the 2015 UK General Election and have hosted collaborative events, for instance seminars, relating to polling. As the MRS CEO Jane Frost noted of the BPC, “we work with them very closely”.<sup>294</sup> BPC members overlap significantly with the MRS; most BPC members have some affiliation with the MRS either as company partners, or through the individual membership of the pollsters working within an organisation.<sup>295</sup> Whilst YouGov is not listed as a company partner of the MRS, it generally abides by the MRS code of conduct, and deems the work of and standards set by the MRS as relevant to its own.<sup>296</sup>

Amongst the members of these two bodies, political polling is a small fraction of the overall survey work which takes place. In 1970, Hodder Williams estimated that organisations conducting political

<sup>292</sup> The British Polling Council, ‘Join the BPC’, British Polling Council, <<http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/>> [accessed 5 December 2019]

<sup>293</sup> The British Polling Council, ‘Officers / Members’, British Polling Council, <<http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/officers-members>> [accessed 5 December 2019]

<sup>294</sup> Jane Frost, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 21, Question 156, 12/12/17

<sup>295</sup> Based on MRS evidence: Jane Frost, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 21, Question 156, 12/12/17

<sup>296</sup> YouGov, *Esomar 25 Questions for Online Panels YouGov Response*, (London: YouGov, 2007) ; Ethnographic Interview 6

work dedicated on average 5% of their resource to it.<sup>297</sup> By 1999 Moon estimated political polls at less than half a percent of the market research sector, with more recent statements from pollsters suggesting this figure remains broadly accurate.<sup>298</sup> These figures do not reflect few political polls being conducted (indeed political polls are increasingly frequent): instead this figure is indicative of the growth of market research as a part of polling organisations' work.<sup>299</sup> For many polling organisations, political polling work may be what they are best known for, but it makes up only a tiny fraction of their work, sometimes under 1%.<sup>300</sup> However a number of BPC pollsters produce limited (or even no) voting intention polling, work often considered synonymous with political polling, and are therefore not associated with political work, despite producing political output.

With a wide range of market research organisations conducting varying work, unpicking these differences to produce an understanding of the sector is a challenging proposition. Though membership of the BPC is not mandatory for those conducting political polls, as noted previously, the council's membership (Table 1) provides a robust basis for conceptualising the different types of "polling organisation" that exist. BPC organisations vary significantly on a number of fronts. Notably, many organisations differ in their methodological choices. These can range from subtle differences in weighting, to more apparent aspects, such as the mode of interview, be it telephone, online, face to face, etc. (with most organisations using a mixture of such approaches). The particular implications of these methodological choices are discussed in the subsequent 'mechanics of polling' section of this chapter (4.3) and their presence creates an additional layer of variety in the sector. The scale of BPC organisations also varies, ranging from companies with revenue in the thousands, to those with revenue in the billions.<sup>301</sup> Staff numbers again differ significantly when viewed at this level, with Ipsos reporting a headcount of 18,000, whilst other organisations have staff numbers in single figures.

A large proportion of market research organisations which conduct political polling are relatively new, with a steady growth in the sector since the 1990s which is well represented within the BPC membership (Figure 1).<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Richard Hodder-Williams, *Public opinion polls and British Politics*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970) p. 9.

<sup>298</sup> Nick Moon, *Opinion Polls: History Theory Practice*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1999) p. 3. ; Simon Atkinson , House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 19, Question 143, 05/12/17

<sup>299</sup> Interview 11-2

<sup>300</sup> Bobby Duffy, *Death of Polling*, (London: Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, 2016)

<sup>301</sup> Ipsos MORI, *Ipsos 2018 Reference Document*, (Paris: Ipsos MORI, 2018)

<sup>302</sup> Roger Mortimore and Anthony Wells, 'The Polls and Their Context' in *Political Communication in Britain*, Ed. by Dominic Wring and others, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) pp.19-38

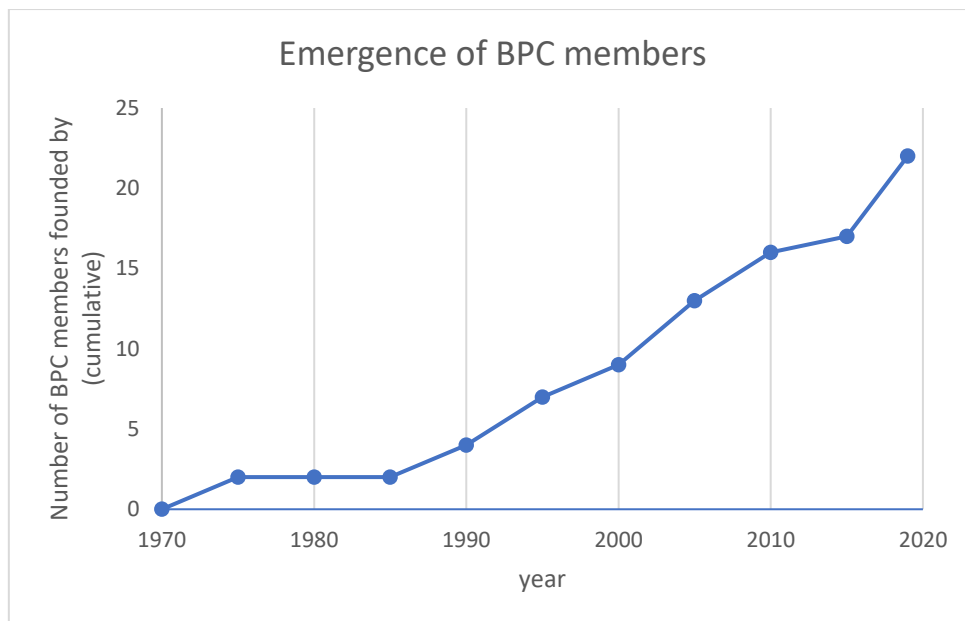


Figure 1: BPC members foundation.<sup>303</sup>

Whilst information such as revenue or headcount is indicative of the scale of broader market research operations, it is less useful in providing an understanding of the extent of an organisation's political polling work. Similarly, information on particular polling modalities or methodological decisions provides limited insight. Most BPC organisations will use all available modalities when necessary (as discussed in 4.3).<sup>304</sup> Even YouGov, an avowedly online pollster, will make use of a number of offline approaches to research.<sup>305</sup> Methodological decisions, such as weighting (also discussed in 4.3) vary frequently enough to make these types of distinctions produce an ineffective typology of polling organisations.

It is more informative, for the purposes of this thesis, to reflect on the types of political polling which exist, and the relationship of that political polling to the wider organisations. Assessing pollsters in this way produces a clearer picture of the political polling in the sector.

<sup>303</sup> Compiled by author

<sup>304</sup> See for instance, Ipsos MORI, 'Survey Methods at Ipsos MORI', Ipsos MORI <<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/survey-methods-ipsos-mori>> [accessed 19 December 2019]

<sup>305</sup> YouGov, 'Qualitative Research', YouGov, <<https://yougov.co.uk/solutions/sectors/qualitative>> [accessed 19 December 2019]

	<i>Political Work Smaller Element</i>	<i>Political Work Larger Element</i>
<i>Larger Organisation</i>	Large Market Research organisation, political polls a smaller feature, often considered as publicity.	Medium sized organisations, comparable political work to other larger orgs. Political a larger proportion of their overall offering
<i>Smaller Organisation</i>	Public opinion/public insight /consultancy organisation, release few, if any public polls	Specialist/dedicated political pollsters. Political work is main focus.

*Table 2: Types of Polling Organisation.*<sup>306</sup>

Table 2 is a useful representation of the types of organisation involved in political polling. Whilst there is variety in each of the broad categories presented, it is descriptively accurate of the relationship between political polling and the wider organisation which conducts it. Indeed, its ambiguities are an honest reflection of the sector; the BPC itself organises its membership fees on an honour system related to whether an organisation deems itself small, medium, or large.<sup>307</sup> For many polling companies, political polling exists as a small aspect of a larger market research/data analytics company. Ipsos MORI, for instance, has claimed to have 2 staff working part time on UK political polling.<sup>308</sup> Other organisations, those inhabiting the lower left quadrant, appear to rarely if ever produce political work publicly, or to conduct polls through other companies when they do. The criteria for what might be considered smaller and larger within this are subjectively assessed, and the size gap between two larger organisations may be bigger than the difference between a larger and small organisation. These looser definitions are used as the intent is not to be descriptively exhaustive. Rather, it is to demonstrate the variety of the sector. Taking into account these structural differences, alongside the different modalities (discussed below), and methodological approaches of organisations, it is evident there is distinctly varied activity occurring within the sector. Considering this variety, close reflection on the type of pollster chosen for participant observation is warranted and will be addressed towards the end of this chapter. Having outlined the landscape of UK polling, I will now provide an overview of the ‘mechanics’ of polling (as noted in 4.1) before proceeding to situate YouGov within both of these discussions.

<sup>306</sup> Compiled by author

<sup>307</sup> The British Polling Council, ‘Join the BPC’, British Polling Council, <<http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/>> [accessed 5 December 2019]

<sup>308</sup> Ben Page, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 20, Question 151, 5/12/17

### 4.3 Mechanics of Polling

Scientific polls can be thought of as having two components – the first being the question, or set of questions that are asked and the associated methodological process of their construction, and the second being a scientific endeavour surrounding the delivery of the question and ensuring a representative answer is collected. Polls are both the content of survey questions, and the vehicle with which they are delivered to a respondent. However, as noted in this chapter’s introduction, the focus of this research on the day-to-day practices of polling results in a prominent concern not with mechanics, as discussed in this section, but on the substance of polls and the process by which pollsters produce them. This section addresses the other aspects of polling that are not explored in detail through ethnographic observation, but which are important backdrops to this analysis; the principles that are important to the mechanics of polling.

As will be shown, questions of samples and weighting are closely related to questions of polling modality (the means by which a poll is conveyed to a respondent). This section addresses first the principles of sampling, before moving on to assess the implications of different modes.

#### 4.3.1 Samples and Weights

There are numerous types of polling, from unrepresentative social media polls to carefully crafted representative endeavours, and many in between.<sup>309</sup> As set out in Chapter 1, the concern for this research is scientific polling. Scientific approaches make use of sampling theory to provide reliable and accurate estimates of population parameters using relatively small random or quasi-random samples of the population (rather than engaging in large Census-style surveys which try to talk to all adults).<sup>310</sup> For random (also termed ‘probability’) samples, each member of the population has a defined, non-zero chance of being included in the sample. Smaller samples are much faster and cheaper to conduct than the large census-style operations (though polling mode has a significant impact on cost, as discussed in 4.3.2) and if the samples are, more or less, randomly selected, they should give a reliable picture of the general mood, with clear estimates not only of the central tendency but also of the amount of error associated with the sample estimate.<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Market Research Society, *Using Surveys and Polling data in your journalism*, (London: Market Research Society, 2019) p. 5.

<sup>310</sup> Leslie Kish, *Survey Sampling*, (New York, Wiley, 1965)

<sup>311</sup> Floyd Fowler, *Survey Research Methods*, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2002) pp. 37-38

Despite random approaches being referred to as the “gold standard” of scientific polling methods, pollsters more often make use of non-random (non-probability) sampling techniques (where members of a population do not have the same chance of being selected), in which samples are selected on a basis defined by the researcher, for instance to reflect demographics found in census data.<sup>312</sup> This quota sampling approach is often adopted because it is quicker and cheaper than pure random approaches, or demanded by the mode of polling (e.g. online polls).<sup>313</sup> Non-probability samples have “no grounding in statistical theory and [are] likely to suffer from non-random error”, specifically errors relating to availability of certain demographic groups over others.<sup>314</sup> Yet with a robust methodological approach to selecting and weighting samples, these errors can be mitigated.<sup>315</sup> The approach therefore represents a cost and time effective solution to sampling for much political polling, noting Kish’s position that, “no clear rule exists for deciding exactly when probability sampling is necessary and what price should be paid for it. The decision involves scientific philosophy and research strategy”.<sup>316</sup>

Getting good representative samples is one of the key elements of robust polling. However, ensuring politically accurate representative samples is challenging work, especially when such polls must be affordable and conducted in a timely way. To add to this challenge, the available pool of respondents to sample varies depending on the mode with which one contacts respondents (discussed in 4.3.2). When polling is compared to events with tangible outcomes, such as voting intention polls and elections, this challenge is made clear. The report of the inquiry into the 2015 British general election opinion poll concluded “that unrepresentativeness in the samples must have been the cause of the polling miss in 2015”.<sup>317</sup> Further, it noted that this was not an isolated incident, as “the report into the 1992 UK election polls and the AAPOR report into the 2008 US Presidential primary polls both concluded that unrepresentative samples were contributory factors in those errors, so there is also a historical precedent for this conclusion”.<sup>318</sup>

A range of approaches are taken amongst BPC members to achieve a representative sample. YouGov, for instance, adopt a non-probability approach. Individuals are encouraged to sign up to the YouGov panel and will be rewarded via a points scheme for answering surveys.<sup>319</sup> With a sufficiently large panel, YouGov are able to conduct polls by sampling amongst their panellists. Other organisations differ, for

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<sup>312</sup> Patrick Dattalo, ‘Ethical Dilemmas in Sampling’, *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 7.1 (2010) ; Christopher Prosser and Jonathan Mellon, ‘The Twilight of the Polls? A Review of Trends in Polling Accuracy and the Causes of Polling Misses’, *Government and Opposition*, 53.4 (2018) 757-790 (p. 761.)

<sup>313</sup> See for instance, Andrew Mercer and others, ‘Theory and Practice in Non-probability surveys’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 81 (2017) 250-279 (p. 251.)

<sup>314</sup> Christopher Prosser and Jonathan Mellon, ‘The Twilight of the Polls? A Review of Trends in Polling Accuracy and the Causes of Polling Misses’, *Government and Opposition*, 53.4 (2018) 757-790 (p. 764-765.)

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.* p. 764-765.

<sup>316</sup> Leslie Kish, *Survey Sampling*, (New York: Wiley, 1965) p. 29.

<sup>317</sup> Patrick Sturgis and others, *Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British General Election opinion polls*, (London: Market Research Society and British Polling Council, 2016) p. 71.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.* p. 71.

<sup>319</sup> YouGov, ‘Join’, YouGov <<https://yougov.co.uk/join-community/>> [accessed 14 December 2019]

example in some instances Ipsos MORI might adopt a random approach, conducting face-to-face interviews with the general public with area probability samples.<sup>320</sup> It is evident from these examples that decisions around sampling and modality are often intertwined.

Even with carefully crafted samples, the final respondents to a poll are usually not the perfect match to a given population. As such, poll results will often be weighted to bring their data in line with the desired population and the quotas set within it. This can be approached by a number of models (for instance cell weighting or raking).<sup>321</sup> However, the fundamental objective of weighting is a proportional scaling of responses in line with an established quota. As explained by YouGov's head of political and social research in their guidance on understanding polls:

“the adult British population is about 51% female, 49% male. If the raw sample a poll obtained was 48% female and 52% male ... weighting would be used to correct it. Every female respondent would be given a weight of 1.06 ... Every male respondent would be given a weight of 0.94... Once weighted, the sample would now be 51% female and 49% male.”<sup>322</sup>

Whilst weighting is often necessary and regularly used, it is not a guaranteed cure for an unrepresentative sample.<sup>323</sup> Where samples are unrepresentative, improved sampling, rather than advanced weighting should be the focus of an organisation's efforts (though this does not present a short term solution).<sup>324</sup> However, polls must be completed within budgetary constraints, and where polls are commissioned by paying clients, those clients will be involved in decisions regarding the balance between sample accuracy and cost (other things being equal, larger representative samples yield more accurate results than smaller ones, but with rising cost, and with diminishing returns on improved accuracy).<sup>325</sup>

Of the approaches to weighting noted above, raking/rim weighting is increasingly the most popular approach of professional market research organisations, and is the model commonly used by YouGov.<sup>326</sup> Raking involves iteratively bringing a sample in line with a desired population demographic. Adjustments are made on a number of selected characteristics in turn, “until convergence

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<sup>320</sup> Ipsos MORI, Survey Methods at Ipsos MORI, Ipsos MORI <<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/survey-methods-ipsos-mori>> [accessed 19 December 2019]

<sup>321</sup> For discussions of these approaches see for instance, Graham Kalton and Ismael Flores-Cervantes, ‘Weighting Methods’, *Journal of Official Statistics*, 19.2 (2003) 81-97

<sup>322</sup> Anthony Wells, ‘How not to interpret opinion polls’, *UkPollingReport*, 2 December 2019 <<http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/blog/archives/10114>> [accessed 2/12/19]

<sup>323</sup> Floyd Fowler, *Survey Research Methods*, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2002) p. 157.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.* p. 157.

<sup>325</sup> Leslie Kish, *Survey Sampling*, (New York: Wiley, 1965)

<sup>326</sup> Andrew Mercer, Arnold Lau, and Courtney Kennedy, ‘For weighting online opt-in samples, what matters most?’, Pew Research Center, 26 January 2018 <<https://www.pewresearch.org/methods/2018/01/26/how-different-weighting-methods-work/>> [accessed 10/12/2019]; Michael Baxter, ‘A better rim weighting algorithm’, *International Journal of Market Research*, 58.4 (2016) 621-634 (p. 621.)

to the population totals is achieved.”<sup>327</sup> Beyond appreciating another incidence of industry diversity, the specific details of these processes are not significant to the furtherance of the thesis, as such they are not addressed in more detail here.<sup>328</sup> There are other complex post-survey techniques which can be applied to polling data, for instance the recently popularised multilevel regression and post-stratification (MRP), an approach which “estimate[es] public opinion in sub-national units from national surveys.”<sup>329</sup> This is both uncommon (though growing in popularity) in its use, often a collaborative endeavour with academics and other data scientists, and usually the preserve of election polling.

### 4.3.2 Polling Modality

Polls are communicated to respondents and recorded through a variety of different modes. The most common approaches adopted by polling companies are face-to-face interviewing, postal surveys, telephone interviews, and online polls. Most organisations utilise a range of these modalities, and each of these choices enjoys a number of benefits, whilst also facing a range of challenges. This sub-section shall provide a short overview of each, illustrating these key approaches used by pollsters, and their perspectives on each.

#### 4.3.2.1 Face-to-face polls

Face-to-face interviewing has a long tradition of use in opinion polling, being the default for the precursors to modern polling (such as Booth and Rowntree), and is still used today. Throughout polling’s early history, it was an approach indicative of “high quality surveys... while much market research was performed on mail”.<sup>330</sup> Interviewers approach respondents, often at their home and conduct structured interviews (stating an exact question wording and providing a range of potential responses to the respondent) with them. Pollsters speak of “classical research training” including conducting regular face to face interviews for nationally representative polls.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Paul Lavrakas, *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods*, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2008) p. 672.

<sup>328</sup> For further discussion, see for instance: Graham Kalton and Ismael Flores-Cervantes, ‘Weighting Methods’, *Journal of Official Statistics*, 19.2 (2003) 81-97

<sup>329</sup> Jerry R. Lax & Justin Phillips, ‘How Should We Estimate Sub-National Opinion Using MRP? Preliminary Findings and Recommendations’, 2013, <<http://www.columbia.edu/~jhp2121/workingpapers/HowShouldWeEstimate.pdf>>

<sup>330</sup> Doug Rivers, ‘Sampling for Web Surveys’, prepared for 2007 Joint Statistical Meetings, (Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, 2007) p. 1.

<sup>331</sup> Interview 11-6



Face-to-face polls carry with them a number of benefits, for instance robust item-response rates, lower levels of satisficing (minimal engagement from a respondent) than other survey modes, and improved attention length from respondents than is achieved in self-completion surveys.<sup>332</sup> These types of benefit can often be traced to the involvement of the interviewer (for example, in fostering the cooperation of the respondent).<sup>333</sup> Yet an interviewer's presence can equally have detrimental effects on the quality of survey data. Whilst some sources note that the presence of the interviewer provides the benefit of a respondent being able to "clarify answers or ask for clarification", many would see this as a negative effect.<sup>334</sup> Clarifications, the nature and wording of which could vary between respondents, change the information one respondent is given in comparison to another and might potentially affect responses (as noted of wording effects in Chapter 2.2.3).

Further effects range from interviewers being less willing to conduct surveys in areas they perceive as less safe, to their presence influencing a respondent's choices through social desirability bias.<sup>335</sup> This can cover a wide range of issues, from race (often identified in an American context as "the Bradley effect" in which white respondents overstate intention for black candidates when asked by black interviewers), gender (where respondents are more sympathetic to issues of perceived importance for the gender of an interviewer) or indeed general political affiliations or attitudes (for instance the "shy Tory" effect, in which people may not reveal an attitude they believe will attract hostility).<sup>336</sup>

There are also practical considerations, with face-to-face interviewing being both costly and time consuming. As one pollster noted of their experience with this mode:

"I would spend days, as in two or three days, knocking on doors from nine o'clock in the morning to five o'clock at night and no one would answer my questionnaires, and so apart from that fact that I thought well firstly this is massively time consuming, secondly this is massively expensive".<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Allyson L. Holbrook, Melanie C. Green, and Jon A. Krosnick, 'Telephone versus face-to-face interviewing of national probability samples with long questionnaires', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 67.1 (2003) 79-125 (p. 112.)

<sup>333</sup> Mick P. Couper, 'The Future of Modes of Data Collection', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 75.5 (2011) 889-908 (p. 892.); Allyson L. Holbrook, Melanie C. Green, and Jon A. Krosnick, 'Telephone versus face-to-face interviewing of national probability samples with long questionnaires', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 67.1 (2003) 79-125 (pp. 83-84)

<sup>334</sup> Isaac Dialsingh, 'Face-to-Face Interviewing', in *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods*, ed. by Paul Lavrakas (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2008) 259-261 (p. 259.)

<sup>335</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>336</sup> See for instance Leonie Huddy and others, 'The Effect of Interviewer Gender on Survey Response', *Political Behavior*, 19.3 (1997) 197-220 ; Steven Finkel, Thomas Guterbock and Marian Borg, 'Race-of-Interviewer effects in a pre-election poll: Virginia 1989', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 55.3 (1991) 313-330

<sup>337</sup> Interview 11-6

As polling is a commercial endeavour, large costs and timescales are significant drawbacks. These drawbacks were significant contributing factors to an industry shift toward other approaches.<sup>338</sup> This is not to say that face to face interviewing has no place in contemporary opinion polling. Indeed its continued and regular use by many professional polling organisations makes it clear this is not the case. Instead, these factors offer an explanation as to why other modalities have gained in prominence.

#### 4.3.2.2 Postal Polls

Conducting surveys by post is another approach which has a long history of use, and a low technological barrier to its conduct.<sup>339</sup> In this approach, respondents are mailed an explanation note and questionnaire which they are asked to complete and post back to the organisation conducting the research. Though not an approach adopted by YouGov, some organisations offer this mode if it is an appropriate fit to the research.<sup>340</sup>

Postal surveys are cheap to conduct, cheaper even than internet surveys, another cost-effective approach.<sup>341</sup> Their response rate is not high, but robust in comparison to other self-completion modalities.<sup>342</sup> Furthermore the low technological barrier of postal surveys can make them effective at reaching certain types of respondents where “technology related characteristics” for instance age, are important considerations.<sup>343</sup> With no interviewer, many of the interviewer effects noted previously (4.3.2.1) do not apply, though survey wording and design effects (discussed in Chapter 2.2.3) are still a consideration.<sup>344</sup> Indeed, with the capacity of the respondent to look ahead on the survey, question order effects (discussed in Chapter 2.2.3.2) work not only for subsequent questions, but preceding questions

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<sup>338</sup> Joe Twyman, ‘Getting it right, YouGov and online Survey Research in Britain’, *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 18.4 (2008) 343-354 (p.345.)

<sup>339</sup> See for instance, Mildred Parten, *Polls, Surveys, and Samples*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950)

<sup>340</sup> Bespoke approaches to research are usually offered by most BPC members, whilst postal surveys are not de rigueur at YouGov and many other organisations they are not an impossibility. ; See for instance, Ipsos MORI, ‘Survey Methods at Ipsos MORI’, Ipsos MORI, <<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/survey-methods-ipsos-mori>> [accessed 05 December 2019]

<sup>341</sup> Ipsos MORI, ‘Survey Methods at Ipsos MORI’, Ipsos MORI, <<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/survey-methods-ipsos-mori>> [accessed 05 December 2019]

<sup>342</sup> Specific response rates for postal surveys vary significantly depending on a number of factors, notably topic salience and questionnaire length and complexity, see for instance, Richard C. Stedman and others, ‘The End of the Research world as we know it? Understanding and coping with declining response rates to mail surveys’, *Society & Natural Resources*, 32.10 (2019) 1139-1154 (p. 1145) ; Kerry Tanner, ‘Survey Design’, in *Research Methods: Information, Systems and Context*, ed. by Kirsty Williamson and Graeme Johanson, (Cambridge: Elsevier, 2018) 159-192 (p. 176.)

<sup>343</sup> Nojin Kwak and Barry Radler, ‘A Comparison Between Mail and Web Surveys: Response Pattern, Respondent Profile, and Data Quality’, *Journal of Official Statistics*, 18.2 (2002) 257-273 (p. 268.)

<sup>344</sup> Don Dillman and others, ‘Understanding Differences in People’s Answers to Telephone and Mail Surveys’, *New Directions for Evaluation*, 70 (1996) 45-61 (p. 58.)

as well.<sup>345</sup> There are also considerations of respondent literacy, survey accessibility, and survey layout which must be born in mind for self-completion postal surveys.<sup>346</sup>

Postal surveys have specific drawbacks in regard to their use for political polling. Principal amongst these is timescale. Postal surveys take a long time (in comparison to other modalities) to reach completion. With delivery, completion and return, requiring “trivial but necessary tasks” from the respondent, postal surveys can operate on the time-frame of weeks.<sup>347</sup> In contrast, online surveys can be completed in hours. Particularly for voting intention polling, this makes for a less attractive proposition in a marketplace in which having up-to-date data is emphasised as a selling point.<sup>348</sup>

#### 4.3.2.3 Telephone polls

Telephone polls are conducted by interviewers contacting respondents by telephone (landline or mobile), reading the respondent a series of questions and recording their responses. The advent of random digit dialling (RDD) and computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) make this approach both good at accessing random samples of the desired population, straightforward in terms of interview preparation and consistency (as the interviewer is guided by software), and comparatively lower cost and faster fieldwork than face to face interviewing.<sup>349</sup>

RDD polling became the industry standard for UK election polling from 1992 onwards, with a number of pollsters attributing this change to the polling industry’s failings in the 1992 UK General Election. As Joe Twyman, then head of political research with YouGov noted:

“maintaining the status quo was simply no longer an option. The tried, but demonstrably not always true, polling methodology of in-person interviews with quota samples was obviously in need of review”.<sup>350</sup>

<sup>345</sup> John Tarnai and Don Dillman, ‘Questionnaire Context as a source of response differences in mail and telephone surveys’, in *Context Effects in Social and Psychological research*, ed. by Norbert Schwarz and Seymour Sudman, (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1992) 115-130 (p.115.)

<sup>346</sup> Kerry Tanner, ‘Survey Design’, in *Research Methods: Information, Systems and Context*, ed. by Kirsty Williamson and Graeme Johanson, (Cambridge: Elsevier, 2018) 159-192 (pp. 174-175.)

<sup>347</sup> Nojin Kwak and Barry Radler, ‘A Comparison Between Mail and Web Surveys: Response Pattern, Respondent Profile, and Data Quality’, *Journal of Official Statistics*, 18.2 (2002) 257-273 (p. 258.) ; Thomas Mangione, *Mail Surveys: Improving the Quality*, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1995) pp. 111-115

<sup>348</sup> See for instance, YouGov, ‘Political Research’, YouGov, <<https://yougov.co.uk/solutions/sectors/political>> [accessed 05 December 2019]

<sup>349</sup> Gerry Nicolaas and Peter Lynn, ‘Random-digit dialling in the UK: viability revisited’, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 165 (2002) 297-316 ; Doug Rivers, ‘Sampling for Web Surveys’, prepared for 2007 Joint Statistical Meetings, (Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, 2007)

<sup>350</sup> Joe Twyman, ‘Getting it right, YouGov and online Survey Research in Britain’, *Elections and Public Opinion and Parties*, 18.4 (2008) 343-354 (p. 345.)

However, the decreased cost and increased speed which RDD enabled for telephone polling were equally significant factors (explaining why the shift to telephone was a global trend, rather than a domestic response). Douglas Rivers, a political scientist who would later become chief scientist at YouGov, noted of RDD's effect on the American polling industry that:

“Nearly all media polling and most academic surveys, except a few large and generously funded projects such as the National Election Studies and the General Social Survey, quickly moved to the phone”.<sup>351</sup>

Telephone polls, given their use of interviewers, are still at potential risk of interviewer effects affecting responses. Whether this be by mistake or malfeasance, many of the effects discussed above in relation to face-to-face interviews are applicable to telephone interviewing.<sup>352</sup> However, especially with CATI improving interview quality/rigour, the likelihood of these effects should not be overstated. The larger issue for telephone polls is not what occurs once the call has been accepted, but rather the tendency for the call to be rejected.

Non-response and non-coverage are an increasing issue for pollsters. Response rates for all modalities of survey are decreasing, but telephone poll response rates are decreasing at a much faster rate. This decline is attributed to a number of factors, for instance the proliferation of telesales and marketing calls, the intrusion of regular and repeat telephone contact, and technological means to avoid unsolicited calls.<sup>353</sup> Telephone poll response rates have dropped by an annual average of 2% since the mid 1990s: with response rates now commonly in the mid-teens.<sup>354</sup> Ipsos MORI's telephone project manager described the real terms of effect, “It has dropped in the 14 years I've been here ... you would buy, for example 15 telephone numbers for every complete you were going to get, now we're looking at closer to about 50”.<sup>355</sup> The inclusion of mobile numbers has become seen as necessary in the US to boost coverage where landlines are not present.<sup>356</sup> For UK pollsters landline coverage can also present an issue as it correlates to potentially relevant demographic factors (e.g. age, income).<sup>357</sup> Mobile contacts are seen as comparable data quality to landline telephone interviews, but are more expensive per contact

<sup>351</sup> Doug Rivers, ‘Sampling for Web Surveys’, prepared for 2007 Joint Statistical Meetings, (Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, 2007) p1

<sup>352</sup> Pamela Nelson and James E. Nelson, ‘Do Interviewers Follow Telephone Survey Instructions?’ *Journal of the Market Research Society*, 38 (1996) 161–76

<sup>353</sup> See for instance, J. Michael Brick and Douglas Williams, ‘Explaining Rising Nonresponse in Cross Sectional Surveys’, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 645.1 (2013) 36-59 ; Tobias Gummer, ‘Assessing Trends and Decomposing Change in Nonresponse Bias: The Case of Bias in Cohort Distributions’, *Sociological Methods & Research*, 48.1 (2019) 92-115 (pp. 95-96.)

<sup>354</sup> Scott Keeter, ‘Public Opinion Polling and Its Problems’, in *Political Polling in the Digital Age*, ed. by Kirby Goidel, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2011) 28-53 (p. 31.)

<sup>355</sup> Ian Douglas, ‘Sultans of Swing’, BBC Sounds, 2 December 2019, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000bx1f>> [accessed 2 December 2019]

<sup>356</sup> Jerry Timbrook, Kristen Olsen and Jolene D. Smith, ‘Why do Cell Phone Interviews Last Longer: A Behavior Coding Perspective’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 82.3 (2018) 553-582 (p. 554.)

<sup>357</sup> Paul Lavrakas, ‘Surveys by Telephone’, in *The SAGE Handbook of Public Opinion Research*, ed. by Wolfgang Donsbach and Michael Traugott, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2008), 249-258 (p. 252.)

and geographically unattached, leading to “uncertainty in how to incorporate mobile numbers into telephone sampling frames”.<sup>358</sup>

Non-response presents several problems – first, it increases the cost of telephone polling, and second any issue of decreasing response rates could become a challenge for the polling industry if “the propensity to respond is correlated with other important variables of interest”.<sup>359</sup> If for instance, an individual who is more likely to respond to a telephone call, is also more likely to talk to strangers, this could add bias to results of any survey where talking to strangers is of key interest. This is especially problematic for political polling, as an individual’s likelihood to discuss their political views may of itself be a variable of interest.

#### 4.3.2.4 Online Polls

The most recently developed of the commonly used polling modes is online polling. There are numerous types of polls that are conducted online. The advent of digital technologies has empowered individuals to field questions to wider audiences with greater ease. Popular social media sites, for instance Facebook and Twitter, allow individuals to post their own ‘polls’. These polls have no methodological claim to being representative, and due to the open nature of these polls, and the increased likelihood that they are seen disproportionately by certain groups, often produce distinctly different results from a representative poll. With no control over who sees and responds to a survey, or even how often an individual might respond, these types of poll are worthless as representative indicators of mood on a given issue. There is a distinction to be made then, between these informal approaches to opinion gathering, and the more rigorous non-probability online approaches utilised by BPC members.

Methodologically rigorous online polling, not being able to take random samples by address or telephone, often relies on cultivating a panel (or purchasing access to a panel) of potential respondents large enough for non-probability sampling to produce a representative sample of the population.<sup>360</sup> Respondents, or panellists, then complete digital survey forms which are automatically recorded, and at the completion of a survey, are processed and compiled for use. Though the wording or design of a

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<sup>358</sup> Jerry Timbrook, Kristen Olsen and Jolene D. Smith, ‘Why do Cell Phone Interviews Last Longer: A Behavior Coding Perspective’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 82.3 (2018) 553-582 (p. 554.) ; Christopher Prosser and Jonathan Mellon, ‘The Twilight of the Polls? A Review of Trends in Polling Accuracy and the Causes of Polling Misses’, *Government and Opposition*, 53.4 (2018) 757-790 (p. 764-765.)

<sup>359</sup> Charlie Cook. ‘The Meaning and Measure of Public Opinion’, in *Political Polling in the Digital Age*, ed. Kirby Goidel, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011) 1-10 (p. 5.) ; Scott Keeter, ‘Public Opinion Polling and Its Problems’, in *Political Polling in the Digital Age*, ed. Kirby Goidel, (2011) (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011) 28-53 (p. 31.)

<sup>360</sup> Anthony Wells, ‘How not to interpret opinion polls’, UKPollingReport, 2 December 2019 <<http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/blog/archives/10114>> [accessed 2/12/19]

survey might affect a respondent, with no interviewer present, interviewer effects are not a concern of this approach. Aspects of social desirability bias, though still present, are therefore less pronounced in online polling.<sup>361</sup>

Drawing a sample from an existing panel has some immediate benefits. Often, information on the panellist is already known, which allows surveys to link otherwise unrelated information more easily than in other modes. This could include salient information, for instance – how a panellist stated they voted at a previous election (useful to identify false recollections of respondents) or irrelevant, but nevertheless entertaining information (the favourite movie of those who vote Liberal Democrat).

Equally, online panel approaches have evident drawbacks. In some of the methodological literature, there is caution in relation to online polling, especially as a non-probability approach with self-selecting samples, or small panels which might be over-sampled, relied on again and again.<sup>362</sup> This caution was also felt amongst members of the polling industry.<sup>363</sup> Whilst this concern is reasonable, it is also true in the same way for any polling mode applied without sound methodological strategies. Rivers makes a similar point, noting the need for nonresponse adjustments to other polling modes: “there is no logical difference between the type of modelling assumptions needed for nonresponse adjustments and those needed for self-selected samples”.<sup>364</sup> Online pollsters argue that such concerns can be addressed through active sampling measures and increasingly sophisticated weighting procedures.<sup>365</sup> Regardless, these concerns are significant to note not only because they are valid considerations of modal effect, but because they are publicly held concerns of organisations such as the MRS and the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). In 2013 an AAPOR report stated that “claims of ‘representativeness’ should be avoided when using these sample sources” despite the proliferation of online methods amongst their members, and during the course of this research pollsters noted that these claims had not been updated.<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> Mikael Persson and Maria Solevid, ‘Measuring Political Participation—Testing Social Desirability Bias in a Web-Survey Experiment’, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 26.1 (2014) 98-112

<sup>362</sup> See for instance, Andrew Mercer et. al., ‘Theory and Practice in Non-probability surveys’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 81 (2017) 250-279 ; Thomas Stafford and Dennis Gonier, ‘The Online Research “Bubble”’, *Communications of the ACM*, 50.9 (2007) 109-112 (p. 109.) ; Yasser Khazaal and others, ‘Does Self-Selection Affect Samples’ Representativeness in Online Surveys? An Investigation in Online Video Game Research’, *Journal of Medical internet research*, 16.7 (2014) 1-11

<sup>363</sup> Ivor Crewe, ‘The Opinion Polls: The Election they got (almost) right’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 58.1 (2005) 28-42 (p. 691.)

<sup>364</sup> Doug Rivers, ‘Sampling for Web Surveys’, prepared for 2007 Joint Statistical Meetings, (Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, 2007) p. 2.

<sup>365</sup> YouGov, ‘Panel Methodology’, YouGov, <<https://yougov.co.uk/about/panel-methodology/>> [accessed 18/01/19] ; Jerry Vaske and others, ‘Can Weighting Compensate for Sampling Issues in Internet Surveys?’, *Human Dimensions of Wildlife*, 16.3 (2011) 212-213 ; Peter Kellner, ‘The Future of Polling’, *Representation*, 42.2 (2006) 169-174 (p. 173.)

<sup>366</sup> Reg Baker and others, ‘Summary Report of the AAPOR Task Force on Non-probability Sampling’, *Journal of Survey Statistics and Methodology*, 1 (2013) 90–143 (p.93.) ; FN606

There are other limitations to this mode of polling. One of the main criticisms made of internet polling relates to the additional elements of self-selection that are present within an internet panel. Though respondents to any survey mode can choose not to participate, internet polls require their panellists make an active choice to be possibly included in a sample through registering with a site or organisation. Because of this internet samples can over-represent certain groups (for instance, the highly educated) even after weighting variables are applied.<sup>367</sup> YouGov's then chairman acknowledged these issues:

“On some issues there is an obvious bias. For example, YouGov panel members are far more likely than the rest of the public to support the idea of allowing people in general elections to vote online; not only do YouGov panel members have computer access, but by virtue of joining the company’s panel they demonstrate a willingness to express their opinions online.”<sup>368</sup>

The proliferation of online capable smartphones has added further challenges to online surveys, meaning that “if you are conducting online surveys, you are conducting mobile surveys”.<sup>369</sup> Without optimisation for mobile devices, this can lead to higher item non-response or abandonment rates from respondents using mobile platforms, or not allowing these types of respondents altogether.<sup>370</sup> YouGov, as a primarily online pollster (alongside many other BPC members), has mobile optimisation in its survey platform alongside offering a mobile app.<sup>371</sup>

Despite these limitations, the chair of the inquiry into polling at the 2015 general election concluded that the ratio of cost to accuracy favoured online polling.<sup>372</sup> The confidence in and proliferation of this modality is demonstrative of the changing landscape of a sector where a decade ago “it seem[ed] doubtful that internet surveys will replace telephone”.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Jerry Vaske and others, ‘Can Weighting Compensate for Sampling Issues in Internet Surveys?’, *Human Dimensions of Wildlife*, 16.3 (2011) 212-213 (p. 200.)

<sup>368</sup> Peter Kellner, *The Future of Polling, Representation*, 42.2 (2006) 169-174 (p. 173.)

<sup>369</sup> Michael Link and others, ‘Mobile Technologies for conducting, augmenting, and potentially replacing surveys’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 78.4 (2014) 779-787 (p. 782.)

<sup>370</sup> See for instance, Justin Bennett and others, ‘Mobile Optimisation Research’, Market Research Society <<https://www.mrs.org.uk/resources/mobile-optimisation-research>> [accessed 05 December 2019]

<sup>371</sup> See for instance, Ipsos MORI, ‘Mobile First: Best Practice Guide’, Ipsos MORI, <[https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2019-12/mobile\\_first\\_final\\_v3.pdf](https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2019-12/mobile_first_final_v3.pdf)> [accessed 05 December 2019]

<sup>372</sup> Patrick Sturgis, ‘Polling in the EU Referendum’, at *Opinion Polling in the EU Referendum Challenges and Lessons*, Royal Statistical Society, [presented 8 December 2016]

<sup>373</sup> David Moore, *The Opinion Makers, an insider exposes the truth behind the polls* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009) p. 81.

#### 4.4 The Fieldwork Site, YouGov

YouGov describes itself as a “public opinion and data company” and, applying the typology outlined in table 2, would be considered a larger organisation, of which political polling is a small element.<sup>374</sup> The company was founded in 2000 as a broader organisation which aimed to be “an interface between citizens and power”, offering a number of services in this regard, including a “political news website, and... a place where if you had to pay money, whether its taxation or TV license or road license or council tax, whatever, you’ll have a one stop shop”.<sup>375</sup> The most successful of its endeavours, polling, had by 2001 become its dominant feature. Responding to this, its other aspects were rolled back, and polling and data became its primary business model. Since 2001, YouGov has grown significantly, from a company of a dozen staff, to an international organisation with 1000 staff worldwide. With the considerable scale of this operation, an exhaustive description of its activities and structures is both implausible, and for the purposes of this research, unhelpful. Here instead we will focus on the aspects of the organisation relevant to contextualising its political polling.

YouGov is a primarily online pollster and maintains its own panel of respondents. Whilst the organisation does conduct polling across a variety of modes, approaches other than online are a rarity. Similarly, YouGov conducts a variety of different types of research, for instance focus groups or ‘mini-ethnographies’, but this work is far less common than its polling activity. Quantitative polling is conducted amongst either its custom research teams, which each focus on individual areas of potential interest for clients (for instance Digital Media & Technology, Sport, or Political polling) or its broader teams (for instance, those conducting omnibus, or brand-index work).<sup>376</sup>

Though it is only a small proportion of their overall polling, YouGov are well known for their political polls, and the organisation acknowledges that their political work is what the public recognise them for.<sup>377</sup> YouGov claims to be the only polling organisation with a designated political team, and to have the largest number of dedicated political staff of any UK polling company.<sup>378</sup> Though the accuracy of this claim is unclear, due to the different internal structures and staffing arrangements of other polling organisations, its position as the largest political team appears uncontested within the industry. Similarly, its output of political polls is large in comparison to other polling organisations.<sup>379</sup> YouGov was one of the seven founding members of the BPC.

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<sup>374</sup> YouGov, ‘Home Page’, YouGov <<https://yougov.co.uk/>> [accessed 1 November 2019]

<sup>375</sup> Interview 5-8

<sup>376</sup> See, YouGov, ‘About us’, YouGov <<https://yougov.co.uk/about/>> [accessed 1 November 2019]

<sup>377</sup> YouGov, ‘FAQs’, YouGov <<https://yougov.co.uk/account/faq/>> [accessed 1 November 2019]

<sup>378</sup> FN423

<sup>379</sup> Roger Mortimore and Anthony Wells, ‘The Polls and Their Context’ in *Political Communication in Britain*, Ed. by Dominic Wring and others, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) pp.19-38



YouGov's offices are located a short walk from the Old Street Tube station in central London. Situated towards the eastern edge of the borough of Islington, and close to Hackney, the general feel of the area to an outsider is young and trendy. This is something the organisation is keen to emphasise, being prominent in the organisation's recruitment materials, and further enhanced by the presence of a slide leading to the company office's lower floors (YouGov occupies several floors of an office building which it shares with a handful of other business occupants).

Though the YouGov offices (figure 2) have since undergone refurbishment, at the time of fieldwork, most of the observations took place in one of the open plan offices where the political team were based, several floors above the building's ground floor reception. These offices had a sociable atmosphere, and a large kitchen area on the lower-ground level which, alongside its intended purpose, was regularly used for staff awards and social 'Fizzy Fridays' (opportunities for socialising amongst staff, with company-provided refreshments).



Figure 2 – Images of YouGov, Office Building<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> Street view image sourced from, Open Offices, <<http://www.openoffices.com>> [accessed 05 December 2019] ; other images author's own

I was situated in a recently vacated desk space in the far corner of one of the third floor offices, amongst the political team. As with all other team members, I was provided with a laptop, linked to a larger monitor, which gave me access to the proprietary tools to create and edit YouGov polls. With the exception of team meetings (taking place in the room indicated on the office diagram displayed in figure 3) client meetings (tending to take place in rooms on the lower floors), and other uncommon incidental meetings, the majority of political polling work took place within this office space.

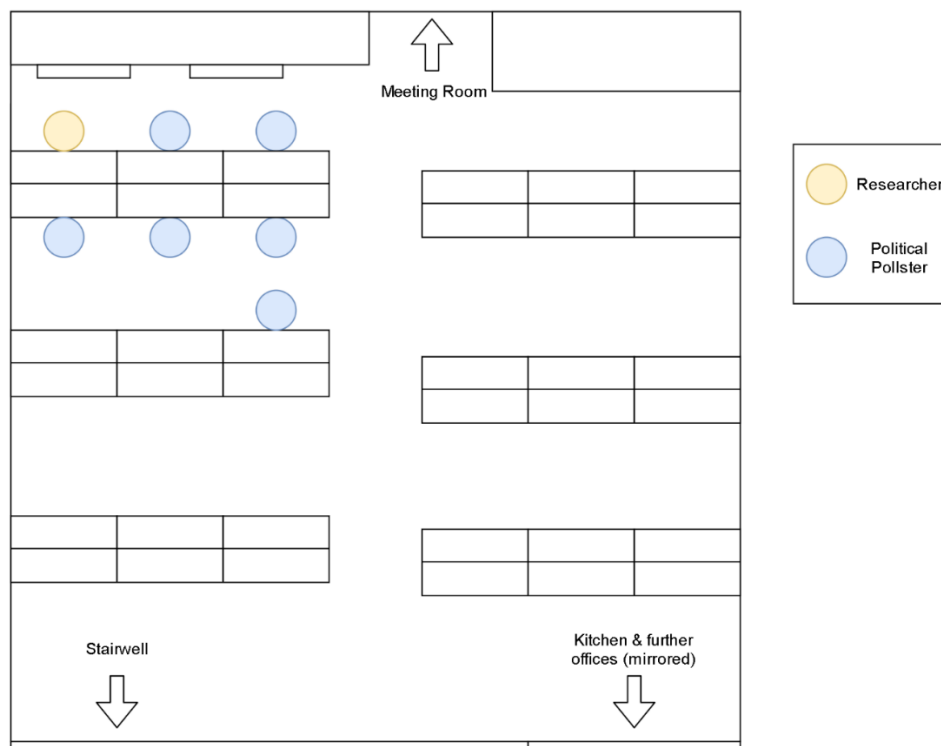


Figure 3 – Office layout <sup>381</sup>

The political department was positioned amongst the other custom research teams, (all remaining desks in Figure 3 would be filled by other teams) and overall comprised a small proportion of the staff within the office. The context of the fieldwork was therefore not one in which political polling was isolated from the norms of the wider organisation. As noted in later chapters, the most regular working relationship for political pollsters, was with the Press and Marketing departments: these were found in an office accessed either back through the main stairwell, or by proceeding through a small kitchen space.

<sup>381</sup> Diagram reflective of part of the third floor office layout – not a precise representation, and not inclusive of the various other areas housing different departments.

This environment was the principle research site for participant observations. Though data was gathered on walks, meetings, and other occasions outside of the space described, the majority (being about the practices of a profession) took place within this working environment.

## 4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has served as a contextual prelude to the research presented in subsequent chapters. It has provided an overview of the significant statistical principles which underpin the polling practices which are recounted in the remainder of this thesis. In the chapter I have examined how samples are designed, how surveys are conducted, and addressed the pros and cons of the major means of delivering questionnaires and gathering data: face-face interviews, postal surveys, telephone surveys, and online surveys.

Further to providing contextual information for the principles of polling, additional information was provided about polling organisations. This includes a reflection on the types of polling organisation which exist (significant in situating this research) before proceeding to look in closer detail at YouGov, the organisation in which participant observation was carried out for this thesis.

The topics in this chapter are important for understanding the types of activities which pollsters engage in. Despite this, they are rarely articulated or otherwise discussed in pollsters' daily practices. These practical aspects of polling are so much part of the background of work in the industry that they are largely taken-for-granted and are not articulated in the day-to-day work of polling. As such, they do not feature in the analyses of everyday practices which emerge in later chapters, but they are essential to an understanding the context of the overall environment within which pollsters work. Having discussed these principles in this chapter, providing a clear scene setting for the empirical research undertaken, the next chapter introduces the findings of this research.

## 5 | Chapter 5 – Practices of Polling

### 5.1 Introduction

In previous chapters, I have noted a tendency for existing coverage of how polls are conducted to focus on mechanical, statistical and processual elements. In this chapter I provide a different perspective and ask the question: how can we understand everyday polling practices? In answering this question, it will be shown that polling is a much more human affair than process driven accounts suggest. Though mechanics, statistics and process inform a greater understanding of polls, alone they do not elucidate the whole practice of polling. Specifically, it is argued that such approaches overlook the human, unpredictable and agency driven nature of this activity, and the norms, traditions and values which inform this agency. In this chapter these elements of polling are revealed, using observational data to elucidate the everyday operations of political polling and provide an answer to how these practices might be understood.

This is a valuable question to pursue; despite the significance of polling discussed in earlier chapters, there are limited accounts of how people in polling organisations work on a day-to-day level, and these tend toward the perspectives of senior figures. This results in limited means with which to understand what pollsters think about, how they make decisions, how they are networked and relate to one another and what processes occur on a day to day level. In answering how we can understand everyday polling practice, this chapter offers an organisational story of how polling organisations work, drawn from participant observation at YouGov. Through this account and the analysis provided in this chapter, core elements of the research question are addressed – identifying the everyday practices, and associated norms, traditions and values, beginning to reveal their significance, which is continued throughout the thesis.

Everyday practices, identified through participant observation in one organisation, are not representative of the experience of all polling organisations. They provide a basis (as discussed in Chapter 3.2.1) to cast light on otherwise overlooked areas, identify widely relevant issues, and generate theory explaining these everyday practices.

To appropriately answer the question of how we can understand everyday polling practice, this chapter is structured around three foci:

1. People of polling: situating the actors of significance and exploring who they are, their skillsets and backgrounds, and the impacts of these factors.

2. Structures and day-to-day practice: exploring the types of work, application of methods in practice, and the norms, traditions, and values of political polling.
3. Relationships and clients: teasing out the nuances of relationships between pollsters and clients and identifying the significant components of this dynamic.

The chapter first focuses on pollsters, looking at the experience and attributes of pollsters and the team structures they work within. This is written with a narrative, confessional approach (noted in chapter 3.2.2). Having established the actors, this chapter then produces a “thick” account of polling, a narrative exploration of the work of pollsters. The subsequent two foci of the chapter, (structures and practices, relationships and clients) explore the implications of the account in more detail, fleshing out these key areas.

## 5.2 The People of Polling

The days before beginning fieldwork at the YouGov central London office were filled with revision; going through my doctoral training notes on SPSS, statistics and quantitative methods in an attempt to make myself a pollster in waiting. Every account that I had managed to find on political polling had maintained a focus on the mechanical and statistical components of the work, and I was determined to have the right skills for the job, so as to fit in with the team. I filled the margins of my fieldwork diary with what I hoped was a comprehensive crib sheet of statistical shorthand. But throughout my three months of fieldwork, these skills were almost never put to use. The accounts of polling that I had read had painted a picture of polling very different from that which I would find. I had prepared to be a pollster under a misapprehension of who pollsters are and what they do. My preparations and expectations were built on a picture of the day-to-day of polling which simply did not reflect the reality; I had been primed by literature, and my own assumptions, to ignore human factors and think in mechanistic terms. So, who is a pollster, and what understanding of them would have been more beneficial to my ‘fitting in’?

Reflecting on my own expectations of working in a polling organisation, it is clear that the work/requirements of pollsters can be misunderstood. This section of the chapter unpicks the assumptions that I, and much of the existing literature make about polling organisations. To do so, I discuss political pollsters in detail. Rather than looking at pollsters as individuals, this section will paint a broader picture of their characteristics, the skill-sets demanded of and utilised by them, their recruitment and career progression, what training and development activities are undertaken, and the ways pollsters interact. It is important to understand who pollsters are before we move on to think about how they fit into the structure of a larger organisation, and their actual practice, so as to avoid assessing

that structure and practice in a way which ignores their identity and agency.<sup>382</sup> These factors are important beyond supporting the analysis in this thesis: they provide a more accurate picture of polling and assist our understanding of it.

My first days of observations within YouGov brought several points into focus for me. The team, though noted as the biggest (and as shown in Chapter 4.4, one of the few designated teams) of its type in the industry, is surprisingly small. It totals 6 staff amongst YouGov's total of 200+. At its maximum size, interviews with the team reveal that a complement of 7 was the largest they had reached in normal conditions (additional support may be sought during peak times, for instance, an election).<sup>383</sup> My reaction to this is one shared by many new starters, as one more experienced pollster noted to me "I don't think applicants have a realistic expectation of what working here is like... they're surprised with how small the political team is versus how big YouGov is".<sup>384</sup> At the time of research, the team was staffed primarily by young researchers in the early stages of their careers. The MRS estimates that the majority of staff within its members are in their mid-twenties and will stay in their roles only briefly.<sup>385</sup> Pollsters noted to me in conversation that political pollsters broadly reflected this wider demographic, though are often more male.<sup>386</sup>

Within the first month of fieldwork, opportunities arose to discuss what skills and experiences were looked for in a political pollster. The team had begun the recruitment process for several interns to join the department over the summer, an annual practice.<sup>387</sup> Telling the story of my own preparation (with which this section began), I received a soft rebuke; "we don't crunch numbers all day, we're not statisticians".<sup>388</sup> This was brought home by a joke told amongst the political team that they must be actively recruiting those without market research qualifications.<sup>389</sup> I asked for reflections about what characteristics and skills are actually sought after in recruitment. One staff member commented:

"it is more often people coming out of politics degrees... because the people coming in... are going to need to be on top of particular events and be au fait with debates and the ins and outs of [political news]".<sup>390</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> Corey Shdaimah, Roland Stahl, and Sanford S. Schram, 'When you can see the sky through your roof: Policy analysis from the bottom up', in *Political Ethnography, What immersion contributes to the study of power*, Ed. by Edward Schatz (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009) p. 255.

<sup>383</sup> FN423 EI1, FN514

<sup>384</sup> FN516, FN427

<sup>385</sup> Jane Frost, Political Polling and Democracy, National Council for Voluntary Organisations [presented 06/06/19]

<sup>386</sup> FN427 FN423

<sup>387</sup> FN516

<sup>388</sup> FN611

<sup>389</sup> FN423

<sup>390</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6

Political knowledge is considered by pollsters to be the most important skill for new starters to possess because it is identified as being linked to the question design process.<sup>391</sup> As one interviewee noted, “political awareness and savvy is definitely more use in their practical day-to-day job than is methodological rigour”.<sup>392</sup> This does not imply that polling is done without methodological rigour (as pertaining to the ‘mechanics’ discussed in Chapter 4.3), but rather that these elements are handled separately by either senior staff or data scientists.<sup>393</sup> The role of political pollsters sees them far more often engaged with rigour as it relates to question and survey design.

As with any of the other departments who conduct research on a specialist topic (as discussed in section 4.4), some requirement of specialist knowledge in the relevant topic is assumed. However, within political research, specialist knowledge is deemed most important, with many staff having limited prior statistical or research background.<sup>394</sup> One interviewee reflected these requirements, stating:

“I think its undeniably true that people who work in the political team are more interested in the topic matter that they’re studying, than people are in other similar teams across market research. You could quite easily move from one of the other teams to another without it being too much trouble and people regularly do, that wouldn’t work in politics”.<sup>395</sup>

Political knowledge is therefore deemed crucial to the work undertaken by political pollsters. Pollsters emphasise that writing balanced questions requires broad subject familiarity and knowledge. Although (mechanical) methodological decisions are an important part of polling, the skills required to make decisions or alterations relating to methodology are not required of new starters (instead dealt with by one or two senior pollsters).<sup>396</sup> This focus on political qualities in the recruitment of interns was common to appointments at all levels in the political team. This similarity was unsurprising; over half of the fulltime members of the team had taken part in an internship with the organisation prior to starting their positions. My starting experience at YouGov it seemed, had been one familiar to many of the political staff.

In contrast to these early career pollsters, team leadership sits with more established figures.<sup>397</sup> Senior figures were noted, across observations and interviews with from pollsters from a number of organisations, as having specific characteristics. Senior figures in political polling often boast extensive methodological experience (and recognition in the media and academia) and with this experience are seen by colleagues as fundamental to the execution of ‘good’ political polling.<sup>398</sup> These individuals

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<sup>391</sup> Ethnographic Interview 1, Ethnographic Interview 4, Ethnographic Interview 6, FN516

<sup>392</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6, FN423, FN612

<sup>393</sup> Interview 11-4

<sup>394</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6, Interview 11-6

<sup>395</sup> Ethnographic Interview 7

<sup>396</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6

<sup>397</sup> FN423

<sup>398</sup> FN424, Ethnographic Interview 5

were described by colleagues as being “like the bedrock on which you found, you base a lot of your quantitative polling”.<sup>399</sup> Colleagues will utilise this experience as a benchmark and trusted perspective to inform their working practices. One interviewee described how this occurred, saying “if I was putting up a question ... and I needed to know how to phrase the question to make sure its balanced... they’d be the first person I’d go to because they have that kind of obsessive understanding of good question wording”.<sup>400</sup> Whilst this may indicate strong hierarchical dynamics within YouGov’s polling team, a collaborative nature is encouraged amongst colleagues that counteracts this. It was therefore observed that junior staff would consult each other, and senior staff would discuss their work with others, noting that: “If I want advice I have the rest of my team, I have trusted colleagues here who I can... seek a second opinion from.”<sup>401</sup> Senior staff are not absent figures, but sit and work amongst the team, participating in collaboration and working on polls in a similar way to other pollsters.<sup>402</sup>

The dynamic between senior figures with significant experience and newer staff selected in the first instance for political knowledge is significant to understanding norms of practice. As shown by research into the sociology of the workplace, because of their perceived greater experience, more senior staff not only advise but also set the tone for more junior colleagues.<sup>403</sup> This establishes the perspectives of senior pollsters on good polling and survey design to be an essential element to the learning and routinisation of new pollsters. Polling organisations are therefore not just places where polling is conducted, but are also where polling and polling behaviours are learned. An understanding of the polling environment is therefore significant not only to identify what occurs at a day to day level, but how pollsters become the researchers they are.

One final characteristic about pollsters which is not conveyed by mechanical, process accounts concerns their attributes. One interviewee noted to me that you might expect political aficionados to be introverted, or stereotypically academic types, yet the reverse is often true. Instead, when bringing in new pollsters, YouGov actively recruited apparently extroverted individuals in line with the belief that:

“being big personalities is the way because we need those people to go on TV and we need those people to shout about all the good stuff we’re doing and be enthusiastic and all that kind of stuff”.<sup>404</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> Ethnographic Interview 5

<sup>400</sup> Ethnographic Interview 5

<sup>401</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6

<sup>402</sup> FN423

<sup>403</sup> Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour; How working class kids get working class jobs*, (Gower Publishing, Aldershot, 1977) p. 177.

<sup>404</sup> Ethnographic Interview 5



Though specific individuals would be primarily responsible for media appearances, all political pollsters would, on occasion, carry out this role. An aptitude for such work therefore becomes an important characteristic within the team.<sup>405</sup>

The picture of political polling actors is therefore a complex one. It is also a necessary component of understanding polling practice. Though not a homogenous group, pollsters' shared cultural experience of learning the process of 'good' polling and the significance of an experienced figure is influential in shaping their approach to research. This can be seen both in the way they approach design and methodology, but also within the shared personal characteristics and priorities made at the recruitment stage. The common lack of statistical background emphasises the significance of subsequent analyses/accounts of their everyday practice, because it is through these experiences that they learn to poll, make decisions, and conceptualise their wider role and significance. This chapter will keep these considerations in mind as it proceeds to consider the everyday work of these actors.

### 5.3 An Everyday Account

When asked in interviews to address the core elements of their regular work, pollsters discussed a variety of distinct practices. In order to best provide a 'slice of life' of polling with which to address the question posed by this chapter of how polling practices can be understood, this section will aggregate the findings of the fieldwork to produce an account of a fictional pollster's daily life of polling. This account is firmly rooted in the data of this research and utilises the real perspectives, and many of the real words of pollsters on what constitutes their day-to-day work. This approach (described in chapter 3.3.1) is used to describe both what happens within modern political polling, but also the ways in which the people described in the previous section conduct their work, face challenges, and make decisions. This form of rich empirical insight is novel in the existing literature but helps to reveal how these organisations actually work.

The subsequent portions of the chapter will use this account to highlight two key issues which emerge. Analysis addresses the emerging themes, looking at the broad practices involved in the production of surveys, and then the relationships between client and pollster.

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<sup>405</sup> Ethnographic Interview 5

### 5.3.1 Alex's Account

It is the start of 2018, and Alex had been a political pollster for just over two years – despite that short career, he feels pretty experienced in his role. The last two years have had enough elections and referenda to last a polling lifetime. Though he often considered them the main part of the job, they were quite draining, and he'd be happy not to see another one for quite some time. The week would be pretty hectic, as even though there was no ongoing election at that moment, it being “peacetime”, as Alex and the team referred to it, didn't mean it wasn't busy.

Alex settled down amongst the rest of the team in the open-plan office and glanced up at the television screens hung on the wall, each tuned to a different 24-hour news broadcast. With nothing interesting but the standard Brexit speculation occurring on screen, Alex's attention shifted to his own work. Alongside two ongoing long-term projects that he had expressed an interest in working on, there were also a number of smaller enquiries sitting in the inbox the political team shared. This was commonly how new clients came to the team, unless they had been referred directly to a specific member.

Alex opened the first of these enquiries. The prospective client was a small educational charity in Norfolk, Nor-ledge, looking to use up some of their remaining research budget by having survey questions conducted on a number of topics pertinent to their campaigning work. This was a relatively normal first contact for a small commission, with a client sending in questions or topics they wanted to be put into the field. Alex was pleased that Nor-ledge weren't providing set questions. He always thought that better survey questions were produced when clients didn't come with a pre-defined set of questions as he and his colleagues were able to use their expertise in survey design to produce what he considered to be more robust questions. Noting some general misunderstanding of research terms and approaches in the email (they didn't seem to quite understand what sample size would be appropriate, or what weighting was), Alex decides to call the client as, in his experience, it is easier to clarify their interests on the phone than to engage in a long back and forth email exchange. There is a new starter in the team that week, so Alex asks them to sit alongside and shadow his interactions and get some experience on what looks to Alex to be a relatively standard client.

The call manages to resolve some of Alex's concerns. Firstly, the client has limited knowledge of survey methodology. This doesn't surprise Alex and is typical of many clients, new or otherwise. Alex takes the time to explain the overall process – from the political sample, to weighting and the process of questionnaire design. This explanation is done for the client's benefit and so that they can understand why they should be confident with the results produced. Alex also views these conversations as a useful part of the negotiation – “by explaining to clients the standard approaches the political team uses and why they are beneficial” Alex opines to his new colleague, “you'll find the clients are more likely to agree to an approach satisfactory to us both.” Alex knows from experience that taking time to set

expectations at the start was an important way of making it less likely that a client would try and insist on question wording that YouGov wouldn't field on principles of question design.

Alex had held this conversation enough times to be able to inform the client pretty easily – even though the method for political sampling that he applies using the company system is a little bit complicated, it can be explained in relatively simple terms. Secondly, Alex discovers that the client, being based in Norfolk, specifically wants to know about what people who live in Norfolk think. The client hadn't considered this as key information, but using an online panel methodology, the team are dependent on whether they have enough panel members in certain areas. This caveat makes the poll more complicated as he is unsure whether his company has enough panel members in Norfolk to get the required number of responses to fulfil this niche sample. This requires Alex to have a conversation with the team: “can we do this?”, Alex asks them. A colleague takes a look at the software which indicates the likely number of respondents which match the required criteria, and responds: “I think so, but in terms of sample size, let's call it 800 to give us some wiggle room”.<sup>406</sup> Alex accepts the recommendation; he wants to commit to a robust sample for the integrity of the results, but also one which is realistic based on their understanding of likely respondents. Given the smaller sample, (over 1000 would be more typical) Alex feels it is more likely that the precise balance of demographics will not be obtained. Weighting would correct this if necessary, and the raw data was decent, so weighting would definitely be a correction, not a cure for the sample (something he'd been taught to avoid). To create a representative Norfolk sample, Alex reviews the recent Brexit and election results in the area and substitutes these figures for the nationally representative figures in the weighting scheme used for nationwide polls: this might take around 30 minutes to sort out.

Having discerned that conducting the poll is possible, and having provided a quote for the pricing, Alex asks the client to send over a list of questions they're interested in asking. The client has narrowed down their interests since they last provided a list of topics. As Alex reads through these, he reflects on his conversations with the charity and the quick online search he made to learn more about them. As the charity was involved in campaigning, he wanted to be alert to where biases in questions may exist, and to do that, he needs to know a bit about their area of interest. From his assessment, Alex identifies that certain biases exist which mirror the charity's objectives and also that a number of the questions do not tap into the specific concerns that they had expressed. It is immediately clear that the questions sent will have to be reworked and rewritten to make them methodologically robust, as well as suited to the charity's concerns. This is important because Alex is almost certain that the poll findings will be press-released and subject to scrutiny, placing a responsibility on Alex's part to maintain the organisation's commitment to producing good polling. Alex explains their caution to the new starter- “often, charity

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<sup>406</sup> FN425

or campaign or pressure groups provide quite direct or leading questions... it's difficult, because we can't control how they'll use the data, so we try to put out good questions".<sup>407</sup>

Question writing is a harder process than many clients assume, and even with two years of experience, Alex will still need to get perspectives from the other members of the team. Alex spends an hour re-drafting the questions and asking across the desks for the perspectives of the team on those which prove most challenging. Alex views the team collaboration element as a particularly important part of question design, both in terms of ensuring robust questions, and also in continuing to develop his expertise and that of the other team members. Very few of Alex's surveys will have solely his own input. One question proves to be both challenging, and particularly sensitive, and so Alex seeks out the team's director to appeal to their expertise. Alex is in no rush at this point. He expects the client, especially as a charity with a specific interest in the results, to iterate on these questions back and forth with him a few times before both sides are happy to sign off on the questions and Alex can prepare them for the field. This can take a few days and is often the most time-consuming element of the process. Alex would later reflect that in his opinion, Nor-ledge weren't too bad on this front – he would only have to redraft the questions twice (and two or three iterations was about normal for a charity).

Before sending questions back to the client, Alex goes through the document and inserts comments to explain each change to assist them in understanding the process and convince them of its merits. The first set of changes to the client's proposed questions were to bring them into line with the polling organisation's general house style. This wasn't something set in stone, but there were some general guiding principles. Alex types out his explanations for each question, beginning by stating: "I've changed this and some subsequent questions as we don't tend to do yes or no questions – they don't give the best results." Commenting on one of the first questions, he explains that there was "Slightly too much preamble to this question, and its setting up a hypothetical question – we find that respondents aren't good at dealing with these." On a question initially presented by the client as a forced choice, Alex notes "I've added don't know, it's a legitimate response to these sorts of questions and may well be useful information for you." Alex had been trained by his colleagues to ensure all possible response options to a question were offered as good practice. Most often, as he was doing now, this would involve including a "don't know" response, an option that clients were prone to omit in their design.

The final comment Alex makes is on an overly wordy question that he suspects the client may be keen on retaining – "I've changed question six here because it unnecessarily wordy and introduces a bit too much information for the panellist, big explanations followed by a question is not what opinion research is best used for, and is unlikely to provide you with useful information as it can impact on the neutrality of the question". It's not a fundamentally bad question, and if it was a bigger client, or one he'd worked with before and built up trust with, Alex reflects, he might not be so picky about this point. However,

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<sup>407</sup> FN502

for this small commission, and with no real certainty about how the poll will be presented in a press release, he feels he has the room to be more demanding about required changes.<sup>408</sup>

As the morning progresses, the team take the opportunity to hold their weekly team meeting. Alex and the team use the opportunity to coordinate the upcoming work they have that week to ensure that there will be enough space on their surveys to get all survey questions commissioned by clients into the field, and be more realistic about timescales with new commissions. Following this, they discuss the newsworthy topics of the week and whether any internal survey work can be done on the topic for public relations purposes. Alex reflects on the news coverage from the office televisions that day – “trains are getting a lot of interest again – could take a look at perspectives on that and nationalisation and see if anything has moved since we last asked it.” The rest of the team like the idea and decide to put some questions into a survey due to go out later that week. As they begin to discuss question wording, one of Alex’s colleagues jokingly suggests that should also “ask about whether people think the sandwiches would get better or worse” if nationalisation did occur. Everyone has a chuckle, and a follow up question is drafted along those lines.

That afternoon, a different client that Alex had been working with the day before gets back in touch to agree to the proposed redraft of their questions. Alex is happy with the work, and the client signs off on the poll questions, authorising the questions to be fielded. Alex is pleasantly surprised that they approved his question changes so promptly as he has known other clients to be more than a little reluctant to change. He even recalls one instance in which he was accused of suggesting questions that were biased, an accusation he took very personally and which led to a mutual agreement with the client that a different (and probably, in Alex’s opinion, less reputable) polling organisation may be better able to design the kind of survey they wanted. Though a rare occurrence, if a relationship reached the stage of such accusations, Alex would be tempted give up on a commission, as he prides himself on his neutrality.<sup>409</sup> Having had the questions signed off, Alex added the scripting process to his to-do list for the day. He would need to enter the questions into the system, ensuring that when a panel member took the survey everything appeared in the correct format. The poll would go out just before the end of the working day, and Alex would have the results in his hand tomorrow, ready to return to the client.

Later on, one of the data journalists from the marketing team pops over – they want to check with the political team whether any spaces are available on the daily polling for internal questions (where YouGov itself is the client). The team all check whether they have anything pending to fill up the slots. Having received the earlier signoff, Alex mentions that he has 12 questions to include, and when added to those of his colleagues he calculates that there is space for about 5 more questions without the survey becoming overly-long for the respondent. The marketing colleague seems happy with that: they aren’t

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<sup>408</sup> FN502

<sup>409</sup> FN516

ever assured question space on the survey, and when they do get it, anything above three questions is a nice surprise. Alex asks what the topic of the questions is. “I’m looking to write a story about Pixar characters, hoping it will attract some public interest, but I need some advice on a few questions”, he is told.

Alex and the teams’ interest is piqued by the topic, and together they start brainstorming possible questions. These kind of interruptions are usually quite welcome, though questions would often be requested with a more serious analytical basis (such as questions on public perspectives on the social issue of the day). Alex finds these more flippant requests an enjoyable way for the team to all collaborate. Given that data journalists are concerned with producing articles from their questions, Alex notes that they tend to ask two distinct categories of question – “there’s either ones that are important and interesting, or ones that are fun and interesting”.<sup>410</sup> Today’s request feels firmly placed in the fun camp. As the team laugh their way through several light-hearted suggestions, a thought occurs to Alex; these questions would be going into the main daily poll, which has a politically representative sample. This means that the output would allow analysis of whether certain characters are liked by, for instance, Conservative as opposed to Labour voters. As he’d recently had a bad experience where some questions about how often you change your underwear had included political ‘crossbreaks’ (displaying data by variables) in the results, leading to coverage of “would Brexit have happened if only people who wash their pants voted?”, Alex asks marketing whether they had considered a potential political backlash to the poll. The team discuss this possibility, but feel that, in this case, the risk is low and unlikely to do the polling organisation’s reputation any harm. Who, after all, would care if Tories turned out to like Buzz whilst Labour voters liked Woody?<sup>411</sup>

The rest of Alex’s afternoon is spent working on one of his larger projects: it’s a multi-wave bespoke survey for a large commercial organisation. The survey exceeds the usual length that the team permit one of the daily surveys to have and is sent out on its own rather than bundled with other commissions. Alex had booked several afternoons for this project this week – the client wants a full spreadsheet of tables and charts and stats that shows the full results. Although this is not usually done for a client, (usually tables of the results are standard) the commission is big enough for the extra work to be worth it. Alex is proud to work for some of the larger companies, and these companies do receive additional courtesies such as being informed if they are the subject of proposed survey questions by other clients, being given greater control in question design (especially given that business clients rarely publish their results), and are provided with a wider range of output reporting.

Spotting another enquiry come into the inbox, Alex has a quick look at what the client is after and then turns to the departmental director sitting across from him. “I don’t even know why I’m asking but, we

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<sup>410</sup> Interview 11-7

<sup>411</sup> FN628

can't really get a representative sample of Muslims, right?" As expected, there is a shake of the head, and an explanation that the team can't get that data easily or reliably. "Who's it for?" the Director asks; Alex explains that the client is an entertainment broadcaster. "God no, we'd only consider doing that for a dry as dust straight down the line academic piece". These inquiries are infrequent – but Alex likes to be sure of the team's position on each when possible.

As soon as he has declined the survey, Alex notices a press release arriving into the inbox. These are often sent over when a client makes a press release based on their survey data. The team get advanced sight of these to provide feedback. This is both to avoid misuse of the data, but also to make sure YouGov get mentioned in the text where possible. Alex again invites the new starter to join him to go through it and show them how it's done. "Right, let's review what they are putting out" Alex says. "They've gone with 'poll shows Britons rejects the government policy', is that fair to say?" The new starter notes that this doesn't sound quite right and Alex agrees; they will need to push back on this as the survey didn't actually ask about this point. "It's tricky, if that's their interpretation", he says, "it's not our job to stop them talking rubbish, but we do have to intervene to stop misrepresentation".<sup>412</sup> This is a general duty to ensure the organisation's good reputation, but also something Alex feels personally – polls are important, and should be used appropriately! In Alex's perspective, the charity is fine to make their own points in a press release on a poll, but they need to be clearer that this is their interpretation, rather than strictly what the poll says. "We can suggest that they either amend the headline or have some contextualising information about that in the first paragraph" Alex explains. The two send back their recommendations, with Alex noting to the new starter that they always need to push back on misrepresentation of findings because their loyalty is to the data, not the client. Though it would be an exceptionally rare occurrence, a gross misrepresentation of their data by a client would prompt the team to publicly draw attention to the original data, and potentially even write a response.

With that completed, Alex sits back. The daily poll is being quality checked by another member of the team, and he has little more to do before another day ends.

#### 5.4 Assessing the Account of Polling

This quasi-fictional account of Alex the pollster reflects the varied processes and tasks observed within YouGov. No working day is the same. However the recurrent practices, approach to polling, and customs offer important insights into the realities of everyday polling. For the remainder of this chapter, a critical eye is turned upon this account, assessing how we can understand the everyday practices

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<sup>412</sup> FN518

observed, and distilling key insights that focus on the practices of polling and client-pollster relations. This is done in two parts:

- The Practices of Polling (5.4.1)
  - Types of Poll
  - Methods in Practice
  - Norms and traditions
- Polls and Patrons (5.4.2)

We turn first to the practices of polling, in which the three areas listed above are addressed. The different types of polls are charted, and the various approaches to different types of work is drawn out. The application of method (in a broad sense) to polls in everyday practice is considered to assess the challenges faced by pollsters in producing robust work. The norms and traditions, (discussed in Chapter 3.2.2.) both within the team and the organisation, are looked at in closer detail to reveal how they impact and regulate the practice of polling and how they affect the way in which pollsters reflect on the significance of their work.

Second, the role of clients in the production of opinion polls is considered. I utilise an assessment of working practices to produce a schema for how we might understand the ways in which pollsters interact with clients and the effects of these different relationships. This provides a direct example of how polling practices in relation to commissioned polls can be understood.

These two sub-sections are an important component of answering the question posed within this chapter: how can we understand everyday practice? The assessment of Alex's account identifies and interrogates individual practices. The subsequent focus on pollster-client relationships provides a means of understanding practices as they relate to one of the most significant areas of political polling work – commissioned polls. By answering this question, this chapter addresses the first aspect of the thesis research questions (what are the everyday practices of polling?) and begins to analyse their significance, work which is continued through Chapters 6 and 7.

#### 5.4.1 Practices of Polling

*“I know I’m a pollster and I do political work but... people would be surprised at our day to day – it isn’t crunching numbers and analysis”<sup>413</sup>*

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<sup>413</sup> FN516



#### 5.4.1.1 Types of Poll

The fictional account outlined above depicted Alex working on a number of different types of poll. Developing this account, it is possible to classify 3 main types of political poll which encompass most of the work encountered day-to-day. These are: daily polls, internal commissions, and bespoke polls.

Much of the most commonly seen political polling comes from ‘daily polling’ surveys. They are recurring surveys which, despite their name (an artefact from when these polls were conducted daily), are fielded usually three times a week. These surveys contain voting intention and performance questions and are usually produced because of standing commissions between the polling organisation and clients such as newspapers. Alongside the regular poll questions, small commissions not requiring an entire survey of their own are added. In the case of Alex’s account, the questions he ‘scripted up’ for a client would be passed on to whoever was responsible for compilation of the daily poll that day (often the senior member of staff, but this could vary).<sup>414</sup> Dailies are comparable to political omnibus surveys put out by other organisations in that they are compilations of questions on a variety of issues, often from different commissioning parties. There are other similarities. For instance, Moon discusses the use of spare space in omnibus polling for methodological experimentation whilst polling with NOP (a former polling organisation), and this is true for dailies, which are often used to test question wording effects (for instance, on voting rights for 16 year olds, should the right be phrased as “lowered”, “extended” etc.).<sup>415</sup>

If any spaces remain, ‘internal commissions’ might be added to the dailies – ideas generated either by the political or marketing teams that may produce publicly engaging content. These are differentiated here from daily polling (even though they are often found on the same overall survey) because of the significant difference that they are generated by the pollsters themselves. A common example of this was seen through Alex’s and the team’s interactions with colleagues from outside the team, who, looking for articles to write, will use survey space to ask targeted questions they have a “high level of confidence will output something that’s worth talking about”.<sup>416</sup> Similarly the team might identify areas they wish to write their own articles about, with the weekly team meeting often providing suggestions for timely questions on trending issues that will garner the company press coverage. The forces at play on how these topics are selected and analysed will be further discussed in Chapter 6 as part of a discussion of the roles that pollsters perform.

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<sup>414</sup> FN612

<sup>415</sup> FN523; Nick Moon, *Opinion Polls, History, Theory, and Practice*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) p. 45.

<sup>416</sup> Interview 11-7

Other types of poll, by necessity, require a bespoke approach. These bespoke polls are usually for when a client requires a large number of questions that could not fit within a daily survey. They are also required when a client desires a non-standard political sample (e.g. a multiple wave survey retaining the same panellists or a niche sample). Alex was seen taking such a survey in relation to Norfolk, and the process of adjusting a sample is largely a fact finding one – by substituting the national figures used in their nationally representative sample (e.g. How people voted at the last election, age demographics, etc.) with those specific to Norfolk, those values can be plugged into the online system which will produce an appropriate sample. In instances where a bespoke survey is niche enough to produce low levels of panellists, they might still go ahead with a survey if they are sure it is only going to be used for rough informative means and they trust the client to do so. These two broad types of work are underpinned by the same processes, but pollsters have to bear in mind different design considerations in each.

In addition to different types of poll, the narrative account also cast light on different methods of practice – suggesting that whilst operating in accordance with certain established principles and norms, there are important differences in how each individual poll is commissioned and refined.

#### *5.4.1.2 Methods in Practice*

Survey design is not one specific activity but actually encompasses a number of different aspects: client relationships, questionnaire design and sampling/weighting decisions. Sample decisions are a relatively small part of all pollsters' day-to-day experience, though an important underpinning of their work. The other elements, especially question design, are a major part of the work of political pollsters with even those in leadership roles stating that upwards of half of their time might be spent working with clients on survey design.<sup>417</sup> As client interactions shall be addressed in 5.4.2 of this chapter, and the technical concepts of survey design were discussed in detail in Chapter 4.3, here I shall focus on the day-to-day application of survey design methods.

Consider the distinct stages of survey design identified within Alex's account of drafting questions for Nor-ledge. The Nor-ledge work represents a fairly typical example of the survey design that forms a large portion of the work on most polls. As seen through the collaborative steps Alex took to seek advice and guidance, survey design can be challenging. The guiding principle in what pollsters consider as "good polling" is the rigorous pursuit of the elimination of bias – often working from the position that "the panellist shouldn't be able to tell who the client is".<sup>418</sup> Staff in polling organisations are taught to

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<sup>417</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6

<sup>418</sup> Ethnographic Interview 4 ; Ethnographic Interview 1

focus on question wording effects that may cause bias, and Alex’s decision to bring in a more junior member of staff to work on this is not an uncommon event. Interviews with polling staff revealed the view that “the only effective way [to gain question writing and editing experience] is just through practice, continual practice and working with people who’ve... had experience, its vitally important that at least two people have seen the questions that are going to be run”.<sup>419</sup>

With a diverse set of issues which can be polled on, pollsters acknowledge that there is no exact science to constructing the perfect question for a given topic.<sup>420</sup> Instead, senior members of staff are influential in establishing the threshold for “good polling” that the team find acceptable.<sup>421</sup> Alex’s account shows him wrestling with several questions that fall just short of such an acceptability threshold. Good polling is a moving concept: pollsters understand it through the influence of senior figures, and also through assessing the practice of the sector. One interviewee explained that “good polling is a sector consensus on what constitutes good polling – constructing a minimum standard above which we can consider a survey as ‘good’”.<sup>422</sup> Such a consensus is evidently distinct from the practices of all pollsters and organisations (in Alex’s account he reflects that a different organisation might take a concerning question), and is not a clearly articulated concept. Rather, it is a pollster’s own estimation of the consensus of ‘reputable’ pollsters.<sup>423</sup> This consensus, consistently expressed by pollsters throughout observations and interviews, is in line with the principles of robust scientific polling articulated throughout this thesis (whilst also being cognisant of the question design issues discussed in Chapter 2.2.3). Additionally pollsters incorporate elements from their practical experience, the question experimentation in daily polls, noted above, and academic principles, to remain comfortably well above any sector ‘threshold’.<sup>424</sup> Alex can be seen expressing these ideas in the comments he sends on question alterations to his client.

Alongside elimination of bias, political pollsters seek to produce questions which are understandable by the panellists, conform to a ‘House Style’ and also translate into easily communicated results.<sup>425</sup> House style is a relatively simple approach to the recurrent aspects of questions (e.g. always say “tick those that apply” rather than “check those that apply”). With hundreds of staff writing questions across an organisation, this seeks to create some consistency between and within surveys across YouGov.

For online polling, the sampling and weighting aspects of the work are straightforward – supported by a technological infrastructure. In the narrative above, software was used by Alex to create a niche sample for a client with relative ease (though other quotas may be more difficult to determine). Behind

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<sup>419</sup> Interview 11-7

<sup>420</sup> FN502, FN510, FN522

<sup>421</sup> Interview 11-4

<sup>422</sup> Interview 11-4

<sup>423</sup> Interview 11-4

<sup>424</sup> FN611

<sup>425</sup> FN502

that infrastructure sit bigger conceptual ideas about what a representative quota sample should be. Sample parameters are set by senior staff and data scientists, and are reviewed on average every 5 years (with additional alterations in response to polling performance in elections).<sup>426</sup> At these points decisions are made relating to the variables which are relevant for representative samples. There is less clarity on what pollsters might consider good practice in this regard. Indeed, one interviewee reflected:

“there’s a quite a lack of consensus about what good methodology is, I mean obviously everybody agrees we want representative samples and we want to use survey sampling that’s likely to produce representative samples... but the actual details of how that’s done, there’s no consensus of what is the right way... the Sturgis enquiry [*the BPC/MRS enquiry into the failure of the polls at the 2015 General Election, Chaired by Professor Patrick Sturgis*] is the obvious example of that... they were the very best academic experts in the field and they didn’t say “do it like this, do it like that, do it like the other”, they said “we’ve identified the problems, good luck with solving them!” There is no method, other than say recommending the sort of methodological rigour that everyone already does anyway, there is no agreed best thing that they could recommend beyond that, and even on questionnaire design”.<sup>427</sup>

With no prescriptive rulebook on how to approach these survey challenges, pollsters must find their own way. Implicit in this quote is that whilst everyone agrees on certain principles, individual pollsters have their own approach to applying those principles; here they exercise their agency to produce what they perceive to be ‘good polling’. There’s no set rule, and the weighting guidelines provided by the wider organisation are mainly around broad principles – that weighting exists to correct, not overhaul samples. On this point an interviewee reflected:

“There’s a clear consensus about what the broad aims and the broad principles are, but there’s no point in enforcing that because everyone does it anyway, there’s not a broad consensus in any way shape or form about the specific details of how you do that, exactly which things do you sample by, exactly how do you construct a turnout model, those are things where people have different opinions that are strongly held, probably equally or badly evidenced and there’s no consensus”.<sup>428</sup>

This presents a similar challenge to that of question design – there are principles that roughly guide what pollsters are looking for, but no consensus on their application. The points raised here show that rather than being a standardised process, pollsters are required to exercise agency informed by a set of standard operating principles. Pollsters face a number of challenges in their work, even if they are not

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<sup>426</sup> Interview 11-3

<sup>427</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6

<sup>428</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6

seen as such by pollsters due to their frequency within day-to-day practice.<sup>429</sup> These come through in key questions – what constitutes good polling and how is it done (conversely what constitutes bad polling and is it out there?) Who is sampled and how are they weighted? Whilst some answers to this are rooted in practical concerns, (e.g. survey experimentation, as discussed above) many of these questions play out in respect to the relationships established with clients (discussed in 5.4.2), and the democratic role which political pollsters perceive themselves as fulfilling (discussed in Chapter 6).

#### *5.4.1.3 Norms and Traditions*

The understanding of Alex’s account is not solely a consideration of the direct application of polling methods, as these activities are situated within a distinct working culture. Though there are a number of interpretations as to the constitutive elements of these types of cultures (discussed in 3.2.2) in this thesis, these elements are identified as norms and traditions, and values. These aspects of working culture are significant to understanding the ways in which the work of political polling is approached, organised and rationalised amongst staff. Though these aspects are embedded throughout Alex’s account, here I pull out significant examples of where aspects of working culture can be directly identified through norms and traditions, (with values, relating as they do to pollsters’ interpretations, addressed throughout Chapter 6). Specifically, I look at the ways in which routine weekly meetings produce polling outputs, at the relationships between the political team and others which lead to questions being fielded, and the culture of collaboration. Here, discussions are centred on the specific practices, and the cultural factors which influence pollsters’ conduct.

Early in Alex’s account we see the regular team meeting that sets out ongoing work and priorities for the week ahead, enabling space in YouGov’s political polling schedule to be identified and filled. The meetings also consider important news topics for the upcoming week, looking to see where they can publicise existing, or generate new, data that may help drive news coverage (and boost the firm’s profile). Ideas of question experimentation, as explored in the ‘methods in practice’ discussion (5.4.1.2), are also discussed in these meetings. These questions will invariably find themselves being placed into the daily polls where space allows. This process is an instance where pollsters attempt to facilitate a cyclical discourse between media and citizenry as an intermediary.<sup>430</sup> One interviewee reflected “if we’re doing our job properly, we should be a neutral conduit of public opinion and our own biases shouldn’t influence how we do that”.<sup>431</sup> This is not altruistic: important issues receive media coverage,

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<sup>429</sup> Ethnographic Interview 7

<sup>430</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2.3.1 ; Stuart Hall, ‘Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse’ (Birmingham, University of Birmingham, 1973)

<sup>431</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6

and pollsters describe using this process to “hijack” such coverage, allowing the organisation to be discussed alongside the issue.<sup>432</sup> Neither is this process neutral – even when responding to current events, contributing polls on an issue might alter the ways in which issues are framed. For instance, a YouGov poll showed opposition to military action (specifically, UK missile strikes) in Syria before a parliamentary vote in 2013. Though public opposition was not unexpected, polling reified opinion, making it a more tangible consideration for representatives, and the YouGov poll was directly cited in parliamentary debate on the vote.<sup>433</sup>

Where spare daily polling space is not taken up by the team’s ideas, it might be offered to, or requested by the marketing team through their data journalists. There is no requirement that this happens through the political team. However, it commonly is. The political team, with its full title of ‘political and social’ had previously created and conducted much of the social interest polling (as seen relating to Pixar in Alex’s account) themselves. As this type of work began to sit more closely with other departments, the political team would continue to contribute to and field these questions out of custom, as well as producing some polling of this nature themselves.<sup>434</sup> The donation of spare survey space to marketing is not a formally established relationship, and it is by no means a given – it entails more work for the political team who are responsible for the data processing and presentation of their own surveys (in comparison to other teams, who give this task to a dedicated data processing team). This is seen in Alex’s account. Though the question topics in that instance were light-hearted, questions are sought to contribute to a spectrum of articles from flippant, to very serious political pieces.<sup>435</sup> The data journalists are responsible for question design, but will be assisted by, and in the process learn from, the political team in that endeavour (as was seen in Alex’s account). Being one of the more established teams, political are well respected for their experience in and approach to question design.<sup>436</sup> Data journalists discussed the effects of this customary relationship on how they approach the work in the quote below:

“I learned my question design through working with the political team, in doing so discovering... how they are and are not happy with questions being presented – I’ve now got a good deal of trust built with them, I like to think they know I’ve got the interest of the data at heart, and am not going to write silly sensationalist stuff, and that’s important to them, I can’t help thinking they’d be suspicious and unhappy to work with me [if I] disrespected the data”.<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> FN508

<sup>433</sup> William Jordan, ‘Public Opinion drove Syria debate’, YouGov, <<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2013/08/30/public-opinion-syria-policy>> [accessed January 20 2020] ; Edward Platt, ‘Living by numbers: YouGov and the power of the pollsters’, New Statesman, 16 April 2015 <<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/04/living-numbers-yougov-and-power-pollsters>> [accessed 5 August 2018] ; Diane Abbott, Hansard, HC Deb. 268-i, vol .566 col.1515, August 2013

<sup>434</sup> Interview 11-7, FN523

<sup>435</sup> FN522

<sup>436</sup> Ethnographic Interview 5

<sup>437</sup> Interview 11-7

Unlike the questions generated in political team meetings, these public interest questions, even the explicitly political ones, are often not driven by news coverage or current events, and instead are “interesting issues that I want to talk about – but they have to be issues that I’m relatively certain will produce good polling data – I’ve got limited space to work with, there’s no point showing things to be the case that we already know”.<sup>438</sup> Where questions developed through team meetings are designed to be conduits for the public perspective on topical events, other internal questions may be specifically selected by the author to start or develop conversations on topics not receiving attention. As was noted in an interview with one pollster, “the political class are incredibly disconnected from what the public think on so many issues, I’d like to be able to provide data that shows them that”.<sup>439</sup> These polls are still considered neutral – in the sense that they will attempt to tell the story that the data provides them. Despite this, in being responsible for choosing these topics, pollsters acknowledge some influence that these actions have in either allowing for further coverage of a story, or creating emergent stories themselves:

“I think the significance of polling, like the media... is control of the editorial agenda, i.e. by deciding what we poll on and what we don't poll on”.<sup>440</sup>

“Sure we have some influence in these areas, but even at our most significant we’re a 1 or at most a 2 on a 10 point scale of influence”.<sup>441</sup>

Though these quotes demonstrate some acknowledgement of the influence of polls on the media effects discussed in Chapter 2.3.1, we also see a partial rejection of prominent pollster Worcester’s claim that pollsters have “a great deal of power”, explored further in Chapter 6.3.<sup>442</sup>

Much of Alex’s work had some aspects of collaboration with the other team members involved. This usually occurs through the regular practice of conversations across the row of desks the political team sit either side of to ask questions or for perspectives on their work. These will be on testing question wording, question ordering, or discussing contextual information cues – the examples in Alex’s account are entirely typical of this. This is a very intentional part of the working practices of political pollsters at YouGov. Collaboration is a key facet of training staff in their question and survey design work and is not confined to new pollsters but is seen as a continual process for all staff, regardless of seniority.<sup>443</sup> Collaboration is also part of the quality checking process: whilst every survey has a structured intervention (per organisational policy) from another staff member before being put into the field, the collaboration during question design is seen as equally important to ensuring good polling, both in terms

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<sup>438</sup> Interview 11-7

<sup>439</sup> Interview 11-7

<sup>440</sup> Ethnographic Interview 2

<sup>441</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>442</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 121.

<sup>443</sup> FN523

of quality assurance and writing questions that can be universally understood. One interviewee commented on the value of collaboration: “when you’re creating a question or survey you see it from your perspective, but if someone else comes in they can add to it”.<sup>444</sup> Another interviewee noted the value in terms of quality assurance: “the questions that never had any input from anyone else until the final check, they’re the ones that end up having problems”.<sup>445</sup> This is so significant a part of both survey design and office culture that, during an office refurbishment which led to the team having to temporarily relocate, they found themselves desperate to ensure they found spaces near each other – explicitly from the fear that their work might suffer without the constant collaboration.<sup>446</sup>

From this overview, it is clear that a number of behaviours that are critical to the types of polling conducted and the ways in which this is done at YouGov are not determined through formal systems or policy, but instead by the cultural practices of working life as part of a team and a wider organisation. Examples include the collaborative approach, or the polling relationships with other departments built on trust rather than formalised allowances. In these instances, we see greater pollster agency, as they work to ensure that their work remains neutral, or acknowledge the influence that their work might have, and rationalise that. This analysis is returned to in subsequent chapters as a significant component in understanding the practice of polling.

#### 5.4.2 Polls and Patrons

Having looked at the common practices of polling, this sub-section provides a closer analysis of the interactions between pollsters and their clients. This analysis is important to the question of how we can understand polling practices. As shown in this sub-section, commissioned work and client interactions are a substantial portion of the work of political pollsters, and constitutive of the output of polls. Mortimore and Wells note that “the polls cannot be understood without understanding the relationship between the pollsters and their media clients”.<sup>447</sup> This idea is extended to suggest that it is necessary to appreciate the different relationships with different types of clients in order to understand the practices of polling. Understanding the factors of this relationship is key to understanding the way in which a great deal of the publicly available polling is produced and assessing whether all polls are treated in the same way.

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<sup>444</sup> Ethnographic Interview 4

<sup>445</sup> Interview 11-7

<sup>446</sup> Interview 11-3, Interview 11-2

<sup>447</sup> Roger Mortimore & Anthony Wells, ‘The Polls and their context’, in *Political Communication in Britain, Polling, Campaigning and Media in the 2015 General Election*, ed. by Dominic Wring et. al. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) pp.19-38



First, this sub-section provides a general account of the ways in which clients are involved in polling. It demonstrates that profit is a consideration in the production of political polling, and that therefore paying clients are a significant element of the work of a political pollster (this dynamic is further elaborated in Chapter 6.3.2). The ways in which clients are involved in the production of a political poll are then identified. Views on the importance of public disclosure of the client who commissioned a poll are also discussed. I then present a means of understanding the dynamics of these relationships and their impact on political polls. This involves mapping the varying levels of flexibility or autonomy afforded to a client over their preferred survey design, and how this is dependent on a pollster's confidence in the ways in which a resulting poll will be used. The types of clients for political polls are listed and through an assessment of the commonalities of their experiences, the variables influencing trust are identified. This analysis informs a new schema which is introduced as a means of understanding the relationship between client and pollster. Further, the heuristics which demonstrate this schema in everyday practice are identified.

#### 5.4.2.1 Polls, Profit, and the role of the client

Political polls have long been commissioned by clients. Polling and journalism have been closely linked since the inception of scientific polling organisations in the 1930s. Indeed George Gallup's 'The Sophisticated Poll Watcher's Guide' is dedicated to the daily newspapers who "made possible our... years of public opinion research".<sup>448</sup> Newspapers acted as patrons for budding polling organisations, and often represented their main, and sometimes only, client.<sup>449</sup> This relationship has shifted. Where once the media sustained political polling through its funding, now the press is in more challenging financial circumstances.<sup>450</sup> With an abundant supply of polling, pollsters are limited in what they can charge news outlets for regular polls (market saturation increases the threat of being undercut by another polling organisation seeking publicity).<sup>451</sup> Pollsters express concern about this, asking how do they ensure that political polls, specifically their regular voting intention polls, are funded? One interviewee commented: "there has been a symbiotic relationship between polling and the media... as we go through this transition... where do newspapers and journalism settle... how does polling find a place in that?"<sup>452</sup>

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<sup>448</sup> George Gallup, *The Sophisticated Poll Watcher's Guide*, (Princeton Opinion Press, Princeton, 1972)

<sup>449</sup> Moon, N. "Opinion Polls, History, Theory, and Practice" (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 199) p.45

<sup>450</sup> Roger Mortimore & Anthony Wells, 'The Polls and their context', in *Political Communication in Britain, Polling, Campaigning and Media in the 2015 General Election*, ed. by Dominic Wring et. al. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) pp.19-38 ; Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 'Review of Press Sustainability in the UK', 12 March 2018 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chair-appointed-to-lead-review-of-press-sustainability-in-the-uk>> [accessed 6 August 2019]

<sup>451</sup> FN423

<sup>452</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6

A common explanation is that political polls do not need to make money – they are considered good publicity for a polling organisation and can therefore function as a loss-leader, attracting attention, exposure, and therefore further custom – a characterisation of polling presented at the House of Lords Select Committee on political polling.<sup>453</sup> In practice, however, political polling does generate profit (suggested to be a similar amount to many other custom divisions, noted in Chapter 4.4).<sup>454</sup> Indeed political work is incentivised and strategically arranged to generate profits (with for instance, staff bonuses being contingent on meeting profit targets), and political polls have an expansive range of clients.<sup>455</sup> The discussion of political polls for profitability and PR is continued in Chapter 6.3.2.

Interactions with clients are a significant element of the work of a pollster – we can see that much of Alex’s work throughout the day involved client interaction. Prospective clients will send over potential survey questions in varying states, from entirely pre-written surveys, to a general sense of a topic of interest. Not only is a pollster like Alex involved with fielding client enquiries on these matters, and negotiating quotes and sales with clients, but he, like the other political pollsters, enters into an iterative relationship with the client as they proceed into the survey design element of their role. This survey design can be a lengthy process, as client and pollster will make recommendations on question design in a negotiation which can proceed for days or even weeks. As one interviewee reflected:

“when we come up with questions and come up with topics it’s not a case of someone just writing a question, fielding it then sending the results to the client, there’s always a back and forth within the team and between us and the client”.<sup>456</sup>

When asked to estimate their allocation of work, pollsters noted a considerable amount of their time is dedicated to client interactions. One interviewee stated that: “about half of it is still hands-on working with clients who I deal with directly and then doing quotes designing surveys and the back and forth of signing surveys off”.<sup>457</sup>

Weighting is regularly brought up in discussion with clients, as pollsters often must explain why their enquiry requires political weighting and the implications of that. Samples and sampling methodology are discussed to temper the expectations of clients, and ensure they understand the limitations of small n surveys. Though pollsters recount that in the early days of the organisation, internet panels were held in suspicion by clients, a track record of relative success across a range of events has since mollified

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<sup>453</sup> FN423 ; Ben Page, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 20, Question 151, 5/12/17

<sup>454</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>455</sup> FN509

<sup>456</sup> Ethnographic Interview 4

<sup>457</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6

many of their concerns: “People were a bit cautious to use an online pollster, but after we predicted Pop Idol right, we got a surge of clients”.<sup>458</sup>

One of the less time intensive, though still significant aspects of interactions with polling clients witnessed in Alex’s account is the process of checking press releases. YouGov adopts a policy of checking client press releases that draw on the data that they have produced. Alex’s experience represents the typical types of changes recommended. It is significant to note that at this point YouGov states that its loyalty is to data and not client. Although it is an uncommon event, not seen in Alex’s account, pollsters explained in interviews that if their recommendations for press release presentations are not taken, they will ‘correct the record’ and make clear their interpretation of the data, or reveal contextual data a client may not have done (e.g. where a client has asked a number of related or similar questions and only released the data which is preferential to a specific interest).<sup>459</sup> In the case of Alex’s account, if his client had chosen to selectively release only the results of the most favourable questions, or to headline any press release in a way which misrepresented the data, they might expect to be called out by the political team. This ‘correcting’ is often channelled through social platforms or through YouGov’s website. This practice is similar to that seen across the social media presence of pollsters from other large polling organisations.<sup>460</sup> As can be seen through Alex’s account, pollsters are concerned with, but have limited control over, how their polls will be used. In particular, pollsters hold concerns around the appropriate and faithful representation of data, and dislike polling work being sensationalised or presented in a misleading fashion.<sup>461</sup> These concerns translate to a set of behaviours and strategies for approaching commissions which vary depending on how pollsters presume clients will deploy the data.

The influence of a client on topic selection and presentation of data is also addressed in policy. BPC rules require that its members satisfy standards of disclosure for polls that enter the public domain. Alongside information detailing the conduct and methodology of a poll, polling council members must therefore also disclose the ‘client commissioning the survey’.<sup>462</sup> This requirement for disclosure indicates two points; that transparency is identified as valuable contextualising information, and that knowledge of the client is a significant component of this transparency. In interviews, pollsters provided context for why they believe this to be the case:

“This is essentially the application of a solid journalistic principle which is name your source”.<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>458</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>459</sup> EI1

<sup>460</sup> See for instance Ben Page (2018) @Benpageipsosmori [online] posted 11:25am November 19 2018

<sup>461</sup> Interview 11-5

<sup>462</sup> British Polling Council, ‘About the BPC’, British Polling Council, <<http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/>> [accessed 5 December 2019]

<sup>463</sup> Interview 11-4

“It’s important because while the wording of the questionnaire should be fair and balanced, the angle they’ve taken is a matter of choice... so you still need to know who commissioned that poll”.<sup>464</sup>

These ideas are significant factors in why client disclosure is valuable. However, they focus on why polls are produced, and not how they are produced. Though the question of why is a significant one, the how is equally so. Given the acceptable variations of ‘good’ polling discussed previously in the chapter (5.4.1.2), and from Alex’s account (5.3), we can see that clients influence aspects of polling beyond topic selection (without resulting in ‘bad’ polling). This influence adds an additional dimension to why disclosure of the client commissioning a poll is of value.

Client interactions are a large part of the work of political polling. Clients have the capacity to influence how polls are designed (through proposing topics, negotiating question design, and signing off on final wording) and communicated (often through press release), while pollsters are particularly concerned over the potential misrepresentation of polling data. Next, I present a means to understand how these risks are managed by pollsters, and the effects of this.

#### *5.4.2.2 Confidence and Autonomy*

Not all polls are treated in the same way. As seen through Alex’s account, and in this chapter’s earlier discussion of question design, there is no one right way to ask a survey question. Pollsters identify a threshold of good polling which is acceptable and try to ensure their work meets it. Yet despite this, not all clients have the same level of freedom in what pollsters will allow them to ask, and the ways in which they can ask it. Within the range of generally acceptable survey design, clients are afforded a narrow window. This window can vary from client to client.

Given that these variations can have material effects on the nature of polling material produced (what will be asked, and how), here I establish a means to understand such variations. I present a schema in which clients are given varying levels of autonomy (their requests are free from oversight and restriction). This ranges from receiving considerable autonomy to being subject to considerable control. To illustrate this difference, it is useful to consider different approaches to survey design. An organisation given autonomy may be given substantial scope to write their own questions, whilst an organisation subject to control may have their questions heavily redrafted or written for them, with only minimal freedom given to drafting. From observations and interviews, variations in autonomy are seen to be a product of different degrees of pollster confidence in the client (figure 4). Here I will discuss

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<sup>464</sup> Interview 11-2

confidence and autonomy, before illustrating in more detail how this dynamic plays out with different types of clients and then identifying the key variables which explain this relationship.



*Figure 4. Confidence-autonomy relationship in clients*

Confidence is a crucial element of the relationship between pollster and client. It is used here in a particular sense, defined as the extent to which a pollster can expect a client to use polling data in a way they would deem responsible, and an assessment of the risk that such data may be presented in a misleading fashion. Repeat clients, who have previously been reasonable and responsible in their commissioning and use of polls are likely to be afforded significant confidence. As one pollster reflected: “if you’re a client we’ve worked with before, and had a good experience with, there’s a level of trust”.<sup>465</sup> Previous working relationships with clients allow polling organisations to have a clearer picture of the ways in which clients will use the polling data that they commission, and how they will present it if it is incorporated into press releases or public facing work.<sup>466</sup> As shown in Alex’s account, confidence may be the difference between a question being fielded as requested, insisting on changes, or even not fielding a question at all – all whilst still within the parameters of ‘good’ polling. One interviewee made this point explicit, “you don’t, unfortunately, just have to think about whether it’s good research, but you also have to think about how that research is going to be used”.<sup>467</sup> Given that many clients have no prior relationships with a pollster, pollsters must have means by which to determine a level of confidence in how data will be used by the commissioning party.

From participant observation, I identify 5 different types of clients who often commission political polling. I use brief generalised accounts of client experiences to identify the varying levels of autonomy that they are offered, and the variables at play in each instance which contribute to the degree of confidence that they are afforded. Having done this, I will reflect on the key variables identified, and the significance of trust and autonomy in polling.

Five types of client commission most political polls:

- Academics
- Charities/Campaign Groups

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<sup>465</sup> Ethnographic Interview 1

<sup>466</sup> Ethnographic Interview 1

<sup>467</sup> Interview 11-3

- Media
- Business
- Policy Makers

### *Academics*

Academics form a major source of income for political pollsters. They are regular and often repeat clients who tend to have significant research budgets. They are generally well regarded by pollsters; many academic clients have significant survey experience, often greater than that of the individual pollsters with whom they liaise. This affects how survey design and negotiation takes place, as one pollster noted: “I’m hardly going to challenge your 20 years [experience]”.<sup>468</sup> When discussing pollster-client relationships, YouGov pollsters noted that their closest, and most convivial relationships were with academics, meeting with them more regularly and in more quasi-social environments, such as conferences. These encounters engender mutual respect and mean that academics often develop a significantly different relationship with pollsters than other groups may experience.

Academics are less likely to have their survey design corrected/amended by pollsters, as they are given greater trust by pollsters to get it right. They receive greater leeway in question design more generally. For instance, where their questions are more challenging or appear leading, this may be because they are intentionally so (e.g. a leading question might be asked to see the effects of a leading question). This treatment is not just for regular academic clients, but new academic clients as well. This trust may be attributed to the peer-reviewed environment within which academics exist, and a sense that their approach to data is likely to include some analysis, in comparison to the press releases other clients may be seeking to construct.<sup>469</sup> This relationship is distinct from other types of client, as noted by one pollster “It would be concerning if academics considered their experience with polling as a normal one.”<sup>470</sup> The relationship between some repeat academic clients and pollsters is so close that a number are able to write up their own surveys in the internal scripting language used to produce the online poll.

This generalised experience of academic clients is illustrative of a number of variables which contribute towards confidence. They are perceived as likely to use polling data responsibly, their expertise (or perceived expertise) is respected, and they have a good reputation amongst pollsters. In turn, they are given considerable autonomy in terms of the survey questions which they can field, being likely to be allowed to ask questions that no other client might. In figure 4 these clients would be to the far right, representing high confidence, and high autonomy.

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<sup>468</sup> FN515

<sup>469</sup> Interview 11-1

<sup>470</sup> FN620

### *Charities/Campaign Groups*

Charities and campaign groups are another large client base for polling organisations, though less likely to be repeat clients.<sup>471</sup> As might be expected, these organisations have an interest in public opinion data that supports their policy aims. Because of this interest, charities will be more likely to have precise questions that they wish to be fielded in order to advance their pre-defined aims.<sup>472</sup> This makes the survey design/iterative stage longer and more significant for these clients on average than for others – as rewriting questions, and persuading the client to deviate from their original questions to the proposed can prove to be more challenging. Alex’s comments on the length of this stage largely hold true; surveys that progress from fieldwork to published data in a few short days can have previously spent weeks in a back and forth iterative process as each party attempts compromise in a way which doesn’t damage their core concerns.

It is from the pool of charity clients that a great deal of the publicly available polling on many topics emerges. Whilst this type of work is, for the reasons given above, often time-intensive for pollsters it also tends to be used by clients for press releases and to gain media coverage.<sup>473</sup> It is therefore significant for the public understanding of positions on policy and generates public awareness of the polling organisation.

Charities and campaign groups, in contrast to academics, are more often one-off clients. In general their usage of polls is more likely to be in producing publicity materials and gaining news coverage and they may have reason to be reluctant to accept expert recommendations. This combination of variables results in what can be seen in Alex’s account, cautious polling work, with restrictions on their survey autonomy. Mapped on to figure 4, this client type may be found to the far left, representing low confidence, low autonomy.

### *Media*

The media’s client relationship with pollsters is idiosyncratic. A number of polling organisations maintain a regular relationship with a newspaper/broadcaster to produce regular voting intention polling and potentially additional data on a small number of other issues (for instance, party leadership approval). The setting of these types of questions is outside the scope of this discussion; the wording is well-established and remains consistent, it is often set by the pollsters, and is typically uncontroversial. Media clients will also from time to time desire polling on other issues. Whilst many individual

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<sup>471</sup> Ethnographic Interview 1

<sup>472</sup> FN520

<sup>473</sup> FN 423, 520, 604

journalists will have longstanding relationships with pollsters (a determining factor in trust), this is not always the case.<sup>474</sup>

Pollsters can be presented with difficult judgements by media requests. Polling requested by a journalist is likely to see publication, and therefore contribute to the polling organisation's profile. This likelihood of publication makes the risk that data is misrepresented more significant – any misrepresentation would be widely communicated.<sup>475</sup> Furthermore, when dealing with the press, there are no press releases to check, and thus no final check against misrepresentation. As noted by one pollster in conversation “we check press releases, we don't check journalist copy. That said, we're always happy to check their copy if they want, that's our moral responsibility”.<sup>476</sup> Whilst this comment raises another issue (moral responsibility, which is addressed in Chapter 6.3.1), it demonstrates the limited control pollsters possess over poll usage in news media. On occasion during observations, pollsters would attempt to mediate these concerns, for instance agreeing to provide data on the proviso that a pollster can also produce some written material to go alongside the data, so that it is not misleading or misconstrued.<sup>477</sup>

The particularly complex relationship between media clients and pollsters makes identifying variables relating to confidence and autonomy more challenging. However, the key issues at the core of this work (excepting voting intention and other regular polling) are the existence of prior relationships, (previously noted as significant in trust), and usage of polls. This results in a tension between greater and lesser autonomy.

### *Business*

Business clients are commercial entities seeking data which will inform their activities. They are regular commissioners of political polling. Due to their core interests in the data usually centring on understanding consumers, or aspects of commercial sensitivity, work done on their behalf is infrequently published. Given that valuable data for businesses is therefore data which is accurate, rather than data which indicates what a business would prefer, they are more likely to adapt to pollsters' recommendations, or keep surveys consistent with previously commissioned work for ease of comparison. Though larger organisations may place more exacting demands on how data is presented to them – through slides, graphs, workbooks and other time-consuming tasks – the fact that their data most often remains private leads to a straightforward relationship with pollsters. This flexible relationship reinforces that the key concern for pollsters is around the public misrepresentation of their work.

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<sup>474</sup> FN618

<sup>475</sup> FN425

<sup>476</sup> FN629

<sup>477</sup> FN425



Businesses are often clients who have considerable research budgets. They are therefore more likely to commission bespoke polls (as discussed at 5.4.1). These larger polls might often have entire days set aside for the analysis and presentation of data. These projects might be longer term or multi-wave contracts, leading to existing relationships becoming a significant factor in the trust afforded.

The experience of business clients indicates the significance of poll usage in survey autonomy. Whilst there is considerable pressure to provide good work, well presented and to specification, there is also less risk inherent in the common ways in which businesses use polling. It is usually evident to pollsters when research is intended to be used privately rather than put into the public domain: as one pollster put it “you don’t see this [commission] and think I wonder if they’re going to publish this”.<sup>478</sup> As businesses often commission polling for internal use, and the fact that it will remain internal is evident, pollsters can be confident in the way the material will be used, and that use presents little risk of wider misrepresentation of an issue. This client type would map to mid-to-high confidence and autonomy.

### *Policy Makers*

Policy makers are the final major group of polling commissioners, noted by pollsters throughout observations to constitute a large proportion of clients for a number of polling organisations.<sup>479</sup> The broad term ‘policy makers’ covers a variety of government departments, local government, select committees, etc. These are prestigious clients because conducting research on their behalf aligns with one of the ideals of polling discussed in Chapter 1.3, connecting citizens with governors.<sup>480</sup> In some regards, pollsters’ relationships with them are similar to those with business clients, as their work is infrequently published. Yet in other regards they are quite different. For instance policy makers may have an interest in a specific outcome (e.g. hoping a tested policy is well received by the public), and as a consequence they may have more specific interest in question design.<sup>481</sup> This was reflected in a discussion amongst the team during discussions of the recruitment of a new member of staff who would take on several policy maker clients: “we need someone who will push back against bad questions”.<sup>482</sup>

Polling data is valuable to these clients, but it is less than clear how the data is utilised, and how influential it is in decision making. The fast turnaround of online polling is often significant in attracting these clients; after releasing data to policy makers, press releases or policy statements would sometimes

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<sup>478</sup> Interview 11-2

<sup>479</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6

<sup>480</sup> Ali Unwin, ‘Why daily polling really matters’, YouGov, 16 May 2011, <<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2011/05/16/why-daily-polling-really-matters/>> [accessed 01/01/17]

<sup>481</sup> FN511

<sup>482</sup> FN626

follow within hours.<sup>483</sup> Pollsters noted that they felt it unlikely that it was their data which was a deciding factor in policy, but instead informed strategy around how to approach its announcement.

These interactions are informative in explaining confidence and autonomy. Though polls for this client type are infrequently published, as we can see from the “push back” comment, pollsters are still cautious in their approach. Poll usage can be identified as a significant component of this caution – though polls are unlikely to be published, they may well inform policy, or inform the strategy around how policy is announced and communicated.<sup>484</sup> These factors might see such clients as mapped in the centre of figure 4, with medium confidence and autonomy.

#### 5.4.2.3 Summary

Through these summaries of complex relationships, the varied experiences of commissioning a poll reveal the impact of confidence on autonomy. Further, the examples demonstrate the variables which determine this confidence. Having explored these variables through the discussion of clients, they are summarised below in table 3.

Variable	Explanation
Prior Relationship	<i>Has there been successful previous work with the organisation?</i>
Intended/Presumed use of poll	<i>How will the poll be presented and in what form? What impacts (policy) might the poll lead to? Public/private?</i>
Expertise	<i>Does the client possess (or respect the pollster’s) survey expertise?</i>
Reputation	<i>The positive/negative public reputation of the commissioning client</i>

*Table 3 - Variables affecting confidence*

These variables can be used to determine pollsters’ judgements relating to confidence, which in turn allow us to understand the variation between clients in terms of the autonomy they are permitted in fielding questions. As noted by one interviewee, “we live in a world where... [results] can be interpreted correctly or interpreted incorrectly or be deliberately made to be interpreted incorrectly and certain clients will do that more than others”.<sup>485</sup> This affects the window of acceptable survey design for a client, and therefore influences the types of questions that are fielded and the way they are presented. These relationships and the factors that shape them are therefore a significant element of understanding the overall output of political pollsters.

<sup>483</sup> FN511

<sup>484</sup> FN511

<sup>485</sup> Interview 11-3

Outside a prior relationship, it was evident that intended (or presumed) use of a poll is the most significant determinant factor for client autonomy. In interviews, pollsters identified the usage of a poll as the primary factor in their judgements, but not to the exclusion of the other aspects of expertise and client reputation.<sup>486</sup> As noted in Alex's account, challenges to expertise and professionalism could have serious consequences for a poll, and reputation, though a less influential factor can in certain circumstances be an important consideration. This was noted by one interviewee, stating that "we should poll for whoever and anyone, the other side of the balance is, we are a commercial company... we wouldn't do something that did huge reputational damage to the business".<sup>487</sup> Though a rare circumstance, this may apply to organisations publicly perceived as extreme or distasteful.

Judgements relating to confidence and autonomy are often not conscious evaluations against these variables, which are made on a case by case basis, nor do they lead to parameters of acceptable polling which are strict or well defined. Instead these factors often unconsciously inform the habitual, routine decisions that pollsters make on an everyday basis. This is often done through using client type (a similar typology as that used in here) as a heuristic of these variables. When collaborating on question design, the question would often be asked "who's the client". The response to this question would invariably be a client's type, and not a client's name.<sup>488</sup> This heuristic was further acknowledged in interviews, with one interviewee noting, for instance that:

"There is some utility in the understanding that when you're approached by a company rather than a charity they're going to want to be doing different things... I think that it's both a convenient categorisation that helps us understand human behaviour in a way, categorising the world in order to help us understand it, but it also actually provided a useful guide as to how to deal with clients".<sup>489</sup>

This heuristic therefore demonstrates the influence of confidence and autonomy in polling and shows that not all polls are treated the same way. This assessment of client-pollster relationships and the resulting schema is a direct response to the question posed within this chapter (how can we understand polling practices?). Individual agency and decision making in these common polling practices are identified, explained and significantly linked to polling outputs.

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<sup>486</sup> Interview 11-5

<sup>487</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6

<sup>488</sup> FN601

<sup>489</sup> Interview 11-4

## 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter was focused around a guiding question: how can we understand polling practices? The answer to this question has provided a robust picture of who pollsters are, and what pollsters do: their day-to-day structure, environment, practices, and interactions with clients. In addition, the account and analysis within the chapter identified norms and traditions which influence polling practices and began to assess the significance of these practices overall (a process continued in the remainder of this thesis). These insights matter because they speak directly to an explanation of the type, nature and availability of political polls.

The account I provided in this chapter reflected the experiences of working in one polling organisation. In a polling industry with a variety of different types of organisations (as noted in Chapter 4.2), this account is therefore a perspective based on working in a particular organisation, at a particular time. Whilst the account is not generalisable as the experience of polling across organisations, its assessment is relevant to an understanding of the industry. The account, and the analysis which followed, produced insights and raised questions for how the practices of political polling are understood. Theoretical explanations were generated, rooted in close study of one of the UK's largest political polling organisations. For example, the assessment of client/pollster relations in 5.4.2 (noted as a familiar challenge in interviews with pollsters from different polling organisations) provides a detailed perspective on a particular challenge facing pollsters, and an explanation of the dynamics of these relationships. In this way, the chapter has been an exploration of how understanding practice improves an understanding of polls.

I presented a complex portrait of the actors involved, individuals with high levels of political knowledge, placed into a shared cultural experience of learning to poll. This emphasises the significance of experienced colleagues, but also of a wider understanding of the day-to-day norms and traditions, because it is through those cultural factors that pollsters find themselves routinized to the work of polling.

Alex's story provides an empirical account of the realities of polling practices on an everyday level, which whilst directly analysed in the second half of this chapter, remains significant to the further exploration of the research question carried out in Chapters 6 and 7.

Through the account and its analysis, several significant ideas are developed. The understanding of the work of polling is more complicated than an understanding of the methods used. The different types of polling engaged with by political pollsters were identified, and the application of method in their delivery charted – revealing a varied approach to polling in order to maintain internal standards. The

significance of norms and traditions, as opposed to distinct policy, in the conduct of political polling were identified.

Finally, a widely noted (as discussed in Chapter 2.4) but largely unexplored area was approached – the effect of the client on the pollster. Through exploring these relationships from the perspective of a pollster, the ways in which polling activity varies between different political commissions were identified and a means of understanding this variance was provided which is based on the confidence pollsters have in how data will be used.

## 6 | Chapter 6 – The Role of Polls and Pollsters

### 6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5 I explored the practices of polling and the many instances in which individual agency is a key component of practice. In this chapter I cast light on the factors which inform that agency, providing a means to understand and explain the decisions that pollsters make in their everyday practice, and the impact this has on polling outputs.

Previous interpretive and ethnographic studies (as discussed in Chapter 3.2.2) have focused on the narratives and beliefs of groups as an important aspect of understanding their practices. Bevir and Rhodes “argue that social contexts influence, as distinct from govern, the nature of individuals”.<sup>490</sup> This was noted in Chapter 1.2; individual pollsters do not act independent of context. Beliefs and narratives help actors to build context around their experiences.<sup>491</sup> This chapter therefore focuses on improving our understanding of the practices detailed in Chapter 5, by unpicking the social context which informs polling.

I frame this effort around a particular question: what do pollsters consider their role, and that of their work to be? By delving into the question of pollsters’ beliefs regarding key issues in their work, from specific questions of ‘what are polls for?’ to broader questions of ‘why do we conduct polls?’ we can better understand the context and values (noted in 3.2.2 alongside norms and traditions) which influence decision making (and therefore practice). These understandings can be used to better explain political polling, as is undertaken in Chapter 7.3.

To address this question, I first return to the discussions of Worcester’s framework of poll usage in Chapter 2.3 (reporting, analytical, predictive). This framing is used to guide an exploration of the usage of polls from an ethnographic perspective. In doing so, I appraise the uses of polls in light of the everyday account provided in this thesis, consider what this reveals about the beliefs of pollsters on the role of polls, and identify the ways in which this influences their practice.

I then move from pollsters’ beliefs regarding the specific uses of polling to reflect on broader themes. I introduce a series of narratives which pollsters raised throughout participant observation to frame their work. These narratives are scrutinised to reveal the underlying social context in which polling takes place. This provides useful insight into narratives around polling, but also gets to the heart of the above

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<sup>490</sup> Rod Rhodes, ‘Theory, Method and British Political Life History’, *Political Studies Review*, 10 (2012) 161-176 (p.168.) discussing Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes, *Interpreting British Governance*, (London, Routledge, 2003)

<sup>491</sup> Norman Denzin, *Interpretive Biography*, (Newbury Park: SAGE, 1989) p. 81.

discussions on the beliefs which influence the agency of those who conduct polling. These narratives relate to polling for the common good, polling as a profit driven practice, and polling as publicly available research.

In identifying pollsters' beliefs around the use of polls (in 6.2) and through an assessment of narratives (in 6.3), a rounded perspective is produced of the values and social context which are an influential force in the practice of political polling. This adds to the overall contribution of the thesis by not only identifying everyday polling practices, but by building the means to understand and explain them.

## 6.2 What are Polls for?

As seen within the literature review, there are varying perspectives on how political polls are used and to what ends. Here I bring back the distinctions offered by Worcester to structure an exploration of pollsters' own views relating to these uses – demonstrated through an assessment of their practice and of their perspectives collected through participant observation and interviews. That structure was:

‘Reporting – What is happening

Analytical – Why is it happening

Predictive – (in the case of some type of contest) Who is going to win’.<sup>492</sup>

By looking at the way in which pollsters engage with these different uses of polling, the influence of pollsters' beliefs on their practice can be assessed, whilst also engaging with the existing literature as presented in Chapter 2.3.

### 6.2.1 Reporting

In Chapter 2.3.1, I noted that reporting was the most straightforward of the uses of polling. An assessment of the literature gave a robust account of how polling is reported (often through the media) and the effects of such reporting. Pollsters' perspectives are similarly straightforward; reporting the findings of a poll is a function widely understood and accepted by political pollsters. Polls often feed directly into media coverage, with polling being commissioned to “give the news media access to

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<sup>492</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 121.

exclusive news”.<sup>493</sup> However, the relationship between polling and the media is shifting, and with it shifts the ways in which polls are reported.<sup>494</sup> Many polls which are reported do not come from a direct commission from a media outlet. Polls are instead provided to the media by other clients (often through press releases) seeking coverage for their issue. Furthermore, polls no longer require traditional media coverage to be reported, with social media and other digital technologies making decentralised dissemination of polls far easier. In this sub-section, I assess the changing ways in which polls are reported and reflect on pollster’s understandings of their role in relation to these changes. First, I focus on the ways in which polls enter the traditional media. This focus allows engagement with existing literature, concerned as much of it is with media reporting (as discussed in Chapter 2.3.1) and reflects the intent of much privately commissioned polling, a desire for media coverage (noted in 5.4.2). Second, I reflect on the self-publishing of polls by pollsters through social media, and what this reveals about how pollsters understand the role of polls.

The everyday experience of polling reinforces many aspects of the analysis found within existing literature regarding the ways polling is reported through the media. For instance, the idea that poll questions conform to media narratives (discussed in Chapter 2.3.1) fits with the observations of everyday practice where media narratives are identified in meetings and targeted with internal questions (discussed in Chapter 5.4.1).<sup>495</sup> Or the assessment that polls represent to the media an opportunity for exclusive news (discussed in Chapter 2.3.1) which was evident throughout pollster’s interactions with the media (discussed in Chapter 5.4.2).<sup>496</sup> This was explicitly noted by one interviewee, who stated that the media “will prize exclusivity over anything else, so they quite happily showed the same results [as a different poll commissioned for another media organisation] three days later from another pollster provided it was their exclusively”.<sup>497</sup>

Outside of the direct relationship between polling and the media, we have a less complete understanding of the dynamics of poll reporting. A great quantity of political polling reported is not produced through media commission, or in response to media narrative. The patronage of polls by the media has long been on the decline. Pollsters attribute this to a combination of factors, for instance noting the increased budgetary constraints for traditional media clients, and the decreased enthusiasm for commissioning

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<sup>493</sup> Jesper Stromback, ‘The Media and Their use of opinion polls: reflecting and shaping public opinion’, in *Opinion Polls and the Media*, ed. by Christina Holtz-Bacha and Jesper Stromback (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 1-22 (p. 13.)

<sup>494</sup> Roger Mortimore and Anthony Wells, ‘The Polls and Their Context’ in *Political Communication in Britain*, Ed. by Dominic Wring and others, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) pp.19-38

<sup>495</sup> Maria Sobolewska and Sundas Ali, ‘Who speaks for Muslims? The role of the press in the creation and reporting of Muslim public opinion polls in the aftermath of London bombings in July 2005’, *Ethnicities*, 15.5 (2015) 675-695

<sup>496</sup> Jesper Stromback, ‘The Media and Their use of opinion polls: reflecting and shaping public opinion’, in *Opinion Polls and the Media*, ed. by Christina Holtz-Bacha and Jesper Stromback (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 1-22 (p. 13.)

<sup>497</sup> Interview 11-6



polling by newspapers following notable polling ‘misses’ in the general election of 2015 and subsequent EU referendum.<sup>498</sup> As such, the perspectives of existing literature on the ways in which polls enter and are reported by the media require some renewal.<sup>499</sup>

To contribute to this, I address the ways in which the changes to *who* is involved in reporting polls can impact *how* polls are reported. This provides insight on pollsters’ perspectives on the reporting of polls, and the ways their practice reflects this. As a result of the changing relationship between polling and media, the way in which polling increasingly enters the media is through commercial commissions by a third party.<sup>500</sup> These third parties are the clients commissioning political polling, (as identified in Chapter 5.4.2), and their importance and significance in the reporting of polls is growing whilst existing literature has a focus on a bilateral relationship between pollsters and the media.<sup>501</sup>

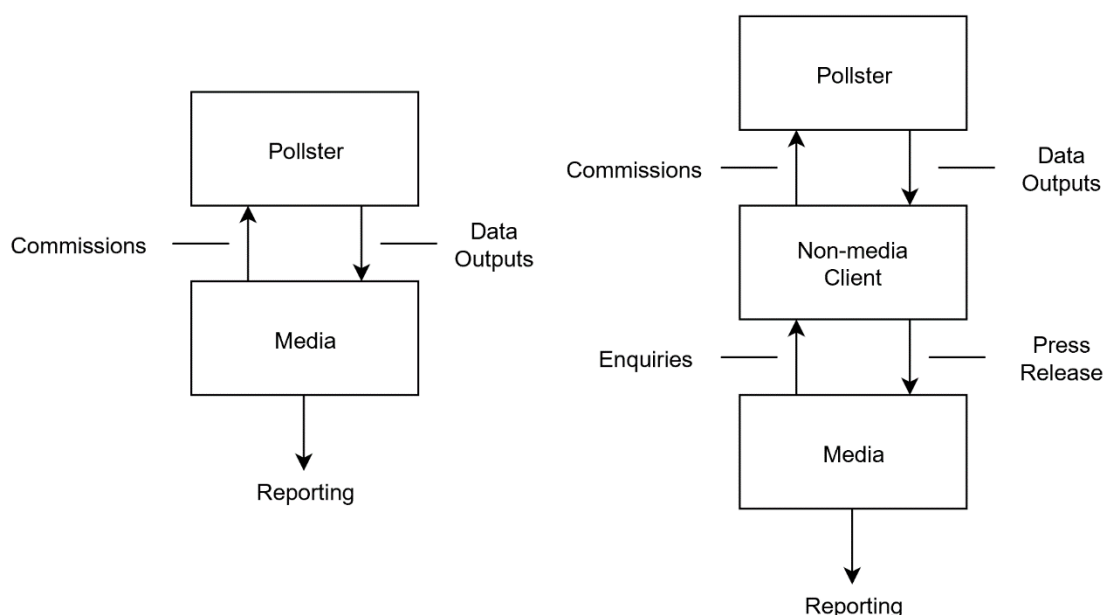


Figure 5 – Polling and media coverage

Though not a comprehensive account of the large variety of polling which is commissioned (as discussed in Chapter 5.4), figure 5 is illustrative of the ways in which commissioned polls enter the media and the significantly different routes they take when doing so. Whilst, for example, *The Independent* newspaper might report on unmediated voting intention polls that it had commissioned through a pollster by being sent the data tables and drawing on the data for their reportage, a large amount of client commissions are released to the media through press release.<sup>502</sup>

<sup>498</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>499</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6

<sup>500</sup> FN423

<sup>501</sup> See for instance, Christina Holtz-Bacha and Jesper Stromback *Opinion Polls and the Media*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) pp. 91-197.

<sup>502</sup> Interview 11-4 & FN626

Client involvement has two consequences for how polls are reported. Firstly, there is an additional layer of selectivity in terms of which polls get reported. Though the media has a definitive say in what receives coverage, clients are responsible for topic selection and can choose to withhold data that was originally intended for publication. This is a significant effect: as noted in Chapter 2.3.1 accessibility of information can cause “changes in standards that people use to make political evaluations”, so the availability of polling information is therefore not a neutral fact.<sup>503</sup> Secondly, clients who are interested in having their polls covered will tend towards publishing their results as part of a press release. This means that a third party beyond the pollsters and the media is involved who is able to contextualise or pre-empt the release of data with a narrative which is reported on.<sup>504</sup> This results in the reporting and analytical functions of polling being increasingly interwoven. This sort of secondary usage of polling data was a concern to Worcester in 1991, who noted in restrained terms that it could be “sometimes careless”.<sup>505</sup> This same concern was articulated by pollsters throughout the fieldwork observations.<sup>506</sup>

As noted in Chapter 2.3.2, reporters of poll data tend to also provide causal explanations for such data. With an increase in clients being an intermediary of polling information to the media, journalists are more likely to be exposed to the causal explanations of clients before they have engaged with the data themselves. Though Chapter 5 noted that part of the work of political pollsters is to check press releases, this activity is generally constrained to checking that data is accurately depicted.<sup>507</sup> As long as data is presented faithfully, pollsters seem less concerned with interpretation of results by a client, which is felt to sit outside their role. As such, the narrative built around polls in press releases can be expected to have had minimal involvement from pollsters. This means future research on the relationship between the media and polls needs to consider commissioning parties, with their incumbent interests as discussed in Chapter 5.4.2.

Pollsters themselves are active in reporting, and seeking coverage for, their own internal polls. The design of the weekly meetings of the political team (seen in Chapter 5.4.1) is intended to allow political pollsters to respond to and hijack existing reporting to insert their data into ongoing stories and debates, and use their own website and social media presence as an avenue for publishing polls and reports. Though authors such as Hogan suggest that polls can shut down debate, the ways in which the political team organised their own polling (though not the polling of their clients) was deliberately intended to

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<sup>503</sup> Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, *News that matters: Television and American opinion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) p. 691.

<sup>504</sup> FN0605

<sup>505</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 125.

<sup>506</sup> FN509

<sup>507</sup> FN503

engage with, develop, or produce new political debate.<sup>508</sup> During my interviews, political pollsters reflected on the effect of polls on debates and stories:

“I think of the number of times that we have taken a relatively small story, done polling on it and it has become a bigger story, for instance”.<sup>509</sup>

“What other stuff is going on outside the stuff we’re hearing on the *Today* programme that actually lots of people in the population are interested in, that won’t be captured if we just talk about what the top political issue of the day is”.<sup>510</sup>

Far from shutting down debate, the intention behind many polls seems to be encouraging it. Many of the less political, and more light hearted surveys are indeed inspired by the types of intra-office debates that will be familiar to many, such as the correct pronunciation and order of fillings for a scone, or which condiment is superior.<sup>511</sup> This is an element of organisational culture that has been successfully propagated; “When the public answer our surveys they become part of the public discourse on anything”.<sup>512</sup>

## 6.2.2 Analytical

The analytical function of polls involves using the data within polls to derive further insight. This is an important function of polling: as Worcester noted, “the interpretation of their [the polls] meaning [is] the essential product”.<sup>513</sup> Yet Broughton noted that much analysis would lack the “sober and, above all, tentative prose which characterises a sound grasp of the nuances and complexities of polling data”.<sup>514</sup> As in reporting, much literature regarding this aspect focused primarily on the roles of the media and academia. However, just as pollsters have increasingly published and presented their own work, so do they with their own analysis. The involvement of pollsters in political analysis is not a revelation – they are a significant component of the active debate and analysis around polling results. Any lack of focus from literature in this regard is not an oversight, but a reflection of two factors: a change within the sector (Gallup, Cantril, and Worcester were writing before social media provided a capacity for all pollsters to regularly publish and promote their own analysis with greater ease); and an assumption that

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<sup>508</sup> J Michael Hogan, ‘Gallup and the Rhetoric of Scientific Democracy’, *Communication Monographs*, 64:2, (1997) 161-179 (p. 177.)

<sup>509</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>510</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>511</sup> FN509

<sup>512</sup> FN508

<sup>513</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 130.

<sup>514</sup> David Broughton, *Public Opinion Polling and Politics in Britain*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995) p. 120.

the fact that pollsters conducted analysis was self-evident, with prolific figures such as Gallup and Worcester being pollsters and providing polling analysis. In this sub-section a further point is demonstrated – analysis is understood by pollsters to be a key element of their role, not only for senior and prominent figures, but for all political pollsters.

It is evident that the ‘big beasts’ of polling are (and always have been) heavily involved in the analysis of polls, through their record in publishing and regular invitation to comment on polls. What is less understood is the extent to which this is a fundamental element of the job of polling, or a proclivity amongst a handful of senior figures. However, experience at the everyday level shows a great focus from all staff at conducting analysis at all levels. Some pollsters had job titles including ‘analyst’, others would note that the team were “all political analysts” to potential clients, and even the interns within the department would seek to put out analytical pieces on polling data.<sup>515</sup> Ensuring a semi-regular flow of polling analysis is an expected part of work for all pollsters, rather than an exceptional step for a senior few.

To contextualise the abundance of analytical work conducted by political pollsters, it is worth reflecting on the characteristics of pollsters discussed in Chapter 5.2. The hiring process for new pollsters has a heavy focus on political knowledge. This places pollsters in a good position to approach question design for political polls, but it is reflective of the centrality of polling analysis in the work of a pollster at all levels of seniority. Having been recruited with their political knowledge as a primary criterion, pollsters are asked to utilise that experience, and are keen to do so. Gallup noted that “the poll-director has a great mass of poll data... the political writer has a lot of insight into politics and government that the poll director does not have”.<sup>516</sup> Given the discussions of Chapter 5.2, the qualities noted by Gallup are now both found in the political pollster. When dealing with media or client enquiries pollsters would often describe themselves accordingly, informing them “we’re political analysts”.<sup>517</sup> The analysis conducted by the team ranges from academic articles and book chapters, to more journalistic outputs – writing web articles or news pieces and being interviewed for broadcasts.<sup>518</sup> Whilst it is seen as acceptable for the team to hold opinions (although many political pollsters would joke that in the business of measuring opinions, they have stopped holding any of their own), they are encouraged and aided by senior team members to make sure their work does not stray to heavily into ‘comment’ rather than analysis.<sup>519</sup>

The extent to which pollsters are expected to act analytically is important not just as a clarification to the literature, but because the analytical function informs topic selection for the political team’s own

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<sup>515</sup> FN501

<sup>516</sup> George Gallup, *The Sophisticated Poll Watcher’s Guide* (Princeton: Princeton Opinion Press, 1972) p. 117.

<sup>517</sup> FN615

<sup>518</sup> FN615

<sup>519</sup> FN508-3

internal polling questions. Though there is not a formal process, nor a requirement for this work to be done, pollsters undertake it out of political curiosity. In interviews, several pollsters described the process as such:

“I don’t think it was a directive, I think it was more an open opportunity... ‘have you had an idea that would be useful, if so when we’ve got some space we’ll put it on’.”<sup>520</sup>

“Interesting things you happen to observe, in a way, around you... you develop a hypothesis and you want to test it, its reasonably similar I would imagine to the way that most academic hypotheses are coming up, we just have an easier and quicker way of testing it.”<sup>521</sup>

Worcester’s assessment of the import of using polls analytically has long been an accurate depiction. What is demonstrated from a close analysis of everyday polling practices is the extent to which this drive to produce analysis is disseminated throughout all political pollsters, and not simply senior figures. Pollsters understand their role as including that of analyst, and this informs their practices accordingly. This demonstrates links between individual beliefs and practices. Pollsters understand their role to be analytical, and the need to produce analysis influences the topic selection of internal polls and encourages pollsters to explore their own interests (a significant point, given the agenda setting effects discussed in Chapter 2.3.1).

### 6.2.3 Predictive

The capacity for polling to predict future events (usually elections or other votes) was noted by Worcester as polling’s “least effective” function.<sup>522</sup> Chapter 2.3.3 noted a similar caution for the use of polls in this regard throughout the literature. Pollsters’ beliefs surrounding prediction are much the same. Though some aspects of polls’ predictive capabilities are embraced by pollsters, they generally caution against its use in this regard.<sup>523</sup> This caution is usually related to the reach of the prediction – polling closer to an event tends to provide a better estimation of its result.<sup>524</sup> This sub-section considers the cautious relationship between pollsters and prediction and what it reveals about the beliefs of pollsters.

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<sup>520</sup> Interview 11-4

<sup>521</sup> Interview 11-3

<sup>522</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 121.

<sup>523</sup> Ethnographic Interview 1

<sup>524</sup> Courtney Kennedy and others, ‘An evaluation of the 2016 Election Polls in the United States’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 82.1 (2018) 1-33 (p. 4)

Prediction is a useful function for polling. As noted in Chapter 5.4.2, YouGov's successful 'prediction' of the television contest 'Pop Idol' in 2002 was seen as instrumental for the young organisation, and its publicity materials continue to celebrate the organisation's track record in predicting events.<sup>525</sup> Predictive claims are embraced when it's good for business, but pollsters think they and the media have become better at avoiding excesses of this behaviour –they would suggest, all voting intention polling is inherently (and problematically) seen by the public as predictive.<sup>526</sup>

When discussing predictive claims, though pollsters were cautious about the idea that their work could be used to predict the future, they were interested with the idea that polls may influence it.<sup>527</sup> In particular, they were interested in how others may use their polls predictively to inform policy, campaign activity, etc. An illustrative example of this was a discussion around the Scottish Independence Referendum, a source of much reflection by the YouGov team, given the way in which their polling became so influential on the campaign.<sup>528</sup>

During the campaign for the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014, polling figures from all major pollsters fluctuated, and showed a narrowing gap between the two sides, but the 'no' option (that of remaining within the union), was usually ahead. Polls closed from large margins of 15-22% in favour of 'no' at the outset of the campaign to smaller margins, often with both sides within the margin of error, in the final weeks of the campaign.<sup>529</sup> On the 7<sup>th</sup> September, just under two weeks before the vote, a YouGov poll showed 'yes' ahead at 52 to 48.<sup>530</sup> The poll was seen by many as a shock and was followed by a rush of campaigning in Scotland, with the three main party leaders agreeing to miss Prime Minister's questions to head to Scotland, promising further devolution.<sup>531</sup> The extent to which this was informed by a poll showing the reversal of fortune is unclear, but it appeared to have had some effect, with then Prime Minister David Cameron overheard stating "I want to find these polling companies and I want to sue them for my stomach ulcers because of what they've put me through".<sup>532</sup>

A similar view to this – that the polls had caused an unnecessary sense of pressure on the campaign, was expressed in the House of Lords, with Lord Foulkes noting during the proposal of new polling regulation:

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<sup>525</sup> Interview 11-6 ;YouGov, *Panel Methodology*, YouGov, <<https://yougov.co.uk/about/panel-methodology/>> [accessed 18/01/19]

<sup>526</sup> Interview 11-3

<sup>527</sup> FN611

<sup>528</sup> Lord Foulkes of Cumnock, *Hansard*, HL Deb. Vol.762 Col. 1336, June 2015

<sup>529</sup> Anthony Wells, 'YouGov shows YES campaign ahead in Scotland', UKPollingReport , 6 September 2014, <<http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/blog/archives/8957>> [accessed 25/03/19]

<sup>530</sup> Ibid.

<sup>531</sup> Charlie Jeffrey, 'The United Kingdom After the Scottish Referendum' in *Developments in British Politics 10*, ed. by Richard Heffernan and others, (London: Palgrave, 2016) 244-263 (pp. 251-253.)

<sup>532</sup> David Cameron, As quoted in Andrew Woodcock, *David Cameron: The Queen Purred after no vote*, The Scotsman, 23 September 2014, <<https://www.scotsman.com/news/uk/david-cameron-the-queen-purred-after-no-vote-1-3550044>> [accessed 7 August 2018]

“What reinforced for me the point that accurate polling is an important issue for the future of our democracy was the one rogue YouGov poll held on 7 September 2014 that seemed to indicate for the first time in the referendum that the Yes campaign was ahead, by 51% to 49%. ... Indeed, the course of history was changed by that one inaccurate poll”.<sup>533</sup>

YouGov pollsters, even those for whom 2014 was before their time, were frustrated by this characterisation – seeing it as an incorrect assumption that the poll was wrong and intended to be predictive.<sup>534</sup> Indeed the poll, a fortnight away from the vote, was considered quite likely right, and in line with trends at the time “it was heading towards that crossover point anyway, it’s just the poll happened to pick it up at that time”.<sup>535</sup> Most polls at this point in the campaign showed an effective tie between Yes and No – either outcome was within the margin of error. This was not a rogue poll in the sense of being an extreme outlier.<sup>536</sup> Where several political pollsters agreed with Foulkes’ assessment was that the poll changed the course of the campaign:

“Our poll crashed the pound, and resulted in... well not necessarily resulted, but the three leaders go up to Scotland to promise more laws. Now that, that is hugely impactful, and... it’s not even that YouGov has that effect, but 7 people [the political team conducting the poll] in YouGov”.<sup>537</sup>

“Our poll helped No win it, because it showed the complacency in the No campaign, and it was two weeks before the result, and I genuinely believe that Yes was ahead at that point”.<sup>538</sup>

Pollsters acknowledge a limited predictive function of polls; the predictive value of polls is not that they are a straightforward prediction of a future political event, but that by showing an accurate position of the time at which a poll was conducted, they prompt reactions in political and campaigning activity. Where Lord Foulkes appeared to identify the poll of the 7<sup>th</sup> September 2014 being different from the result of the vote on the 18<sup>th</sup> September as a sign that it was bad polling, pollsters interpret the difference as a sign that it was a poll used well. In their view, the poll was not a definitive prediction, but an assessment of current circumstance, from which reasonable inference could be drawn. Whilst prediction may be the “least effective” function of polls in terms of their capacity to accurately perform this function, the use of polls to make reasonable predictive inferences can be linked to impacts on political outcomes.<sup>539</sup> This soft predictive function is a perspective of polls entirely in line with YouGov’s

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<sup>533</sup> Lord Foulkes of Cumnock, *Hansard*, HL Deb. Vol.762 Col. 1336, June 2015

<sup>534</sup> Ethnographic Interview 1

<sup>535</sup> Ethnographic Interview 4

<sup>536</sup> Anthony Wells, Scottish Independence Referendum, UKPollingReport, [n.d.]

<<http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/scottish-independence-referendum>> [accessed 25/03/19]

<sup>537</sup> Ethnographic Interview 1

<sup>538</sup> Ethnographic Interview 1

<sup>539</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 121.

organisational mission statement, that public participation in polls results in better informed political decision making (further addressed in 6.3.1).<sup>540</sup>

#### 6.2.4 Summary

This exploration of three different functions of polls from an ethnographic perspective has provided a number of insights into the ways in which pollsters understand their role (in relation to poll usage), and the influence of this on their practice. Having first looked at reporting, it was shown that the ways in which polling finds its way into media coverage has changed, with potential implications for how polling is framed. Additionally, the behaviours of pollsters were highlighted which are designed to prompt and sustain political debates. Turning to analytical uses of polling, it was shown that analysis was a significant feature of the work of all political pollsters, not solely senior figures. Furthermore, this analysis can be linked to topic selection for internal commissions. Finally, the complicated relationship between pollsters and predictions was explored, reflecting on their role in changing political events.

The assessment of the uses of polls is illustrative of the ways in which pollsters think about their work, and the link this has to their practice. It reveals specific beliefs about how polls should be used (as noted above) and the ways in which these values are an important influence on the actions and agency of those who conduct polling, a point furthered in the next section of this chapter.

Although the account above is based on my fieldwork with YouGov, interviews with pollsters from other organisations indicated that the discussion around poll usage resonates in other organisations, from the increased analysis expected from pollsters, to pollsters' concerns surrounding using polls predictively.<sup>541</sup>

### 6.3 Why do we Conduct Polling?

In the previous section of this chapter I addressed the perspectives of pollsters on the usage of polls, and the ways in which this influences practice. In this section, I move to a broader discussion of pollsters' beliefs relating to their work. This is done through posing and then critically assessing a

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<sup>540</sup> YouGov, *About us*, YouGov <<https://yougov.co.uk/about/>> [accessed 1 November 2019]

<sup>541</sup> Interview 11-6, Interview 27-1



number of narratives which relate to political polling, specifically narratives that were raised by pollsters (often to contrast against the realities of practice) during participant observation for this thesis.

As noted in this chapter's introduction, narratives are a significant part of establishing the social context of a particular group – providing coherence to their activities.<sup>542</sup> In the context of political polls, they also contribute to the discourse surrounding polling, and affect the way those involved with polls may understand the product that they are engaging with. Assessing narratives therefore represents an opportunity to engage with important stories about polling whilst also providing a means to identify and understand the values and social context which influences the individual practice seen in Chapter 5.

In this section, I focus on three broad narratives which emerged frequently in observations and in interviews, and which are also woven throughout publicly available literature and commentary on political opinion polling. I will commence by exploring the narrative that political opinion polls exist for the common good. Early pollsters were firm proponents of this perspective. But contemporary pollsters now interpret their work in a different way. I discuss that new perspective and consider the consequences this has for the industry in terms of responsibility and ethics. Second, this section will challenge a more specific narrative which surrounds political polling, its role as a profit or not for profit product. This narrative exists at various levels and has been put forward in elite testimony to the PPDM. This section will disentangle the assumed link between political polling's status as publicity, and being non-profitable, and consider the implications. Finally, I will engage with the commissioning of polls which remain private. I will explore the role of the client in the publication and topic selection of polls, the perspectives and concerns of pollsters in this regard, and the ways the client role influences the practice of pollsters (as seen in Chapter 5.4.2).

### 6.3.1 For Common Good

As considered in Chapter 1.3, the early story told around political opinion polling and indeed its sales pitch by prominent figures such as Gallup was one of a great democratic good. According to Gallup, polls could “bridge the gap between the people and those who are responsible for making decisions in their name”.<sup>543</sup> The power of polls to connect the governed to the governors was a hugely exciting prospect for some, or for others a source of grave concern as it was felt that polling could undermine

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<sup>542</sup> Norman Denzin, *Interpretive Biography*, (Newbury Park: SAGE, 1989) p. 62.

<sup>543</sup> George Gallup and Saul Rae, *The Pulse of Democracy: The Public Opinion Poll and How it works*, (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1940) pp. 14-15.

the British representative system (appealing to the trustee model of the representative).<sup>544</sup> What is not clear is how modern pollsters understand this democratic aspect of their role. In this section I will draw on fieldwork observations and interviews to consider the ways in which pollsters' early ideas about how polls might revolutionise democracy have shifted. Having done so, I assess whether pollsters believe they have a role in promoting the common good.

The idea that public opinion is important to democracies has long been commonly held within the literature. Writing in 1922, Lippmann positioned public opinion as not just an important element of the democratic state, but as its foundational myth:

“democracies, if we are to judge them by the oldest and most powerful of them, have made a mystery out of public opinion... The more obvious angels, demons and kings are gone out of democratic thinking, but the need for believing that there are reserve powers of guidance persists, it persisted for those thinkers of the Eighteenth century who designed the matrix of democracy. They had a pale god, but warm hearts, and in the doctrine of popular sovereignty they found the answer to their need of an infallible origin for the new social order. There was mystery, and only enemies of the people touched it with profane and curious hands”.<sup>545</sup>

This idea persists; throughout interviews, observations, and in public statements most political pollsters identify polls as a key mechanism with which to discern public opinion.<sup>546</sup> Given this belief, it might reasonably follow that pollsters hold polls as having a significant democratic role. Hennessy proposed in the 1960s that pollsters saw political polls as a hugely significant democratic tool, one which acted as the great solution to the problem of representation.<sup>547</sup> As seen in Chapter 1.3 early pollsters espoused values which might position them as proponents of opinion sample majoritarianism – direct governance through opinion.<sup>548</sup> Hennessy noted that the reason we did not see pollsters directly supporting this type of majoritarianism was the lack of a technological solution to address the realities of such a system; the regularity, speed and accuracy of polling that would be required.<sup>549</sup> This view of polls as a solution to the problem of representation has not disappeared since it was noted by Hennessy. Indeed it is echoed in veiled terms in YouGov's explanation of daily polling, as discussed in Chapter 2:

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<sup>544</sup> Winston Churchill, Hansard, HC Deb. 30, vol .374 col.517, September 1941,; Hanna Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972) pp. 168-169.

<sup>545</sup> Walter Lippmann, 'The Image of Democracy', in *Public Opinion and Propaganda*, Ed. by Daniel Katz (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1965) 28-32 (p. 28.)

<sup>546</sup> Interview 11-3 ; See for instance, Anthony Wells, *Political Research*, YouGov, <<https://yougov.co.uk/solutions/sectors/political>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

<sup>547</sup> Bernard Hennessy, *Public Opinion* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1965) p. 130.

<sup>548</sup> J Michael Hogan, 'Gallup and the Rhetoric of Scientific Democracy', *Communication Monographs*, 64:2, (1997) 161-179 (p. 177.)

<sup>549</sup> Bernard Hennessy, *Public Opinion* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1965) p. 132.

“As Rousseau put it: “The English people believes itself to be free; it is gravely mistaken; it is free only during election of members of parliament; as soon as the members are elected, the people is enslaved; it is nothing.” Our polling data could be used to change this”.<sup>550</sup>

Within its polling apparatus YouGov has something approximating the technology to which Hennessy referred – general population samples that could be easily and frequently reached, and a turnaround from question to processed data in hours, a huge leap forward even from the 1990s, where nationally representative surveys could take over a week to complete.<sup>551</sup> Yet no opinion sample majoritarians were discovered within polling organisations during this research, suggesting they are a rarity among modern pollsters. YouGov’s stated position can be considered to have softened in terms of its role, moving from the above statement in 2011, to its more recent description of the organisation’s beliefs: “We believe in the power of participation... The more people are able to participate in the decisions made by the institutions that serve them, the better those decisions will be”.<sup>552</sup> This represents a slight, but nonetheless significant shift from a direct diagnosis of a flaw within the democratic system to which polling is the solution, to a more constrained position that polling is a means by which to augment the existing representative system. These perspectives have real implications for the conduct of polls, as will be discussed throughout this section – specifically how moral and ethical considerations that inform their question design and decision making are driven by perspectives on polling’s democratic function.

Political pollsters do not reject the idea that they have a democratic role of some kind, and it is a common belief amongst many. This can be seen in the ways in which pollsters distinguish the importance of their work from other areas of market research. As one interviewee expressed to me:

“People would say, ‘oh it doesn’t matter, it’s only a poll about tomato soup, it doesn’t really matter, it’s only a poll about washing powder’... Nobody says ‘oh it doesn’t really matter, it’s only a poll about abortion’”.<sup>553</sup>

In both fieldwork observations and in interviews, YouGov pollsters explicitly acknowledged the idea that political polling is democratically important, but also showed that there are important caveats. These were articulated during a conversation with one pollster: “I accept that we possibly do have a democratic role, but we’re also a company that needs to be accountable to shareholders and make money”.<sup>554</sup> Whilst pollsters may feel direct cues as to the functional role of polls (as discussed earlier in this chapter), discerning a conceptual role for their work is less straightforward as it is a reflective exercise on the utility of public opinion information in a democratic society and their own role in

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<sup>550</sup> Ali Unwin, *Why daily polling really matters*, YouGov, 16 May 2011, <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2011/05/16/why-daily-polling-really-matters/> [accessed 01/01/17]

<sup>551</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>552</sup> YouGov, *About us*, YouGov <<https://yougov.co.uk/about/>> [accessed 1 November 2019]

<sup>553</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>554</sup> FN516

providing that. The idea of a broader democratic role for political pollsters is one that can appear, superficially, abstracted from the day to day proceedings of their work. As such, it is not a regular focus of discussions or debates within the political team. However, during routine everyday practice, a number of terms and approaches are utilised which indicate these considerations have been made, such as “good polling”, “moral and ethical imperatives”, “power and moral responsibility in polling”.<sup>555</sup> When asked to elaborate upon these points in interviews, political pollsters provided the following explanations.

“[The importance of the work] attaches a responsibility to the work that you do and you become aware, well, good pollsters, become aware of this responsibility, become aware of its importance... This is an important world in which we operate and I like to think that, as I say good operators within the industry will... give it the respect that it deserves”.<sup>556</sup>

“I think it’s naïve to say that polling doesn’t have an effect. Given that polling does have an effect, that then adds [a] moral and ethical dimension into the debate. i.e. if the work that you are doing has real effects, you have to think about, seriously start thinking about whether the work you are doing is having, or should you start thinking about whether the work you’re doing is having positive or negative effects, should that come into the discussion?”.<sup>557</sup>

These responses reveal pollsters have a clear sense of responsibility in the work that they do and identify their work as both important and impactful. Political pollsters are not proponents of polls being the new basis of direct governance. Instead they identify the importance they possess in augmenting representative democracy and empowering representatives.<sup>558</sup>

Improving the quality of representation is not straightforward; Glynn argued that a simple responsiveness to public opinion is not inherently democratic if the quality of that opinion, or rather the quality of the process leading to that opinion, is flawed.<sup>559</sup> The sheer amount of survey design and data processing conducted by political pollsters puts them in a privileged position to recognise the fragility/volatility of opinion. Regular comments occur in day-to-day work that acknowledge this phenomenon and are often couched in terms similar to Converse and Zaller’s perspectives on opinion instability (as discussed in Chapter 2.2). Indeed, a number of pollsters had explicitly read and internalised the work of these two authors, and would raise it for discussion with me.<sup>560</sup> Though there

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<sup>555</sup> FN606, FN611, FN522

<sup>556</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>557</sup> Ethnographic Interview 7

<sup>558</sup> FN516

<sup>559</sup> Carroll Glynn and others, *Public Opinion*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999) p. 299.

<sup>560</sup> FN424, FN501, FN607

are many public examples of pollsters encouraging careful *use* of their product, some pollsters also expressed a concern that information should still be *provided* responsibly:<sup>561</sup>

“[An] argument was ‘we just innocently produce these figures and you know it's part of this grand democratic function that information is available’, and I've got some sympathy for that case, and ‘politicians need to stop taking it so seriously ultimately it's their job to make judgements you know and you know they shouldn't be beholden to our numbers’... I think on some level that's true but it kind of overlooks what I imagine... the daily workings of politics and life are... It's actually very difficult I imagine to find the time to sit back and calmly assess the evidence, balance it out and make a reasoned judgement and if you are struggling to find the time to do everything I actually think probably polls are a quite convenient heuristic”.<sup>562</sup>

Where pollsters hold this view, it can be seen reflected in their practice. Chapter 5.4.2 showed pollsters were reluctant to ask risky questions if they feared a client might use the resulting data irresponsibly. Though discussed in terms of concern over probable use and reputation, at a more fundamental level this also stems from a wider consideration of their role and responsibility. Similarly, pollsters' concerns over asking hypotheticals (“people aren't good at predicting how they would really react in a hypothetical situation”) or when deciding what questions to ask in internal commissions (“we could ask that, but it's a bit suspect, I'd prefer not to”) are both examples of a shared sense of responsibility and their role in providing public opinion information.<sup>563</sup>

However, this view of political polling is not always shared. Whilst ‘good polling’ is stated by political pollsters to be understood through a “sectoral understanding of what decent, robust research is,” (as discussed in Chapter 5.4.1) the idea of who constitutes ‘the sector’ is selectively compiled by the individual pollster, omitting those whose practice is not in line with their perceptions of responsibility.<sup>564</sup> The sector is not shorthand for ‘The BPC’ when it comes to discussions of decent, robust research, as membership is awarded on the basis of abiding by rules of disclosure, not an idea of minimum standards.<sup>565</sup> A pollster's sense of their role or responsibility, a question of common good, appears to be a factor in explaining judgements as to what these minimum standards entail.

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<sup>561</sup> See for instance Peter Kellner, *A Journalist's guide to Opinion Polls*, British Polling Council Opinion Polls: Guidance for Journalists, <<http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/opinion-polls-guidance-for-journalists/>> [accessed 10/05/19]

<sup>562</sup> Ethnographic Interview 2

<sup>563</sup> FN509, FN612

<sup>564</sup> Interview 11-4, Interview 11-1

<sup>565</sup> Interview 11-6

### 6.3.2 Not for Profit

Chapter 5.4.2 noted the significant commercial aspect of political polling. However, the dominant narrative articulated around political polling, by senior figures in the industry and in media commentary, is that it exists to build profile, reputation and awareness, drawing in clientele for the organisation.<sup>566</sup> Though this narrative is sometimes focused on voting intention polls (where it is more accurate) it is directed at all political work.<sup>567</sup> Throughout the observations, pollsters outlined a distinctive picture of how they were viewed. In their view they were perceived to be “the black sheep of the organisation, we’re just so different, our job isn’t to make money”.<sup>568</sup> This is a widely assumed feature of the sector with good reason. Expert testimony to Select Committees from senior figures within the polling industry has described political work as not profitable, even as loss making.<sup>569</sup> I encountered pollsters at all levels of the company discussing this view, from potential recruits thinking that they were joining a non-profit organisation, to pollsters identifying it as the major misconception they commonly see about their work.

This view is found even within the organisation. When I began fieldwork at YouGov, I went through the same induction to the organisation as all other new starters. During that induction process, a member of YouGov’s political team introduced their team as being different to other areas of custom research; the role of the team, I was told, was not to generate profit.<sup>570</sup> If not for profit, then what? Political polling, with the huge attention it commands, especially during elections and referendums, is seen as a strong source of PR for the organisation. It grabs attention, and during elections it has the benefit of being testable against a final result, showing a polling organisation’s accuracy and enticing clients to expect that accuracy in other areas of market research. This not for profit view is commonly held, as much publicly available evidence (e.g. expert testimony) demonstrates. However, though this characterisation contains elements of truth, the issue of political pollsters’ functional role within the organisation in terms of profit or PR is not as clear cut as initially presented. At an everyday level the picture of political polling not making money, or existing purely as a “shop front” for polling organisations quickly broke down both in terms of how work is conducted, and the ways in which it is discussed.<sup>571</sup>

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<sup>566</sup> See for instance, Ben Page, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 20, Question 151, 5/12/17 ; Stephen Bush, *There’s something that everyone has missed about polls and the people’s vote*, The New Statesman, 2 January 2019 <<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/elections/2019/01/there-s-something-everyone-has-missed-about-polls-and-people-s-vote> > [accessed 4 March 2019]

<sup>567</sup> Roger Mortimore and Anthony Wells, ‘The Polls and Their Context’ in *Political Communication in Britain*, Ed. by Dominic Wring and others, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) pp.19-38

<sup>568</sup> FN423

<sup>569</sup> Ben Page, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 20, Question 151, 5/12/17

<sup>570</sup> FN511

<sup>571</sup> FN627

The first way in which it becomes clear that the ‘not for profit’ perspective of political polling does not hold true is the division of workload between commercial commissions and internal questions. The vast majority of political pollsters’ time is spent on commercially commissioned work.<sup>572</sup> The polls that are often considered as the loss leaders are straightforward in their execution; regular voting intention/political job approval polling is incorporated into the survey script (discussed in Chapter 5) of each ‘daily’ poll and simply needs to be activated, alternating between two pre-existing sets of questions. These questions therefore generally require no survey design work and are processed and tabulated once the sample have responded. Even then, these questions are commissioned, as with many other polling organisations, in partnership with the media, and whilst not immensely profitable, are not conducted at a loss.<sup>573</sup> Whilst the political team, alone or in collaboration with other departments might commission internal and therefore unfunded polls (discussed in Chapter 5.4.1) these are done where space allows around other commercial commissions, and therefore have only a small opportunity cost.<sup>574</sup> This leaves the vast majority of work as commercially commissioned and profit-making. As a result, the political team “made a nice amount of money, in some years made a very nice amount of money”.<sup>575</sup> This results in similar earnings from political commercial work as many other custom teams of comparable size. As one interviewee noted, “they work in the same way as any other custom team. They probably bring in... the same amount of revenue”.<sup>576</sup>

The ‘not for profit’ narrative can be partially explained by definitions (those providing the expert testimony to the House of Lords might hold a narrower view of ‘political’ work, and may therefore earn a great deal from surveys which other organisations might consider political<sup>577</sup>) and partially by proportionality – whilst these teams could make large per-capita profits, they are small teams amongst organisations of hundreds. Accordingly one interviewee noted that “political polling as a proportion [of overall earnings] is virtually insignificant”.<sup>578</sup> Whilst the political pollsters’ work is therefore only a small part of the organisation’s total profits, they will often be the best source of publicity and awareness for a market research organisation – of the work conducted by an organisation of over 200 people, a huge amount of that which gains attention comes from a team of between 5 to 7 individuals.<sup>579</sup> The question of profitability would appear to resonate across different organisations. Pollsters discussing YouGov noted that their profitability was “unusual, not unheard of” in the industry, whilst comments from pollsters from different organisations noted the question of profitability was down to “how you

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<sup>572</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6, Interview 11-1

<sup>573</sup> FN423 ;Roger Mortimore and Anthony Wells, ‘The Polls and Their Context’ in *Political Communication in Britain*, Ed. by Dominic Wring and others, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) pp.19-38

<sup>574</sup> FN423

<sup>575</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>576</sup> Ethnographic Interview 5

<sup>577</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6

<sup>578</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>579</sup> FN423

define political” as previously noted.<sup>580</sup> Though there are elements of truth in the notion of political polling as a shop-front, the everyday reality is more complicated, and has certain implications for those concerned with polls which are otherwise obscured by the prevailing narrative. Presented with the shop front narrative, one political pollster provided their perspective on the role of political work:

“I’ve always described it not as the shop front, I’ve described it as the Formula One, its, in the same way that Ferrari and all these car manufacturers like to show off just how good they are with their Formula One cars, that’s what we like to do... with political polling, and to carry the analogy on its also the most dangerous... also it’s the one that everyone associates with it”.<sup>581</sup>

The analogy can be extended, as political polling is an intensely commercial affair, with much going on under the bonnet that remains unseen. Though political pollsters noted that organisational strategy sees political polling as a ‘not for profit’ area, staff salary bonuses are tied to meeting earnings targets.<sup>582</sup> Though one political pollster told me that “it’s a bit of both...the main purpose here is to be a very good marketing department for the company, the incentives I have always felt have been in place for us to be as accurate as high quality as possible, above anything else”.<sup>583</sup> In identifying the reality that political polling does act as a marketing department, incentivised to be accurate, whilst also operating a significant commercial endeavour, this pollster disentangles the established narrative’s link between being a significant PR element, and being not for profit.

This sub-section demonstrates that an understanding of the role of political polling needs to reflect the role of money. The assumption that political polling in general does not make money needs to be challenged. Political polls do make money, and this is significant, suggesting that political polling is not only about informing political debate and raising organisational profile, but also meeting commercial demands.

### 6.3.3 For Public Consumption

Much of the focus on political polling concerns polls that are publicly available. This is a narrative of political polling that stems from convenience, and not conviction – the existence of private political polling is well known (e.g. ‘internal’ polling for political parties) but its private nature restricts the attention it can be afforded.<sup>584</sup> In this final sub-section, this area of less attention is assessed, considering

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<sup>580</sup> Interview 11-6 ; Interview 27-1

<sup>581</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>582</sup> FN511

<sup>583</sup> Ethnographic Interview 7

<sup>584</sup> Nick Moon, *Opinion Polls: History Theory Practice*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) pp. 171-184.



the role of political pollsters in the production of private polls, and the implications this suggests for how polls should be approached.

It is common for many polls conducted by market research firms to never be published (e.g. research for stores – in which information about preferred store layouts/product placement is neither intended for, nor desired by, the public).<sup>585</sup> These ‘private’ polls are also a normal occurrence in the everyday work of political polling. As detailed in earlier chapters, many clients will conduct polling as a source of political research and publish survey findings to bolster a campaign or secure media coverage. However, it is not unusual for businesses, policy makers, or charities to commission polls solely for their own use.<sup>586</sup> This can normally be identified in the client–pollster discussions before a commission:

“Most of our stuff, I think most of our stuff is stuff intended for the public domain, but you can see it, when something comes in, it’s not, what research is for the internal development of a campaign and stuff that’s meant to go in a press release are normally a world apart, you don’t see this and think I wonder if they’re going to publish this”.<sup>587</sup>

Private political polling has been controversial in recent elections. During the 2016 EU referendum, a plebiscite with no exit-polling, *Bloomberg* reported that hedge funds had commissioned a number of political pollsters to provide private exit polls on the day of the vote, with data revealed to them whilst voting was ongoing.<sup>588</sup> This report sparked controversy over the legality of releasing information relating to a vote whilst voting was ongoing, and the potential use of superior political information to effectively insider trade on the result of the election.<sup>589</sup> This charge is an outlying example, being an exit poll, (different from the representative sample surveys seen in daily practice) but the strong reaction to it raises questions about the role of pollsters in producing polling which remains private. One interviewee noted that this controversy could have positive outcomes in forcing the industry to consider its ethical position on private polling of significant events: “It’s been awkward for the polling industry, but actually maybe they need to think about how they’re going to answer that question probably... in the long term it’s healthier for them to have to have done that [private exit poll] than not”.<sup>590</sup>

In addition to polls which are entirely withheld, some might be selectively withheld. As the commissioning client has ownership of the data, publication is at their discretion, and only once made public will a BPC member’s transparency obligations require they upload the results in a public place.<sup>591</sup>

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<sup>585</sup> Interview 11-2

<sup>586</sup> FN503

<sup>587</sup> Interview 11-2

<sup>588</sup> Cam Simpson, Gavin Finish, and Kit Chellel, *The Brexit Short: How Hedge Funds Used Private Polls to Make Millions*, *Bloomberg*, 25 June 2018 <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2018-06-25/brexit-big-short-how-pollsters-helped-hedge-funds-beat-the-crash>> [accessed 25/06/18]

<sup>589</sup> See for instance, Lord Foulkes of Cumnock, *Hansard*, HL Deb. Vol.792 Col. 540, July 2018

<sup>590</sup> Interview 11-4

<sup>591</sup> FN521

Pollsters made clear that variations in disclosure had implications for how a poll result could be understood. As clients can publish their data selectively, though the information may be accurate, it can still mislead. In an interview, one pollster discussed a hypothetical poll as an example:

“That polling company will have carried out that poll in a completely fair, above board way using exactly the same methodology they’d use for any other poll, and the political party would have chosen to publish it after it showed they were 4 points ahead, if it showed them 4 points behind it would be at the bottom of a filing cabinet... of the political party office. So even if polling is done in a completely fair and balanced way, the person who commissioned it still has agency and we still need to be aware of that.”<sup>592</sup>

Overlooking this aspect of private polls risks missing the extent to which the commissioning party is a variable in the rationale behind differing disclosure levels. Prominent American pollster Zogby argued that transparency regarding the commissioning party is superfluous information and will not affect the quality of the polling work carried out by an organisation.<sup>593</sup> We can see, with table 4 below, why this overlooks significant information.

<i>Poll Outcome</i>	<i>Source</i>	
	<i>Polling Organisation</i>	<i>Client</i>
Not Published	Poll idea didn’t work – inaccurate sample/no space.  No public interest.	Information does not support cause/Commercial Sensitivity/Advantageous Private Information.
Partially Published	Errors made in conduct of poll/Poll results prove uninteresting.  Some findings seem of more public interest than others	Certain aspects more preferential.
Fully Published	No errors. In public interest.	All aspects align with client goals.

*Table 4 – Publishing Rationales*

Table 4, though illustrative rather than exhaustive, demonstrates the divergent rationales behind the outcome of a poll in terms of disclosure from internal polling or client perspectives. It presents client transparency as a significant part of a comprehensive understanding of poll publication.

Private clients influence not only whether and when polling data they have commissioned becomes public, but also just what topics are covered in the polls they commission (and hence what might be released at some stage to the public domain, discussed in 5.4.2). The value in understanding the role of

<sup>592</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6

<sup>593</sup> Larissa Macfarquhar, *The Pollster*, *The New Yorker*, 10 October 2004, <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/10/18/the-pollster>> [accessed 25 March 2019]

the client in this regard is not that they will persuade political pollsters to ask bad questions (which pollsters argue they would resist), but that topic selection is a significant act in itself.<sup>594</sup> One interviewee described why this is the case with an example:

“If you were an organisation or pressure group campaigning for longer prison sentences and you wanted some findings that helped your case you would go to a polling company and say I’d like to commission some questions asking the public whether they want prison sentences to be longer or shorter or about right already. You could word that question in a beautifully balanced and fair way... and you could find that the public wanted longer sentences. On the other hand if you ... wanted to show that the public actually had some doubts about the sentencing policy you’d ask some questions about how effective do the public think prison is at stopping reoffending... It would show that the public are actually... they think prison isn’t that effective at stopping people reoffending, because public opinion is often nuanced and contradictory. So by taking only a partial perspective of it, you can paint a misleading picture, so that’s what lots of people who commission polls do, they ask questions... along the angles they think help them, and they don’t ask those other questions because they wouldn’t help them”.<sup>595</sup>

The role of private clients in producing commercially driven polling means that even ‘robust polling’ has the potential to result in a misleading picture of public opinion being presented, either through their role in the release of information, or their selection of what topics of information become public.<sup>596</sup> The motivations for the disclosure of polls vary from when pollsters are acting as PR for the wider organisation. This is illustrative of the values pollsters hold in regard to poll publishing. Though cases of the nature discussed in this sub-section are uncommon, they demonstrate that a robust understanding of the processes behind the commissioning of private polls contains information significant to a comprehensive understanding of a given political opinion poll.

#### 6.3.4 Summary

The discussion of narratives around the role of polling produces a number of significant insights which contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the practices of polling. Additionally, the assessment of these narratives reveals the interpretations pollsters make of their work, and the values that mediate

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<sup>594</sup> See for instance, Damian Lyones-Lowe, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 20, Questions, 148-154, 5/12/17

<sup>595</sup> Interview 11-2

<sup>596</sup> Also influential in terms of ‘media effects’ see for instance, Dietram Scheufele and David Tewksbury, *Journal of Communication*, 57 (2007) 9-20

their practices. In some instances, for example the discussions of profitability (6.3.2) and notions of ‘good’ polling (6.3.1), analysis made reference to the wider industry and the resonance of these issues. Other areas of this section were treated as important discussions for the polling industry, undertaken in a particular context here to provide insight on how pollsters’ values and the social context of their work is influential on their actions.

In discussion of the common good, the notions of ‘good’ polling, (discussed both in this chapter and throughout Chapter 5) were linked directly to a pollster’s sense of ‘moral and ethical’ responsibility and the role of polling in a democracy. The ‘not for profit’ narrative of political polling was challenged as a depiction of polling which obfuscates important tensions that incentivise pollsters and the production of political polls. Finally, discussions of private polls bring into focus the lack of control pollsters have over polling data once released to a client, the potential for ‘good’ polling, and the concerns of pollsters in this. These points demonstrate the values of pollsters regarding their work, the social contexts within which that work takes place, and the influence this has on practice.

## 6.4 Conclusion

This chapter took on the task of providing pollsters’ perspectives, structured around the question: what do pollsters consider their role, and that of their work, to be? This question provides an important component to answering the research question and contribution of this thesis. It is concerned with identifying the values and beliefs of pollsters, and the narratives against which the context of their working practice is established. These concepts are, as noted in reference to existing interpretive and ethnographic studies, important parts of understanding and explaining practice.<sup>597</sup>

In order to provide a rounded answer to this question, I first addressed it in relation to the three function framework put forward by Worcester. This framing provided the opportunity to assess how pollsters’ beliefs interact with their practice, and to engage with existing literature as covered in Chapter 2.3. Doing so provided a number of insights. First, reporting as a function of polls should be understood both in terms of how it operates bilaterally between pollsters and the media, and also the additional steps and influences which are apparent when polls are reported via a commissioning party. Pollsters identify a role in encouraging debate through reporting their own poll findings on popular issues. Second, I established that the analytical function of polls has become baked-in to pollsters’ everyday roles, rather than being an activity reserved for a senior few. Furthermore, the potential for analysis is a driver of topic selection for internal polls. Third, a variety of perspectives of pollsters were shown on

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<sup>597</sup> Noted in Chapter 6.1

the use of polls for prediction, and the challenging moral and ethical questions this produces around their role and responsibility in changing the course of political events.

I then addressed the question in relation to broader narratives that relate to polling. This provided a means to address more closely the social context within which polling is produced, and the values of pollsters which influence polling's production. I did this first by showing that pollsters' early understandings of their product as a democratic good have shifted, but that considerations of common good are influential on practice. I addressed the role of profit in polling and presented a complex picture of polling which is incentivised by multiple factors. Finally, I looked at the varied forms of private polling, the role of the client in the selection of which polls are published, and the role of pollsters in this process. Assessing these broad narratives revealed the values and context which surround polling, and which tangibly affect both the practice of polling and the way the role of those who conduct should be understood.

## 7 | Chapter 7 – Scrutiny, Inquiry, Regulation

### 7.1 Introduction

In the previous two chapters I have explored, respectively, the everyday working practices of political polling and how pollsters' think about their work. Those chapters demonstrated that individual actions, decisions and judgements are a significant component of political polling, and affect the type, nature and availability of political polls. In this chapter these collected insights are used to address a specific question: how does this research assist an assessment of the regulation and scrutiny of the polling industry? The topic of regulation and scrutiny is chosen as the focus of this chapter because it is both an important issue for the polling industry and an opportunity to demonstrate the applications of this research. It is an issue which speaks both to how polling is discussed and understood by those outside of the industry and has potential implications for polling organisations' policy and practice. In exploring this question, I assess the perspectives of pollsters on regulation and the ways in which that regulation interfaces with their working practices, and I explore an example of how understanding everyday practices can improve scrutiny.

To deliver this approach, the chapter will be structured in two parts: First, I will establish the existing structures of governance and regulation, the history of and the approach to formal scrutiny of polling. In order to discuss the way this research engages with these particular examples, they must be contextualised. The chapter therefore takes a step back and provides information on the regulation and scrutiny of polling. This requires covering a broad range of information, but it is information on which the subsequent parts of the chapter depend. The existing regulations which apply to political polling are covered, detailing how these impact the work of political pollsters. Second, an overview of the scrutiny of political polling is provided. The significant inquiries into political polling are noted and commonalities in what triggered these reports, their scope, outputs, and reception by pollsters are identified. Analysing this data alongside insights from previous chapters, the impact of scrutiny on the polling industry is reviewed.

Having established necessary contextual information, I conclude the chapter by exploring the utility of an ethnographic perspective for considering debates around regulation. The perspectives of pollsters on existing and potential regulations are explored, noting the extent to which scrutiny has reflected ongoing change in the industry, as opposed to driving such change. Appetite for regulation amongst rank and file pollsters is gauged and the 'low hanging fruit' are identified for any prospective regulator or scrutineer. To conclude, the chapter shows how an ethnographic perspective can provide insights currently absent from the regulatory debate.

## 7.2 Regulation and Inquiry

### 7.2.1 Regulation

Political polling is described by those within the polling industry as an endeavour which is simultaneously under very little regulation yet also, according to the UK managing director of polling organisation ORB (Opinion Research Business), “probably more regulated than colleagues in the US, France, Italy and a lot of other democracies around the world”.<sup>598</sup> Despite this claim, there is little legislation in respect to political polling. Whilst polls are subject to broader general legislation that regulates the operation of companies/organisations, there is only one piece of legislation that pertains directly to opinion polling. Section 66A of the Representation of the People Act 1983 notes;

“1) No person shall, in the case of an election to which this section applies, publish before the poll is closed—

(a) any statement relating to the way in which voters have voted at the election where that statement is (or might reasonably be taken to be) based on information given by voters after they have voted, or

(b) any forecast as to the result of the election which is (or might reasonably be taken to be) based on information so given.”<sup>599</sup>

This prohibition only applies whilst ballots may still be cast on polling day and is well known for its effect of restricting the release of election exit polling until polls close as Big Ben first chimes 10pm. The impact on polling of this requirement is small – it applies to specific polls on a small number of days, often at the end of an intensive period of voting intention polling. Pollsters interviewed expressed no real disapproval of this prohibition, revealing themselves to be content in waiting for an official result, rather than make one more forecast of an ongoing contest.<sup>600</sup> One pollster noted that they are happier to be patient, rather than continue polling in such close proximity to an election;

“that’s the role of the election, to call it, ...it’s not our role to say what the actual result is, if we do a poll two days before, just wait two days!”<sup>601</sup>

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<sup>598</sup> Johnny Heald House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling, Evidence Session 20, Questions, 148-154, 5/12/17

<sup>599</sup> Representation of the People Act 1983, s66A

<sup>600</sup> Ethnographic Interview 1

<sup>601</sup> Ethnographic Interview 1

Exit polling is most affected by the prohibition, but these polls are noted as a very different proposition to a traditional poll or survey.<sup>602</sup> Though exit polls are often carried out by established pollsters, those pollsters describe them as presenting distinct methodological challenges, requiring significant preparation and having a high cost.<sup>603</sup> With one prominent general election exit poll being conducted for BBC/ITN and, since 2010, Sky, most pollsters (including those involved in the participant observation for this research) beyond those conducting the joint broadcaster's exit poll (NOP/GfK/Ipsos MORI) do not conduct exit polling.<sup>604</sup> From this, it can be seen that regulations relating to exit polling have little to no impact on most pollsters.

Beyond legislative regulation, polling organisations may elect to join groups that establish terms of self-regulation. For those involved with political polling this is commonly two organisations, discussed briefly in Chapter 4.2.1 and referred to throughout this thesis, the BPC and the MRS.

The BPC, as described by one pollster associated with the council's creation, has very specifically targeted aims: "it's about ... ensuring that polling companies are completely transparent about how they sample, what questions they ask, what results they obtain and so on".<sup>605</sup> John Curtice, president of the BPC, speaking in 2017 to the PPDM expressed reluctance for the council to perform a role beyond this, noting the well evidenced disagreement between polling organisations on what constitutes 'good' polling; (discussed in Chapters 5.4.1 and 6.3.1). "We cannot go around saying, 'This is right. This is wrong'. What we can do is ensure that the industry collectively is concerned about its methodological health".<sup>606</sup> Membership of the BPC can therefore be taken as a form of kite-mark, a general indication of being a quality pollster to prospective clients, regardless of the BPC's functions in this regard.

The MRS has a wider membership than the BPC, declaring membership from over 5000 individual members and 500 companies.<sup>607</sup> In its own words, "MRS promotes, develops, supports and regulates standards and innovation across market, opinion and social research and data analytics. MRS regulates research ethics and standards via its code of conduct."<sup>608</sup> The code of conduct covers principles on general conduct, commissioning and design, data collection and analysis and reporting of findings.<sup>609</sup>

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<sup>602</sup> Colin Rallings & Michael Thrasher, 'Opinion polling and the aftermath of the 1992 general election', *Contemporary Record*, 7:1 (1993) 187-197 (p.194) ; Jouni Kuha, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 2, Questions, 14-22, 5/09/17

<sup>603</sup> Sue English, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 9, Questions 71-76, 24/10/17

<sup>604</sup> FN626, John Curtice, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 19, Questions 139-147, 05/12/17

<sup>605</sup> Interview 5-8

<sup>606</sup> John Curtice, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 19, Questions 139-147, 05/12/17

<sup>607</sup> Market Research Society, *About MRS*, Market Research Society, <<https://www.mrs.org.uk/about>> [accessed 10/07/2019]

<sup>608</sup> Market Research Society, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Written Evidence PPD0010, (London: House of Lords, August 2017)

<sup>609</sup> Market Research Society, *Code of Conduct* (London: Market Research Society, 2014)



The MRS's broader membership and code of conduct is in part a reflection of its wide scope – the MRS is concerned with all market research, whereas the BPC is concerned with political polls. Consequently, scrutiny of political polling will tend towards a focus on the BPC over the MRS.<sup>610</sup>

As can be seen, despite the description of UK political polling as “more regulated” than in other nations, the majority of these regulations are self-imposed.<sup>611</sup> Pollsters expressed cautiously positive perspectives on this self-regulatory approach, because of its narrow focus on transparent conduct:

“I’ve never been quite sure whether the BPC should do wider than having a transparency function... I would take some convincing... I think in polling self-regulation works quite well because you have a very specific and clear objective which it fulfils.”<sup>612</sup>

Yet many described a greater degree of ambivalence to the idea of additions to a regulatory framework of some kind:

“I [am] instinctively inclined to support regulation but slightly more strongly sort of cognitively inclined not to... my inclination is to say that regulation is often a good thing and I wonder to what extent I’m starting to make an exception for the industry that I work in.”<sup>613</sup>

“With the external regulations out there at the moment... we know what would happen if we didn’t do good research, I mean it could probably be heightened or improved, I’m not entirely sure how, but I think there’s always ways to try and improve things in a certain industry.”<sup>614</sup>

These individual views on regulation, (ranging from satisfaction with existing regulations, a concern that opposition to regulation stems from nimbyism, to an openness to more regulation) though taken from pollsters working in different organisations *across* the sector, are not demonstrative of the views of the *entire* sector. Yet they do reveal that regulation is a contested space amongst practitioners. Though these ideas will be pursued further in the second half of this chapter, they reveal that individual pollsters are open to contemplating regulation if it is compatible with their working practices.

From this brief overview it can be seen that there are, in practice, few obligations upon the sector, with most coming from self-regulatory endeavours by membership organisations.<sup>615</sup> This self-regulation, with its focus on transparency, is extremely valuable in permitting the scrutiny of polls. It provides prospective scrutineers with the necessary information, from survey design to sampling approach, that

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<sup>610</sup> As seen in Patrick Sturgis and others, *Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British General Election opinion polls*, (London: Market Research Society and British Polling Council, 2016)

<sup>611</sup> Johnny Heald, in House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 20. (House of Lords, December 2017) Q148-154

<sup>612</sup> Interview 5 8

<sup>613</sup> Ethnographic Interview 2

<sup>614</sup> Ethnographic Interview 4

<sup>615</sup> Johnny Heald House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling, Evidence Session 20, Questions, 148-154, 5/12/17

they need to assess the rigour of survey results. On the other hand, self-regulation has little impact on the day-to-day practice of polling.<sup>616</sup>

### 7.2.2 Polling Inquiries

Polling is an important feature in popular political discourse; it is used in a great deal of social and news commentary, with polls containing what is deemed as significant information making front page news, being deployed in social media and forming an evidence basis for many debates and discussions.<sup>617</sup> Whilst in this way, individual *polls*, especially those which are political, are constantly being scrutinised, scrutiny of *polling* tends to be led by specific events, for instance elections and referendums and the shortcomings of polling (as conducted by BPC members) in these events. This relationship is understandable; elections and pre-election polls provide that “rare exception” to test survey work, especially eve-of-election polls which more than any other poll perform the predictive function of polls described in Chapter 2.3.<sup>618</sup> It will be shown in this section that the close relationship between events and scrutiny leads to a generally technical debate on methods and that the focus on events where questions are standardised (voting intention questions) means these methods questions are often not ones of question design.<sup>619</sup> These technical debates are significant and important endeavours that produce real impacts; pollsters identify them as valuable in ensuring their methods remain relevant and helping them be best prepared for polling on future political events.<sup>620</sup> However, the technical nature of these debates has the potential to miss the implications of the everyday practice of polling: questions about who pollsters are and how they work.

Scrutiny through inquiries is predominantly in response to failure, or the perception of failure, in the performance of the polls. Given the focus of this research on the pollster’s perspective and the impact and approach of regulation and scrutiny on everyday polling practice, this section focuses on those inquiries and reports which are seen as key by pollsters themselves. The following criteria are used to establish the inquiries of interest:

- Instigated by a body with potential regulatory authority in the sector.
- Broad in scope, usually incorporating the work of others and receive input from practitioners, stakeholders and experts; and

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<sup>616</sup> Interview 5-8, FN502

<sup>617</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2.3

<sup>618</sup> Fred Smith, ‘Public Opinion Polls: The UK General Election, 1992’, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 159.3 (1996) 535-545 (p. 535.)

<sup>619</sup> As discussed in Chapter 5.4.1

<sup>620</sup> Interview 27-1

- They make actionable recommendations about the conduct of political polling.

With these criteria in mind, this chapter identifies three key inquiries into political polling in the UK, shown here in table 6.<sup>621</sup>

Date	Instigated by	Title	Cause
1994	MRS	Report on polling at the 1992 General Election. <sup>622</sup>	Significant average error of pre-election polls in 1992 GE
2016	BPC/MRS/National Council for Research Methods	The Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British General Election Polls. <sup>623</sup>	Significant average error of pre-election polls in 2015 GE
2018	House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media	The Politics of Polling. <sup>624</sup>	Perceived failings of polls at ballots from 2015 onwards

Table 5 – UK Polling Inquiries

There have been additional reports and reflections on polling events, notably Butler & Pinto-Duschinsky’s work on polling at the 1970 General Election (considered a notable polling ‘miss’) and BPC-run seminars for 2016 Referendum and 2017 General Election polling.<sup>625</sup> However, these only partially meet the criterion of key events and as such are not raised further here.

A review of these events reveals several commonalities in terms of their trigger, scope and recommendations.

### 7.2.2.1 Trigger

Polling scrutiny is triggered by poor performance when compared to the average performance of the polls in elections. Two of the major reports (into polling at the 1992 and 2015 general elections) were in response to higher average error in (eve of election) polling, significantly over 3% compared to a

<sup>621</sup> NB: A report on the performance of polls in the EU referendum was released shortly after writing – given that it took place subsequent to fieldwork and analysis, it will not be factored into the discussion in this chapter.

<sup>622</sup> David Butler and others, *The Opinion Polls and the 1992 General Election: A Report to the Market Research Society*, (London: Market Research Society, 1994)

<sup>623</sup> Patrick Sturgis and others, *Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British General Election opinion polls*, (London: Market Research Society and British Polling Council, 2016)

<sup>624</sup> House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, *Politics of Polling – HL Paper 106* (London: House of Lords, 2018)

<sup>625</sup> David Butler and Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, *The British General Election of 1970*, (London: Macmillan, 1971) ; Ivor Crewe, ‘The Opinion Polls: Confidence Restored?’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 50.4 (1997) 569-585 (p. 569.)

wider cross-national average of approximately 2% since the 1960s.<sup>626</sup> The PPDM report, meanwhile, identified its own trigger as the perception that election and referendum polls from 2015 onwards, had ‘called it wrong’, in the sense of predicting overall result, regardless of average error.<sup>627</sup> A similar claim could be made of polling in the 1992 general election. The relationship between performance and inquiry is unsurprising; inquiries require investment of time and money and failure incentivises this more than success.<sup>628</sup> Despite this being a predictable commonality, it is nevertheless a significant one in terms of its impact on other features of the inquiries, directly influencing their scope.

#### 7.2.2.2 Scope

Themes, questions and common trends in scope can be identified across inquiries. Each sought to:

- Determine the cause of recent poll inaccuracy;
- Explore the possibility that ‘herding’ has occurred – ‘herding’ refers to steps taken by pollsters to make their work seem more in line with those reported by the rest of the sector, the American Association of Public Opinion notes that “strategies can range from making statistical adjustments to ensure that the released results appear similar to existing polls to deciding whether or not to release the poll depending on how the results compare to existing polls”;<sup>629</sup>
- Make recommendations for how polls are conducted and published; and
- Make recommendations [for or against] rules and obligations of BPC (for those reports after the BPC’s inception).

These similarities notwithstanding, inquiries are not homogenous and the specific detail and terms of reference vary. For instance, the report into polling at the 1992 General Election was concerned with determining the validity of the claim of ‘shy Tories’ misrepresenting their voting intention to pollsters. The inquiry into the 2015 General Election looked closely at the mode of polling, including online, not

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<sup>626</sup> Will Jennings and Christopher Wlezien, ‘Election Errors Across Time and Space’, *Nature Human Behaviour*, 2 (2018), 276-283 (p.278.)

<sup>627</sup> House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, *Politics of Polling – HL Paper 106* (London: House of Lords, 2018) p. 7.

<sup>628</sup> FN606

<sup>629</sup> American Association of Public Opinion Research, ‘Herding’, AAPOR, <<https://www.aapor.org/Education-Resources/Election-Polling-Resources/Herding.aspx>> [accessed 11 July 2019]

a widespread practice at the time of its predecessor.<sup>630</sup> Finally the PPDM report, though primarily concerned with polling around elections, explored the impact of policy polls between elections.<sup>631</sup>

Curtice notes that incidences of scrutiny are important for maintaining the “methodological good health” of political polling as an organised endeavour.<sup>632</sup> They are technically focused investigations that respond to event triggers. This is a logical approach – questions around the performance of voting intention surveys, (surveys which, as noted in Chapter 5.4.1 require little input from pollsters save the completion of fieldwork) are invariably technical questions. Even in uncommon circumstances when there is what pollsters describe as a ‘difficult decision’ to take, such as which parties to prompt for, the response is determined in a technical way; through the testing of available approaches against a final result and moving forward with the most accurate.<sup>633</sup> Because scrutiny has historically been organised around investigations of polls’ measured shortcomings, other questions about the practices of polling, such as decisions on question design, or the relationship between pollsters and their clients have been left out of the overall scope, or been subsidiary to the technical considerations.

Though sharing common themes, these scrutiny events are significantly different in a number of ways. They focus on different trigger events and interrogate different causes of error as mentioned above. The most notable differences are between the PPDM report and the prior reports. Where prior reports were more tightly constrained by a lack of resource, the PPDM had greater capacity.<sup>634</sup> Accordingly, the PPDM considered all political polling, not just voting intention polling in the most recent election, as in previous reports.<sup>635</sup> This constituted a widening of scope beyond the technical questions associated with voting intention polls, due to the greater room for pollster agency (for instance in matters of question design) in more general policy polling as opposed to voting intention polling.

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<sup>630</sup> David Butler and others, *The Opinion Polls and the 1992 General Election: A Report to the Market Research Society*, (London: Market Research Society, 1994) , Patrick Sturgis and others, *Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British General Election opinion polls*, (London: Market Research Society and British Polling Council, 2016)

<sup>631</sup> House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, *Politics of Polling – HL Paper 106* (London: House of Lords, 2018) pp. 42-50.

<sup>632</sup> John Curtice, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 19, Questions 139-147, 05/12/17

<sup>633</sup> Anthony Wells, *Here’s how we prompt for the Brexit Party, and why it’s more accurate*, YouGov, 31 May 2019, <<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/05/31/heres-how-we-prompt-brexit-party-and-why-its-more->> [accessed 10/07/19]

<sup>634</sup> Interview 27-1

<sup>635</sup> House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, *Politics of Polling – HL Paper 106* (London: House of Lords, 2018) p. 4.

### 7.2.2.3 Recommendations and Outputs

As with their scope, whilst the inquiries' outputs varied significantly in terms of their response and the detail of their triggering event, common recommendations can be found across all. These include:

- Greater methodological pluralism/innovation;
- Greater care by the media in their reporting of polls;
- Methodological reviews of turnout prediction;
- Improved representative samples; and
- Increased methodological transparency.

Differences in recommendations are found, again, in relation to the PPDM report, which proposed increased oversight from the BPC, including guidelines of methodological best practice. The PPDM provided its rationale for this recommendation:

“In light of the damage done to confidence in the accuracy of polling, the oversight of polling also needs to change... The current system is not satisfactory and we therefore recommend a coordinated approach towards the oversight of polling, involving the British Polling Council, the media regulators and the Electoral Commission. The British Polling Council's remit should be expanded to take on a greater standard-setting and oversight function”.<sup>636</sup>

These summarised recommendations, though not exhaustive, tell a particular story of the formal scrutiny of political polling. The specific, event driven focuses of polling inquiries lead to the robust addressing of technical concerns but an occlusion of a significant amount of the regular work of polling. This omission is noted in the scope of a number of the reports – acknowledging focus on methodological causes of error.<sup>637</sup>

### 7.2.2.4 Reception

Polling inquiries have received varying receptions from pollsters and their wider organisations, from welcoming to sceptical, with the most critical voices being found in relation to elements of the PPDM report. Pollsters from across the sector were broadly welcoming of the 1992 and 2015 reports.<sup>638</sup> This

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<sup>636</sup> House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, *Politics of Polling – HL Paper 106* (London: House of Lords, 2018) p. 4.

<sup>637</sup> Patrick Sturgis and others, *Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British General Election opinion polls*, (London: Market Research Society and British Polling Council, 2016) pp. 7-8.

<sup>638</sup> Anthony Wells, *What the BPC Inquiry's final report says*, UKPollingReport, 31 March 2016, <<https://ukpollingreport.co.uk/blog/archives/9662>> [accessed 7 August 2018]

welcome reception by pollsters for inquiries is often directed at an inquiry's work on identifying or excluding systematic effects. As identified by one pollster in interview: "when you have systemic issues where everything goes wrong for the same reason, that's where I think the correct response was something like an inquiry like the Sturgis review [2015 inquiry]".<sup>639</sup> For instance, the shy-tory effect in 1992, or "the underrepresentation of the politically disengaged" in 2015 were identified as systemic factors in the shortcomings of the polls.<sup>640</sup> Whilst reviewing the causes of past failures does iteratively ensure the continued good methodological health of the industry, it does not protect against future failure.<sup>641</sup> Pollsters likened their approach to driving through the use of a rear-view mirror: good and proper responses to failures of polling in the 2015 General Election for instance, contributed to failures of polling in the 2017 General Election (e.g. an assumption that young people were overstating their likelihood to vote, as had been identified in 2015).<sup>642</sup>

Pollsters from across the sector respond positively in their public statements and interviews towards recommendations of more responsible media reporting of polls.<sup>643</sup> Despite this, they are, with reason, pessimistic that advice and guidance will be used by journalists. Recommendations for the more careful reporting of polls were being made before the 1992 report, and similar recommendations continue to this date. At an event in June 2018 reflecting on the work of the PPDM, one pollster implored the journalists present to join them for one-to-one support and yet expressed certainty that none would.<sup>644</sup> Many pollsters in interviews indicated that the media was becoming generally more sophisticated with how they use polls. Nevertheless, they also identified that the broader recommendations of care from inquiries have had little effect.<sup>645</sup>

The welcome reception for many aspects of these inquiries is not unexpected. This may be attributed to issues of timeliness, non-prescriptive recommendations and the relationship of external inquiry to the internal reviews of individual polling organisations. As described in 5.4.1, polling organisations conduct their own reviews to adjust their methods and samples following each election.<sup>646</sup> With the inquiries

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<sup>639</sup> Interview 27-1

<sup>640</sup> Ben Page, *Response to the Interim findings of the BPC Polling Inquiry*, Ipsos MORI, 19 January 2016, <<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/response-interim-findings-bpc-polling-inquiry>> [accessed 11 July 2019]

<sup>641</sup> John Curtice, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 19, Questions 139-147, 05/12/17

<sup>642</sup> Ben Page, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 20, Question 150, 5/12/17 ; Martin Boon, *The House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media: a response*, Deltapoll, <<http://www.deltapoll.co.uk/the-house-of-lords-select-committee-on-political-polling-and-digital-media-a-response>> [accessed 15 July 2019]

<sup>643</sup> Interview 11-2

<sup>644</sup> FN606, Joe Twyman, *Political Polling and Democracy: an afternoon seminar*, (NCRM, London) [Presented June 6 2018]

<sup>645</sup> FN606, Joe Twyman, *Political Polling and Democracy: an afternoon seminar*, (NCRM, London) [Presented June 6 2018]

<sup>646</sup> Robert Worcester, 'Political Polling: 95% Expertise and 5% Luck', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*. 159.1 (1996) 5–20 (p. 10.)

discussed in this chapter being published months or years following the event in question, polling organisations will already have made, or be in the process of making appropriate adjustments by the time of an inquiry's release.<sup>647</sup> Where the inquiries recommended that change be taken, they did so in a way described by pollsters to be "not prescriptive as to what changes might be".<sup>648</sup> Furthermore, across all of the inquiries, change is recommended in areas where pollsters had already taken, or planned to take, action. This is exemplified through Ipsos MORI's public response to the initial report of the 2015 election polling:

"The interim findings of the British Polling Council's inquiry released today in many respects chime with our own analysis about what went wrong with our polling... We've already put in place new measures to address these issues."<sup>649</sup>

This public position was encountered throughout research for this thesis across different organisations, and in response to different inquiries. For example, one pollster describing their response to the PPDM report as follows: "some bits will work very well and are steps that we are already inclined to do and it will serve merely as a helpful kick up the backside as it were".<sup>650</sup> Whilst pollsters acknowledge the utility of the perspectives of the "very best academics in the field", in answering broader questions about polling systemically, many pollsters express appreciation for inquiries' work in confirming the problems that pollsters face, rather than prescribing solutions.<sup>651</sup> Where it comes to suggesting changes to the technical approach to polling, inquiries reflect, rather than lead change.

The reactions of pollsters are increasingly critical where an inquiry addresses broader questions than the identification of issues and challenges for the industry to face. This is seen in reactions to some areas of the PPDM and its wider scope. One senior pollster summarised the concern with the PPDM's broader scope:

"It was, a peculiar inquiry that I think, its problem was it didn't talk to practitioners, or at least didn't talk to many practitioners and those it did were too late in the day... Some of the questions they were firing at regulators or journalists or people who commissioned stuff or academics... really should have been directed at pollsters and they didn't have a pollster sat in

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<sup>647</sup> See for instance, Ben Page, *Response to the Interim findings of the BPC Polling Inquiry*, Ipsos MORI, 19 January 2016, <<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/response-interim-findings-bpc-polling-inquiry>> [accessed 11 July 2019]

<sup>648</sup> Anthony Wells, 'What the BPC Final report says', UKPollingReport, 31 March 2016 <<http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/blog/archives/9662>> [accessed 15/07/19]

<sup>649</sup> Ben Page, *Response to the Interim findings of the BPC Polling Inquiry*, Ipsos MORI, 19 January 2016, <<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/response-interim-findings-bpc-polling-inquiry>> [accessed 11 July 2019]

<sup>650</sup> Interview 11-2

<sup>651</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6



front of them. When they did finally get pollsters, they only had three and [they were pollsters who were] not on the ground”.<sup>652</sup>

This critical response extended to the outputs of the PPDM report, with recommendations on poll design being seen as a “threat to... methodological plurality and innovation in opinion research” and incompatible with the day-to-day practice of pollsters.<sup>653</sup> These perspectives are further considered within this chapter.

Overall, the reception of these inquiries from those within the industry suggests that, whilst well regarded, they tend to confirm pollsters’ perspectives on events and reflect changes the industry are set on taking. With no counterfactual, the extent to which inquiries have had any material effects on polling cannot be calculated, but the public statements of pollsters from across the industry align with the accounts developed through this research: their response to events is already determined before inquiry recommendations are made.

This first part of the chapter has provided a review of the regulation and scrutiny of polling – identifying common features of these. On occasion the perspectives of pollsters were drawn in to identify the impacts of the regulation and scrutiny discussed. The remainder of this chapter now turns fully to the question offered in the introduction of the chapter – how does this research assist an assessment of the regulation and scrutiny of the polling industry?

### 7.3 An Ethnographic Perspective

To address the question posed in this chapter, first the perspectives of pollsters on regulation will be explored. The ethnographic approach adopted in this research allowed for questions of regulation to be explored over sustained periods of time and assessed in the workplace which such regulation would affect. This allowed for a different engagement with the issue of regulation than other approaches may produce, bringing in both the explicit discussions of regulation that occurred throughout observations and interviews and the attitudes, practices and behaviours which are salient to reflections on regulation. Views on existing regulations and prospective regulations will be explored, noting where regulation is perceived as unnecessary and identifying potentially more productive areas for future scrutiny.

To further demonstrate the ways in which these perspectives are beneficial to our understanding of scrutiny, I highlight an example where scrutiny has raised an important issue but taken a very narrow

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<sup>652</sup> Interview 11-2

<sup>653</sup> Martin Boon, *The House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media: a response*, Deltapoll, <<http://www.deltapoll.co.uk/the-house-of-lords-select-committee-on-political-polling-and-digital-media-a-response>> [accessed 15 July 2019] ; Interview 11-2

view. In this instance, I highlight the area of client pressure, raised in questioning during the PPDM and demonstrate, using ethnographic insights, that the answers accepted by the committee obfuscate (though unintentionally) an area which offered potential for productive scrutiny.

### 7.3.1 Regulation

In the previous section of this chapter (7.2), a backdrop was provided of the extant regulatory and scrutiny forces on political pollsters, especially for those within the BPC and MRS. In this sub-section, I consider how these regulations impact on pollsters on an everyday level and their perspectives on existing and future regulation. Noting the differences between the experience of senior figures in polling and other political pollsters (as discussed in Chapter 5.2) and the tendency for scrutiny events to invite these senior figures to provide testimony, this sub-section brings in the views of pollsters with a range of different experience.

#### *7.3.1.1 Perspectives on existing regulations*

Existing polling regulations have minimal effects on the everyday experience of polling. As discussed earlier in this chapter, there is scant legislation on polling and BPC guidelines focus on the transparency of work, but have little effect on its conduct.<sup>654</sup> During questioning by the PPDM, a variety of pollsters noted the value of these transparency requirements. For instance, in his testimony to the PPDM, Damian Lyons Lowe (the CEO of Survation) commented that:

“Because of the BPC rules on transparency, Ben [Ipsos MORI CEO] and my very good friends at YouGov and ComRes can go very quickly to the way in which the question was asked and shoot it down. It is a matter of professional reputation”.<sup>655</sup>

Whilst the view was consistent with those encountered from pollsters through observations and interviews, different views also came out in interviews:

“Unless you are requiring people to say why your [own] polling is bad and shouldn’t be trusted, it’s hard to make it less explicit than that and I think the gap between what we put out from a

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<sup>654</sup> Interview 5-8

<sup>655</sup> Damian Lyons Lowe, in House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 20. (House of Lords, December 2017) Q149

technical perspective and what gets published and what gets into the zeitgeist, I think that's really hard to bridge that".<sup>656</sup>

These comments indicate the utility of transparency in identifying and criticising bad practice, but also the challenges in disseminating these critiques to the wider public which has engaged with a specific poll. The comment from the PPDM also indicates that political pollsters make use of transparency regulations to criticise the work of other pollsters. Whilst transparency requirements mean that pollsters *can*, as suggested in PPDM testimony, identify bad polling and "shoot it down", they do not mean that pollsters *will*.<sup>657</sup> Though examples can be found of pollsters criticising the work of others across social media (or less regularly in traditional media), these examples tend to be discrete, or directed towards organisations considered as 'disreputable'.<sup>658</sup> It is uncommon for pollsters to openly criticise the work of those considered as direct competitors. The tendency to not discuss each other's work does not come from a lack of awareness, indeed pollsters pay keen attention to each other's work.<sup>659</sup> Whilst the work of others would be regularly discussed privately, public discussion was reserved for cases found to be particularly egregious.<sup>660</sup> Whilst Lyons Lowe's comments to the PPDM may have indicated that the potential for exposure by one's peers had a preventative effect on bad practice, when such practice occurs, those peers often remain silent. This behaviour was framed as an 'unspoken rule' by multiple pollsters across many organisations in the industry. As one pollster expressed it to me in an interview:

"We do have a sort of unspoken rule that we won't criticise other people's work. The reason for that is, you can always find fault with somebody's questions and so the danger is that you start a spiral of destruction and everyone gets covered in shit, because then nobody can publish anything without everyone piling in to get back at the fact that they criticised them previously".<sup>661</sup>

"It's unseemly to be there hacking away at each other... don't really want to go back to a polling industry which spends their time shouting each other and doing each other down".<sup>662</sup>

This unspoken tendency of pollsters to avoid criticising others' surveys is significant in relation to the discussion of regulation. If sector norms lead pollsters to only actively call out extreme cases of bad practice and most pressure is, as will be shown in 7.3.2, effective at the 'margins' of good polling, then the nature of PPDM's discussion of transparency as the key regulation of BPC members does not

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<sup>656</sup> Interview 27-1

<sup>657</sup> Damian Lyons Lowe, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 20, Questions, 148-154, 5/12/17

<sup>658</sup> Interview 27-1, FN523

<sup>659</sup> For instance, FN511, FN512, FN514

<sup>660</sup> Interview 27-1

<sup>661</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>662</sup> Interview 11-2

realistically frame the usage of transparency provisions.<sup>663</sup> Though transparency regulations were consistently identified as good and valuable in interview and observation, their effect on practice does not come through the critique, or concern for critique, of rivals and peers but from interested parties, for instance the media, or academics.<sup>664</sup> This may seem a small difference, but it is nevertheless an important element of the way pollsters interact and engage with the surveys of their peers.

### 7.3.1.2 Perspectives on potential regulations

As the PPDM's recommendations were published shortly before the start of fieldwork for this thesis and as my interviews sought out pollsters' views on its work, this research is able to consider their perspectives on how proposed regulations were viewed. As shown in the discussion regarding inquiries in this chapter (7.2.2), a common theme of the major polling inquiries are recommendations for potential new regulation, often established through a "more substantial oversight function" for the BPC.<sup>665</sup> The PPDM made two recommendations regarding the BPC's role that constituted new functions relating to polling organisations (with a number of other recommendations articulating existing activity, or relating to media coverage.)

These two novel recommendations were:

"Issuing guidance on best practice for the methodologies used in polling.

Providing an advisory service for reviewing poll design. This would be a service intended to give companies the assurance that their questions and survey design had been evaluated independently, which could provide a degree of cover when dealing with sensitive or controversial issues."<sup>666</sup>

These recommendations sit in contrast to previous reports, which expressed a view more in common with that of polling organisations. The 1992 report, for instance, concluded: "we would encourage methodological pluralism; as long as we cannot be certain which techniques are best, uniformity must be a millstone – a danger signal rather than an indicator of health."<sup>667</sup> Though neither of the PPDM recommendations directly resulted in uniformity, neither are they conducive to the innovation which supports a landscape of methodological pluralism.

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<sup>663</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>664</sup> Interview 11-3

<sup>665</sup> House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, *Politics of Polling – HL Paper 106* (London: House of Lords, 2018) p. 61.

<sup>666</sup> *Ibid.* p. 61.

<sup>667</sup> David Butler and others, *The Opinion Polls and the 1992 General Election: A Report to the Market Research Society*, (London: Market Research Society, 1994)

When asked, political pollsters expressed no opposition to new regulations for political polling and appeared to welcome an increased role for the BPC:

“Of course the question is should they [BPC] have more of an active role. I think once you start judging on questions it gets really difficult ... You can always find something wrong with a question, but are there questions about minimum standards, that is an interesting question, and simply paying your dues to join up and committing yourself to a certain degree of transparency is not really enough as far as I’m concerned”.<sup>668</sup>

However despite this, many pollsters seemed relieved that the PPDM’s recommendations were framed as guidance and advice, rather than as a strong regulatory prescription. This relief can be attributed to the challenge in effectively implementing the PPDM’s recommendations, as one pollster described in an interview:

“I can’t imagine any scenario where I want to go to either some committee of other pollsters and say “what do you think of this guys” or someone who they randomly pick to employ, who would offer this advice?”<sup>669</sup>

This view is unsurprising in what is a competitive industry; there is little incentive for possibly valuable insights to be shared with rivals. This type of perspective is also rooted in the context in which the observations for the research took place; a large polling organisation focusing on online polling. Larger polling organisations have the capacity for a highly collaborative approach to their work as discussed in Chapter 5.4.1. With a number of political pollsters sitting together and tackling problems of methodology and design together, there is little desire for an external body to dictate practice. In organisations such as YouGov, this is reinforced by a pre-disposition against definitive expressions of methodological best practice. As a company specialising in online polling, there was a sense that such statements would have been an impediment to their development and its pollsters felt frustrated by similar methodological statements made by the MRS and AAPOR (discussed in Chapter 4.3.2) which suggest less confidence in online samples.<sup>670</sup> Outside these larger organisations, interviews suggested such proposals might have been treated more positively. Indeed, pollsters had been contacted by colleagues from ‘smaller’ organisations for advice on methodological questions and approaches.<sup>671</sup> Other pollsters noted that the associated costs may well force out those organisations who would benefit, with one political pollster working for a different polling company describing the dilemma this posed:

“It’s going to need funding to do that and where’s that funding going to come from? Is it going to be us as organisations that produce it? In which case, I mean, I am fairly committed to it as

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<sup>668</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>669</sup> Ethnographic Interview 6

<sup>670</sup> Interview 5-8, FN606

<sup>671</sup> Interview 5-8

a sea of quality and transparency, but that may lead to questions about whether or not this is a worthwhile use of our resource”.<sup>672</sup>

One recommendation which was repeatedly and spontaneously encountered amongst a number of pollsters was the view that methodologies should not change over the course of any given election. One interviewee stated:

“[I]f I was ever to have made a recommendation to the British Polling Council and obviously I don’t want them to do this, as I work in the industry, I think it would be legitimate for them to be considering an idea like ...us submitting our methodology to the BPC at the start of an election campaign and then not allowing us to change it”.<sup>673</sup>

Indeed it was noted by one pollster that this approach would be self-imposed at the next general election.<sup>674</sup> Though offered as a recommendation, this suggestion has been put forward, non-prescriptively, by all of the polling inquiries discussed in this chapter. The support for consistent election methodologies indicates that it warrants attention in the discussion of future potential regulation.

A variety of responses to regulation have been discussed here. An ethnographic approach, and subsequent interviewing, allowed these questions to be addressed in the context of working practices over a sustained period – revealing nuanced perspectives on regulation. In addition to being instructional as to the reception of regulations, several points for closer attention in future regulation can be highlighted. As noted above, consistent election methodologies, though previously mooted, have support amongst many pollsters. More challenging is regulation around best practice. Though pollsters were identified as expressing some support for minimum standards, there are concerns that articulating these in terms of ‘best practice’ would hinder methodological pluralism in the sector.

Interviews suggest other areas where we might expect pollster support, but which are made difficult by current BPC resources. Given the appreciation by pollsters for the work of inquiries previously noted, formalising the process of polling reviews after general elections may well be welcomed. Though this continues the link between event and scrutiny, it breaks the connection between outcome and scrutiny. Whilst widening the scope of these reviews to include polling besides voting intention polls would be beneficial, it would further challenge resources (even at a more sedate rate of elections than we have seen between 2015-2019).

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<sup>672</sup> Interview 27-1

<sup>673</sup> Ethnographic Interview 7

<sup>674</sup> FN615

### 7.3.2 Scrutinising Pressure

This final sub-section of the chapter concludes the discussion of the question posed at the outset of the chapter – how does this research assist an assessment of the regulation and scrutiny of the polling industry? To answer this, this sub-section focuses on an example from the PPDM, addressing an issue on which the select committee asked specific questions.

In the PPDM’s call for evidence, it asked: “[c]an polls be influenced by those who commission them and, if so, in what ways?”.<sup>675</sup> This line of inquiry was also developed in the PPDM’s oral questioning, where it was noted by committee members that “there is a sense that somehow [for policy polls] messages are misconstrued, or deliberately conveyed in one way or another, in order to get the group’s issue across”.<sup>676</sup> This concern is realistically grounded. The strategies of campaigning groups are increasingly sophisticated and polling is seen to be an important source of information for influencing politicians.<sup>677</sup> It is therefore a reasonable assumption, and one in line with data from observation, that pressure/campaigning groups are likely to want to use polls as a tool. Acting in that regard, clients may apply pressure on pollsters to ensure that they obtain survey results which best support their case.<sup>678</sup>

In both interviews and observational research, pollsters noted accusations of bias as a regular critique of all polls.<sup>679</sup> For voting intention polls particularly, this critique is seen as unfounded, with interviewed pollsters noting that it is not clear what advantage this might confer to a party: “In reality I just don’t get which way you would skew it [a voting intention poll] if that was your intention”.<sup>680</sup> For policy polls, however, senior pollsters giving evidence to the PPDM acknowledged that pressure from clients is common and provided hypothetical examples of cases which suggested that polling organisations would resist pressure, or refuse commissions which sought misleading polling.<sup>681</sup> This assertion was included in the PPDM’s final report, which then moves on to methodological considerations of a technical nature.<sup>682</sup>

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<sup>675</sup> House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, *Call for evidence*, (London: House of Lords, June 2017)

<sup>676</sup> Lord Hayward, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 20, Questions, 149, 5/12/17)

<sup>677</sup> Wyn Grant, ‘Pressure Politics, the role of Pressure Groups’, *Political Insight*, 5.2 (2014) 12-15 ; Colin Ralling and Michael Thrasher, ‘Elections and Public Opinion, Leaders under pressure’ *Parliamentary Affairs*, 57.2 (2004) 380-395

<sup>678</sup> FN510

<sup>679</sup> Interview 11-3, FN501

<sup>680</sup> Interview 27-1

<sup>681</sup> House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, *Politics of Polling – HL Paper 106* (London: House of Lords, 2018) pp. 42-43.

<sup>682</sup> House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, *Politics of Polling – HL Paper 106* (London: House of Lords, 2018) ) p. 43.

Whilst the assertion included in the PPDM's report is an accurate reflection of the everyday behaviour of pollsters in relation to extreme types of client pressure, the more nuanced ways in which pressure might arise, and the rubric by which political pollsters might identify and navigate such pressures was not further discussed.<sup>683</sup> The ethnographic account built across this thesis is well placed to show the impact of pressure in the process of commissioned polling on policy issues and how and why pollsters navigate this pressure. In doing so, it demonstrates that this question is nuanced and its implications significant in terms of understanding polling outputs. The exploration of the theme of pressure that follows is linked to and builds upon the analysis of clients and misrepresentation presented in Chapter 5.

The nature of pressure is varied; commissioned political polling is not simply a one-off interaction in which a commissioning party states a topic, or list of questions to be pursued, as seen in Alex's account in Chapter 5.3. Polling is an iterative design process in which both parties work towards a survey design which can be agreed upon. It is common for a survey to go through 2 or more iterations before being fielded.<sup>684</sup> There is therefore no one single site at which a clear instance of client pressure might be located and its conditions noted, but a number of interactions over which it is expressed.

This insight into the everyday practices of polling affects how the problem of client pressure is understood. Pressure is not just being asked to field a patently biased or misleading question. Here I will reflect on pressure as presented through the PPDM, and contrast this with pressure as understood through the ethnographic account in this thesis. Consider an example suggested to the PPDM: "Do you agree or disagree that setting dogs on cuddly foxes is a nice thing to do?"<sup>685</sup> Though the results of allowing questions such as this would be pernicious, it is easy for a willing pollster to identify and address. Pollsters discuss their approach to these extreme examples in public fora, with one noting on social media that "we almost always refused/suggested asking it properly, explaining why. The best clients would agree with our advice, whilst others would go to a different company to run them".<sup>686</sup> The additional comment, that some companies would run questions that others had refused is an important point. This concern also arose within observations and interviews and was noted in Alex's account in Chapter 5. Though no unscrupulous behaviour was observed during fieldwork, pollsters were aware that such behaviour occurred within the industry. As noted by one interviewee "when we turned people away we did it in the knowledge that at least half the time they would go off to less honest brokers within the industry".<sup>687</sup> Not only does this indicate a rich area of scrutiny, it impacts the practice of all

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<sup>683</sup> FN516

<sup>684</sup> As discussed in Chapter 5.4.1

<sup>685</sup> Johnny Heald House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling, Evidence Session 20, Questions, 148-154, 5/12/17

<sup>686</sup> Laurence Janta-Lipinski, 'we almost always refused/suggested asking it properly, explaining why. The best clients would agree with our advice, whilst others would go to a different company to run them.' (tweet, @jantalipinski 29 August 2018)

<sup>687</sup> Interview 11-6



pollsters. The knowledge that questions will be taken up by a different organisation contributes to the pressure felt by pollsters to compromise on question design. This point notwithstanding, the portrayal of how pollsters might deal with ‘bad’ questions is consistent with an abundance of data from this research, with pollsters regularly explaining to clients why certain questions were bad, would not be run and would not be helpful for the client if they were.<sup>688</sup> Pollsters provided explanations for this during fieldwork:

“We have to think about our credibility and theirs and ask questions that provide good opinion data. If clients don’t understand bias it won’t work.”<sup>689</sup>

“We have even come across clients who have refused to ask a question in a balanced way: they just want to touch on one specific side of the debate... we say we can’t run it, so we’ve financially lost out, but on a, maybe a moral basis we haven’t.”<sup>690</sup>

Though this is an accurate portrayal of the extremes of pressure, it does not represent the ways in which it is commonly manifest and as noted it does not necessarily reflect the practice of all polling organisations. Pressure is more often a prolonged attempt to test the boundaries of acceptability over what question wording might be fielded.<sup>691</sup> This was experienced time and again in the day-to-day back and forth of interactions with clients and was directly noted by pollsters in subsequent interviews. Clients are more likely to exert pressure in the margins of ‘good polling’ than they are to fight for ‘bad’ polls and questions.<sup>692</sup> As one pollster explained in interview “I’ll always do work I stand by but I will do better work if I’m not arguing with someone over question design”.<sup>693</sup> The process of pressure can be conceptualised as akin to an ‘Overton Window’, often used to frame the boundaries of acceptable political discourse.<sup>694</sup> In this example, the overall “window” of acceptable survey design for a client is established by the individual and industry standards established in Chapter 6 and the confidence/autonomy interactions – often framed around client type, as established in Chapter 5.4.2. That a window, a threshold, of survey design is established regardless of pressure from a client, does not make client pressure ineffectual and without impact; the positioning of where survey design falls within that window is established by, amongst other factors, client pressure, as visualised in figure 6.

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<sup>688</sup> FN625

<sup>689</sup> FN516

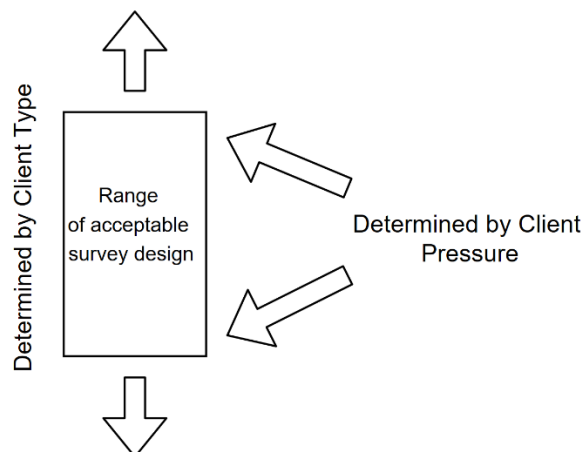
<sup>690</sup> Ethnographic Interview 4

<sup>691</sup> FN510

<sup>692</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>693</sup> Interview 11-3

<sup>694</sup> The ‘Overton Window’ suggests a moveable frame of acceptability (relating usually to policy), for further information see, Mackinac Centre for Public Policy, ‘The Overton Window’, <<https://www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow>> [accessed 19/6/19]



*Figure 6 – Client pressure and survey design*

Marginal changes are not of only marginal interest for those concerned with the influence of clients in policy polls. Minor changes in question design can lead to significant differences in results.<sup>695</sup> The impact of such minor changes in wording were seen during my fieldwork: responses to questions for issues such as a second Brexit referendum, or lowering the voting age to 16 shifted significantly as a result of seemingly small changes to phrasing.<sup>696</sup> This directly reflected the discussions of opinion influence held in Chapter 2.2.3.

This iterative pressure, on the margins of acceptable survey design, is more difficult for pollsters to identify and challenge than the extreme examples, as it often probes the limits of acceptability, rather than wildly overstepping them.<sup>697</sup> In these iterative scenarios, pollsters do not have to identify bad polling, but need to consider the nature of good polling, which is acknowledged throughout this thesis and more widely throughout the literature, as a contested idea. This results in a more nuanced task for pollsters, as they would note that while “you can definitively say this is a bad question, you can’t say definitively [say] this is a good question without any faults at all”.<sup>698</sup> One pollster recalled to me a time that writing two questions took two and a half weeks because a client found inherent bias in questions difficult to understand and was sure that all they were stating were ‘just facts’. Even in these circumstances, pollsters will often carry on the ‘back and forth’ because of a dislike of turning down projects.<sup>699</sup>

<sup>695</sup> John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) pp. 76-97.

<sup>696</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2.2.3

<sup>697</sup> FN502

<sup>698</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>699</sup> FN516

Having looked at pressure from the perspective of the day-to-day work with clients, this same perspective can provide differing insights into how pressure is resisted. For the obvious examples of proposed bad polling, such as those raised in the PPDM's evidence, if a client cannot be persuaded to use good polling, a straightforward rejection is the simple response, with senior political pollsters informing their staff:

“Our reputation is worth more than 2 or 3 thousand quid, and don't be afraid to turn down a piece of work because it would involve asking a question that we think is wrong”.<sup>700</sup>

It is routine for pollsters to identify misleading or biased questions; as noted in Chapter 5 they are recruited because of their knowledge of politics and therefore their capacity to write balanced questions about ongoing events.<sup>701</sup> Their training focuses on how to avoid bad question writing and their experience in question writing from daily practice makes this a straightforward catch for most pollsters.<sup>702</sup>

For the more difficult to identify iterative pressures from clients, organisation practices and norms are key in resisting pressures. The most obvious and perhaps most significant, of these is the heuristic of client type, discussed at length in Chapter 5.4.2. Alongside this are other elements of quality assurance identified throughout the account of everyday polling: a collaborative approach to question design, strong leadership cues on methodology and educating clients on why 'good' polls are helpful to their cause.<sup>703</sup> Whilst these mitigate against the effects of pressure, there is no comprehensive measure that can be taken to eliminate its influence.<sup>704</sup> Pollsters have to exert their judgement and decide if work can be considered as meeting the threshold of whatever window of acceptability has been erected for that client.

It is notable that this exploration of pressure is rooted in an organisation that has a strong potential for resilience in this regard; a political department that is profitable and well known and is supported by a wider research organisation. Other polling organisations' response to pressure may well vary and (as explored in the previous discussion of this chapter on regulation) they may benefit from different types of support, but interviews indicate that all companies in the industry contend with client pressure.<sup>705</sup> With question design issues comprising 75% of the complaints which are heard at MRS tribunals, (as part of the disciplinary process for breach of MRS regulations as outlined in 7.2.1) the effects of factors which impact question design, such as pressure, warrant scrutiny.<sup>706</sup> This suggests a need to share best

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<sup>700</sup> Interview 5-8

<sup>701</sup> As discussed in Chapter 5.2

<sup>702</sup> FN627

<sup>703</sup> As discussed in Chapter 5.2 & 5.4.1

<sup>704</sup> Interview 11-2

<sup>705</sup> Interview 27-1

<sup>706</sup> Jane Frost, *Political Polling and Democracy: an afternoon seminar*, (NCRM, London) [presented June 6 2018]

practice amongst organisations, but also to understand the incentives behind why pollsters may resist, or be moved by, pressure.

Having considered how pressure exists, the impact it has and the ways in which pollsters establish individual and structural boundaries to resist it, why it is resisted should be briefly reflected on. The explanation given to the PPDM that bad polling would be reputationally damaging still stands. In this sub-section I have discussed how pressure often relates to ‘good’ polling.<sup>707</sup> This would indicate the presence of additional incentives to resist pressure and support the ideas discussed in Chapter 6.3.1 of a perception of a democratic responsibility by those involved in the day-to-day practice of polling to produce authentic accounts of public opinion. As one pollster described their democratic role: “I genuinely believe this, I would say this wouldn’t I, but I do genuinely believe that polling does provide an opportunity for the public to feed back to power, however you would characterise that power”.<sup>708</sup> The ideas explored in Chapter 6.3.1 and put forward by Gallup of polling’s democratic role still survive in perspectives such as these, though to a lessened extent.<sup>709</sup> This meeting of the business of polling and the practice of democracy is not purely rhetorical and is significant in guiding pollsters in their response to this commonly faced issue of pressure.<sup>710</sup>

The ethnographic approach to the question of pressure, a question raised directly within the PPDM report, reveals different insights than in that event-driven scrutiny. Pressure is more likely to be an iterative feature of a polling interaction rather than a single point, request and denial. As such, the influence of pressure is more likely to be nuance at the margins of what is considered ‘good polling’ rather than the inclusion of patently bad polling. Pollsters have developed heuristics to help them approach their clients and the likely pressures that they will face for them. Finally, the incentives behind why pollsters have developed these approaches to conducting good polling is indicative of wider views about how pollsters view their role – which can lead to tangible effects on the nature of available polling data and productive lines of enquiry about the practice and politics of polling more generally. Exploring this example in detail has shown the ways in which a robust understanding of everyday practices can facilitate more comprehensive scrutiny of polling on matters of real significance.

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<sup>707</sup> House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling, Evidence Session 20, Questions, 148-154, 5/12/17

<sup>708</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>709</sup> George Gallup and Saul Rae, *The Pulse of Democracy: The Public Opinion Poll and How it works*, (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1940)

<sup>710</sup> J Michael Hogan, ‘Gallup and the Rhetoric of Scientific Democracy’, *Communication Monographs*, 64:2, (1997) 161-179 (p. 177.)

## 7.4 Conclusion

Chapters 5 and 6 discussed respectively what pollsters do in their everyday practice and how they understand their role. In this chapter, these insights have been applied to contemporary issues in polling. Ideas around regulation should be read in the context of the organisation in which participant observation was conducted (as noted within the section), as insights into a particular range of views rather than generalisations regarding the sector as a whole, as discussed in Chapter 3.3.2. However, the assessment of pressure in 7.3.2 is a demonstration of how specifically located insights can be used to engage in more widely relevant debates. Overall in this chapter, I have explored the ways in which polling is governed, regulated and scrutinised, providing a demonstration of how the ethnographic perspective adopted in this thesis can “provide novel ways of understanding phenomena of central concern” to political polling.<sup>711</sup>

First, the chapter considered the limited legislative and regulatory framework surrounding political polling and three major inquiries into polling, all of which were conducted in response to various perceived ‘failings’ in political polling and all of which made a range of recommendations for reform. In doing so it showed that the links between failings and inquiry created a specific type of environment of scrutiny which focused on the technical aspects of political polling and less so on the significance of individual pollsters. This is reflected in the regulatory environment of political polling.

Second, the chapter then assessed the views of pollsters on regulation, revealing the more nuanced ways they interact with existing legislation and showing that, though a contested space amongst practitioners, a good number of pollsters involved in the day to day practice of polling saw no issue with potential regulations that were compatible with their working practices. Finally, it explored a particular example, illustrating the value of an understanding of everyday practices to scrutiny. The manifestation of pressure in political polling and its impacts were assessed - providing a picture of complex factors which influence the quality and output of political polling.

Having in this chapter demonstrated the utility of this research in relation to regulation and scrutiny, this thesis now moves on to conclude on its broader themes. The next chapter provides an answer to the research question posed at the outset of the thesis, reflects on the relationship between academics and pollsters and looks to what this thesis provides for further study of this area.

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<sup>711</sup> Lisa Wedeen, ‘Reflections on Ethnographic work in Political Science’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 13 (2010) 255-272 (p.268)

## 8 | Chapter 8 – Conclusion

### 8.1 Introduction

This research began with the question:

*“What are the everyday practices of political public opinion polling, and what is their significance in understanding political polls?”*

In answering that question, this thesis makes a number of empirical and theoretical contributions, summarised below.

First, empirical. Through the production of accounts and descriptions of the everyday activities of polling, this thesis casts light on practices which were not previously well documented. I documented who pollsters are, the nature of their working environment, and the norms, traditions and values observed within political polling. This produced a number of findings, for instance the regularity of commissioned work, the prevalence of client interactions, and the attitudes taken to topic selection and question design. Empirical and descriptive accounts of the everyday practices of polling were provided which enable an understanding of polling routines and practices and allow future studies to reflect on the work of pollsters with more precise focus, and greater nuance. Chapter 1 noted that the empirical contribution of the thesis would be made through a “thick” account of polling, and this was provided in Chapter 5, and elaborated on throughout the thesis.<sup>712</sup>

Second, theoretical. As noted in Chapter 1.2 a particular argument was advanced through close analysis of the empirical account provided in the thesis. Human interactions, decisions and judgements, documented empirically in the thesis, were demonstrated to be a significant component of political polling. Assessment of the human aspects of polling (for instance, managing commissions in Chapter 5.4, notions of common good in Chapter 6.3.1, and responding to pressure in Chapter 7.3.2) revealed that they are influential on the type, nature and availability of political polls. Throughout this thesis, theory was generated to explain the dynamics of these everyday aspects and provide a basis on which further study of polling practices can be built. These understandings are important because of the importance of polling in politics (as discussed throughout Chapters 1 and 2).

In this conclusion, rather than encompassing the totality of the insights raised across a “thick” exploration of polling, I will instead draw out a number of the empirical and theoretical contributions of the thesis, reflect on their meaning in relation to one another and tell their story.<sup>713</sup> Throughout the

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<sup>712</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: selected essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) pp. 10-13

<sup>713</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 10-13

time I spent amongst pollsters, they would often note of their work that despite the external focus on statistics, political polling is “a science, and an art”.<sup>714</sup> I will first reflect on how the research in this thesis enables us to see the art so often hidden behind the science. Then, I will consider the contribution in relation to the continued study of this area– reflecting on why this sort of research has not occurred before and presenting suggestions for what comes next.

## 8.2 An Art, Not Just a Science

Within my first week embedded with YouGov, I had been told that whilst polling is an endeavour undoubtedly characterised by its scientific trappings, it is also an art.<sup>715</sup> Throughout observations, and across the course of interviews and other interactions, it became clear that pollsters greatly respected and revelled in the ‘art’ component of their work. Pollsters would tease each other on question design, and relish finding an elegant wording for a tricky topic.<sup>716</sup> It was also clear that the art of polling, by which pollsters meant the day-to-day decisions and nuances of their work, was significant for an understanding of political polls.<sup>717</sup> In this section I will reflect on a number of points from across the thesis which exemplify this point, ascertain what was known about these areas outside of this thesis, and demonstrate how they reveal an overarching story of polling.

### 8.2.1 No Single Yardstick

From this research, we can see that polling is not the science of implementing a template or applying an accepted yardstick to a particular problem, but the art of assessing a request and the maker of said request, and interactively iterating to a point of mutual acceptability. Upon entering fieldwork, one of the first “foreshadowed problems”, as discussed in Chapter 3.3.1, of this research was to observe and record the life-cycle of the typical political poll.<sup>718</sup> To do this, I observed and participated in the production of polls, identified their common features and the processes at work and then presented this information as part of an empirical account. Such an account was provided throughout Chapter 5.

As identified in the introduction, everyday practices were an area of study overlooked in analyses of polling. Whilst our knowledge of the statistical and mechanical elements of polling are robust (if

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<sup>714</sup> FN607, FN508, EI1

<sup>715</sup> FN508

<sup>716</sup> FN522

<sup>717</sup> Ethnographic Interview 7

<sup>718</sup> Branislow Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London, Routledge, 1922) p. 9.

continually evolving) as detailed in Chapter 4, we have no narrative accounts of the practices behind the crafting of a poll from commission to completion. Consequently, we have limited information about the processes which constitute a typical poll. In contributing this narrative account, this thesis set out to bridge this knowledge gap.

However, whilst Chapter 5 addressed what the process of producing polls looked like day-to-day, and articulated the different types of polls which had different constitutive practices involved (daily, internal, bespoke) it also demonstrated that attempts to identify the processes behind a typical poll in isolation were flawed. Not only are two polls rarely alike, many polls are a reflection of the specific dynamics that arise between different pollsters and different clients. An understanding of the processes of polling therefore necessitated an understanding of the dynamics between pollster and the commissioning party, dynamics not previously explored.

Certainly the general importance of identifying the commissioning party of a poll is broadly known by interested parties within and without the polling industry. The BPC's transparency rules include the disclosure of clients for this reason.<sup>719</sup> However this is a general principle which does not equate to a richer understanding of the dynamics of client effects on polls. Reflections on clients, and on pressure in chapters 5 and 7 respectively allowed for a more nuanced appraisal of their influence. The existing descriptions of these effects, explored in Chapter 7, such as the depiction of pressure as clients explicitly asking for bad polling to be run, and pollsters identifying and resisting such pressure has a basis in reality. However, such a depiction does not cover the more common ways in which the relationship between pollster and client and its pressures manifest.

This thesis detailed iterative relationships with clients, with pressure more commonly active at the margins of good polling, rather than the extremes of bad. In this picture, client characteristics, presented as heuristics in Chapter 5, set the framing for good practice and the influence of pressure in the negotiations within that framing was explored in Chapter 7. Relationships between pollsters and clients were often protracted, and often concerned with influence over survey design. As one pollster noted to me: "there was one [commission] recently that took two and half weeks to sign off two questions".<sup>720</sup> Presented within the thesis are two complementing theories of how this extended influence can be understood. First, a confidence/autonomy framework was presented which describes the approach of pollsters to clients, in which pollsters use client characteristics to determine a threshold of quality and clarity to which they should work. This approach, explored in Chapter 5.4.2, though rational (as it assists them in avoiding providing material which will be misused) impacts the nature of the polls we see in the public sphere. Second, Chapter 7 included a description of the ways that pressure operates within

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<sup>719</sup> British Polling Council, *Objects and Rules*, British Polling Council  
 <<http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/objects-and-rules/>> [accessed 24/10/2019]

<sup>720</sup> Interview 11-5



this threshold. This description presented negotiation and pressure as operating with a window of acceptable poll design, established by the thresholds mentioned above. Again, these interactions influence the question wording which we see in the public sphere.

Through casting light on polling as an art, this work acts as an important corrective to perspectives of polling which crowd out human agency. Where this chapter spoke previously of a flaw in attempting to understand a poll in isolation, it is because of effects such as those described above, often operating out of the sight of our conventional understandings of political polling. As one pollster summarised when interviewed, “There are certain checks and balances that we need, and we do need to follow when we’re creating a survey, but I don’t think there’s one size fits all criteria”.<sup>721</sup> These dynamics are understandable because they are rational safeguards to protect against misuse of polling. They might be expected to have small, or inconsequential impacts, but they are likely to cause potential changes to question wording. We can see from the exploration of question wording effects in Chapter 2.1 that these sorts of changes have the potential to translate into effects on results. These dynamics between pollsters and clients are also significant because the conduct of pollsters speaks to a further question – what are polls for?

### 8.2.2 The Purpose of Polling

This thesis has shown that political polling can have many different purposes, some of which challenge the conventional wisdom of what polling is for. There are existing narratives on this topic, explored in Chapter 6.3. The broader functions that political polls perform (reporting, prediction, analysis) are the subject of much of the literature discussed in Chapter 2 and revisited in Chapter 6.2.<sup>722</sup> In terms of why polling organisations produce political polls, there are also a number of accounts. Across many public events, publicly available interviews, and even select committee testimony senior pollsters present the purpose of political polling as clear cut. Political polling gets attention, with many pollsters describing it as a loss leader which provides PR material for the wider polling organisation.<sup>723</sup> Political polls are therefore reputationally significant and treated as such. This narrative has the benefit of being borne out across interviews and observations, it is well known, and it is accurate.

However, it is also not the only factor worth considering in explaining what political polls are for, Chapter 6 revealed a variety of discordant perspectives on this matter. Political polling’s status as a loss leader depended on definitions of political. When this definition includes social or policy polling,

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<sup>721</sup> Ethnographic Interview 4

<sup>722</sup> Robert Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 121.

<sup>723</sup> Ben Page, House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, Evidence Session 20, Question 151, 5/12/17

political work makes similar profits to a custom team of comparable size. Whilst political polls make for great publicity, online material from a number of polling organisations speaks to pollsters' acknowledgement of a more democratically significant function that their work fulfils.<sup>724</sup> Why are these discordant perspectives significant? They indicate that the motivations and conceptions of role and responsibility held within the industry are more complex than our existing explanations adequately account for.

Chapter 6 outlined behaviours and express statements given in interviews in which pollsters acknowledge a democratic responsibility, and the “moral and ethical imperatives” commensurate with this responsibility.<sup>725</sup> In their online material, polling organisations invoke Rousseau, (as discussed in Chapter 6.3.1) arguing that political polls fulfil a function in ensuring government is responsive and representative, and pollsters reflect on the real impacts and importance of their work, and the responsibility and respect it should be treated with.<sup>726</sup> This sense of responsibility can be seen to impact polling practice. Pollsters vary in the extent to which they are comfortable with ideas of their holding a democratic role, some preferring to acknowledge this as a role shared between all pollsters, rather than one performed individually.<sup>727</sup> However at the everyday level these considerations of responsibility were identified as being linked to modest alterations in practice regarding ‘good’ polling. With a number of interpretations as to what constitutes ‘good’ polling, explored throughout chapters 5 and 6, concepts of responsibility are often invoked in justifying individual decisions as to how ‘good’ polling is arrived at. As noted by one pollster in relation to rejected questions “we can’t run it, so we’ve financially lost out, but on a, maybe a moral basis we haven’t”.<sup>728</sup> Why are these more complex senses of responsibility and motivation significant? Because again, they have some impacts on the surveys we see, and the thresholds for what individual pollsters might set as their minimum standards of good polling. Furthermore, they do so in ways which are not addressed by existing understandings.

### 8.2.3 Who are these Pollsters?

With the themes drawn out in this chapter so far reflecting on issues of human agency in the approach taken to topic selection, question design, or standards of individual decision making, the question of who pollsters are, the individuals involved in this decision making, becomes salient. Chapter 5 addressed this question at a generalised level. Whilst broader organisations such as the MRS describe

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<sup>724</sup> Interview 5-8, Yougov 'Why daily polling really matters.' <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2011/05/16/why-daily-polling-really-matters/> accessed 01/01/17

<sup>725</sup> FN611

<sup>726</sup> Ali Unwin, *Why daily polling really matters*, YouGov, 16 May 2011, <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2011/05/16/why-daily-polling-really-matters/> [accessed 01/01/17] ; Interview 11-6

<sup>727</sup> Interview 11-2

<sup>728</sup> Ethnographic Interview 4

the demographics of the profession as young, with high staff turnover, we are concerned here specifically with the subset of political pollsters – the types of backgrounds they have, the skillsets and interests.<sup>729</sup> On this, few accounts provide details beyond the broad demographics of the wider market research sector.

Chapter 5 began to address this absence by contributing a picture of pollsters which may be unsurprising to those who work closely with the sector, but unexpected for many others. The small number of political pollsters (6) in the YouGov team is surprising, even in an organisation boasting the largest political team in the UK. Amongst this small group, political pollsters were hired not for their statistical knowledge, but for their political knowledge. From the account in Chapter 5, this can be seen as due to the everyday activities engaged in by pollsters being primarily non-statistical in contrast to the perceptions of the public viewing them as “number crunching all of the time”.<sup>730</sup> One pollster noted to new starters during an induction that – “We’re not statisticians”, another commenting that there are few “highly statistically able” people in polling.<sup>731</sup> Polling is work which requires considerable skill, but for most political pollsters, that skill is political knowledge, question design, and analytical thinking.<sup>732</sup>

With political knowledge the priority, pollsters are significantly more politically engaged than an average citizen.<sup>733</sup> This is a necessity of the role, as well as a by-product “I mean a lot of the questions that we write... we have to read up about it at the time, it’s not a given that we know all about it, so it’s very much a learning process that develops over time”.<sup>734</sup> Continued development in role focuses on the non-statistical, as one pollster noted, “most of the skills you learn on the job really is questionnaire design and client handling and the management of the system”.<sup>735</sup>

Political pollsters note that their industry reflects the broad demographics of market research – generally young, white, and male.<sup>736</sup> Beyond this, political pollsters are likely to be recent graduates of from politics or politics-related degree courses.<sup>737</sup> Political pollsters from across the industry noted this trend: “The political space is a bit niche, and so the demographic range isn’t huge there. I think our team is obviously very urban based, partly because we’re based in London, it’s also more male”.<sup>738</sup> The structural impacts of having fields dominated by specific demographics, for instance design for a ‘male default’, are increasingly well documented and accessible to wider audiences.<sup>739</sup>

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<sup>729</sup> Jane Frost, *Political Polling and Democracy: an afternoon seminar*, (NCRM, London) [presented June 6 2018]

<sup>730</sup> Ethnographic Interview 1

<sup>731</sup> FN611, Interview 11-4

<sup>732</sup> Interview 11-6

<sup>733</sup> FN508

<sup>734</sup> Ethnographic Interview 4

<sup>735</sup> Interview 11-2

<sup>736</sup> Interview 27-1

<sup>737</sup> Interview 11-2, Interview 11-6

<sup>738</sup> Interview 27-1

<sup>739</sup> See for instance, Caroline Criado Perez, *Invisible Women* (Chotto & Windus, London, 2019)

A number of pollsters acknowledged this diversity issue when pollster demographics were raised during interviews, and suggested it was less prevalent in polling than other areas of public life. Further, they believed that their own inherent biases were somewhat mitigated through their cognisance of pollster demographics, their willingness to reach out when they lacked perspective, and the nature of their work, which they viewed as regular engagement with broader social groups beyond their own.<sup>740</sup> Though pollsters describing these mitigation factors acknowledged that sector homogeneity would still influence their work to some degree.

Political views amongst pollsters were varied on a number of issues and party preferences, and were acknowledged by pollsters in observation and interviews: “I actually think pollsters are really quite good at accounting for their own political bias, generally speaking, so the fact that you may have a background in a certain politics, doesn’t mean you’re more likely to be skewing your polling towards that party”.<sup>741</sup> Though one might expect this response regardless of the truth of the situation, this claim is in line with the perspectives gathered throughout this research. Not only would the varied political views of pollsters make such skewing problematic amongst a team, interviewees argued that even if they were inclined to skew a poll, it would be evident that this had happened, and present no clear benefit to themselves or another party.<sup>742</sup> Indeed pollsters agreed with the suggestion that they were more likely to act more cautiously when dealing with party politics which aligned with their own.<sup>743</sup> Chapter 5 presented this picture of pollsters both as an empirical contribution and a contextualisation of the account of polling which was to follow. Understanding the demographics of political pollsters and the propensities for recruitment to come from people with particular backgrounds and with particular interests is important when reflecting on the degree of individual discretion afforded to pollsters.

In isolation these common features are interesting, perhaps surprising to many, but their significance is unclear. However, when taken in relation to the individual decision making reflected upon in previous sections, understanding common features amongst individuals exercising their discretion is salient to an understanding of polling because of potential impacts these characteristics can have. Examples of this effect can be illustrated. For instance, the production of the YouGov Pop Idol poll noted in chapter 6.2.3 (which pollsters and organisational publicity noted as being instrumental in YouGov’s early successes). Young pollsters, being of the audience demographic of the show, may be more likely to have had an awareness of and interest in the show, and these factors may have motivated polling on this issue.<sup>744</sup> Whilst this thesis does not definitively trace the specific links between pollster characteristics

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<sup>740</sup> Interview 27-1, Interview 5-8

<sup>741</sup> FN621, Interview 11-3

<sup>742</sup> Interview 27-1

<sup>743</sup> Interview 11-3

<sup>744</sup> YouGov, ‘Timeline’, YouGov, <<https://corporate.yougov.com/about/timeline/>> [accessed 24/10/19] ; Interview 11-6

and polls, it puts forward evidence that there is the capacity for these factors to influence topic selection, and raises this question for consideration, as will be further considered below.

#### 8.2.4 The Individual's Discretion

Having reflected on the picture presented of political pollsters in Chapter 5, we can tease out additional meaning by looking at avenues by which individual discretion is exercised. There are a number of existing accounts which provide some insights into individual agency in polling. These tend to point towards question design, with insider accounts, reflected on in Chapter 2, such as Moore's and public blogs from political pollsters discussing the challenges and rationale behind question wording or aspects of survey design.<sup>745</sup> This thesis contributes to this literature, but also extends the insights such work provides.

In relation to survey design, this thesis has supported existing insights to show that this is an area of considerable individual, and collaborative discretion. Indeed with the diversity of political commissions and their own internal work, political pollsters are given a great deal of opportunity for discretionary or experimental question design, and are recognised for this experience within their wider organisation.<sup>746</sup> Though some political pollsters noted that there was still a proportion of 'formulaic' work which had to be conducted, there were nevertheless opportunities for creative work.<sup>747</sup> Indeed, one interviewee commented:

“Yeah, I probably think of myself as more of a researcher than a pollster I think. Because to me, a researcher probably... covers more areas. Even though a pollster does similar work, I think the research side of it, the background work, the contact with the clients, having that back and forth with them as well is more what I think research to be”.<sup>748</sup>

To further highlight individual discretion, this sub-section will reflect on the 'internal commissions' referenced in Chapter 5 and throughout the thesis. Chapter 5 discussed these survey questions of a pollster's own design with no associated client. These types of commissions were identified as regular practice through observations, in interviews across organisations, and within literature on opinion polling. This discretionary polling is described as reactive in literature (often following the news agenda

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<sup>745</sup> See for instance, David Moore, *The Opinion Makers, an insider exposes the truth behind the polls* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009) p. 153. ; Anthony Wells, *UK Polling Report*, <<https://ukpollingreport.co.uk/>> [accessed 24/10/19]

<sup>746</sup> Ethnographic Interview 4, Ethnographic Interview 5

<sup>747</sup> Interview 11-4

<sup>748</sup> Ethnographic Interview 4

at the time), or experimental, being used to test polling concepts or principles.<sup>749</sup> These accounts were reflected in the empirical observations produced in Chapter 5, with regular evidence of polling targeting the news agenda where no existing commissions existed, or being used for their experimental value (for instance, testing question wording effects on issues which see regular polling).<sup>750</sup> Not only does this thesis demonstrate that such work is a prominent feature of everyday polling, it suggests that it is so to a greater extent than existing literature otherwise makes clear.

These uses of internal commissions are well accounted for. However in Chapter 5, an additional way in which these internal commissions were used was presented: pollsters pursuing their own interests. Pollsters used these open opportunities to pursue topics they deemed to be entertaining, be it on the nation's favourite condiment, term for a chip butty, or perhaps something more political. This work, historically conducted within the political team, was moving away to dedicated PR teams, though still fielded through political surveys. Beyond this, they were also used as a means for pollsters to produce analysis on a given topic. Whilst these pieces could be informed by perceptions of public interest (led by the news agenda as noted above), they could be driven by individual interest. Pollsters commented to this effect, and its frequency in interview:

“A lot of the time inspiration will come from nowhere frankly, [topic] was pretty much to do with me thinking about my personal views on the topic... So I thought it would be interesting to examine...”.<sup>751</sup>

“There are times when we do do it to test out methodology things and wording things, but most of the time it's: is this is interesting, have we got some space this week? Well yeah we have, throw it on”.<sup>752</sup>

With this in mind, and with a view to the observations of Chapter 5 that all political pollsters aimed to, and were encouraged to produce analytical work, the considerations in the previous sub-section of “who” pollsters are becomes increasingly important, because they impact what pollsters find interesting and worthy of polling.

Whilst many of the forces which drive topic selection are common-sensical and straightforward (e.g. driven by the news agenda, identified collaboratively at weekly team meetings, or the experimental polling which is both well documented, and also present in the account of Chapter 5) there are aspects of individual discretion on these internal commissions on which there is little to no existing information. The introduction of individual interest throughout Chapters 5 and 6, combined with the reflections on

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<sup>749</sup> See for instance, Roger Mortimore and Anthony Wells, ‘The Polls and Their Context’ in *Political Communication in Britain*, Ed. by Dominic Wring and others, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) pp.19-38 ; Nick Moon, *Opinion Polls: History Theory Practice*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) p. 45.

<sup>750</sup> Nick Moon, *Opinion Polls: History Theory Practice*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) p. 45.

<sup>751</sup> Interview 11-7

<sup>752</sup> Interview 11-2

who pollsters are, and the organisational culture in which they work, invites greater reflection and future research on the sort of polls being produced. Initial findings from this thesis offer some clues as to the potential outcomes of such work. For example, Chapter 5 raised factors which mediated the personal choices of pollsters on topics, as explained to me during one interview:

“I normally have a good idea of what the outcome of a survey will be when I ask it, on the basis that you need to ask interesting surveys. Let me explain that properly, there are any number of surveys I could run... You can’t just ask all the surveys on the basis that there might be an interesting result, you’ve got to ask, because there’s only so much survey space available, you’ve got to ask surveys that you have a high level of confidence will output a result worth talking about.”<sup>753</sup>

Pollsters do not act entirely in a vacuum. Though individual interests might lead them to research particular topics, this must be balanced against limited resource, and the value of fielding a particular question. A second mediating factor was clear from the first few days of the fieldwork for this thesis – a concern that pollsters would be viewed as in a ‘Westminster bubble’, detached from the concerns of the average person.<sup>754</sup> Though political pollsters would rank highly on any political interest measure in comparison to the wider public, they were cognisant of this divide, and expressed a desire to avoid polling solely on their own interests:

“What other stuff is going on outside the stuff we’re hearing on the *Today* programme that actually lots of people in the population are interested in, that won’t be captured if we just talk about what the top political issue of the day is.”<sup>755</sup>

A robust understanding of the topic selection for internal questions is significant in relation to the agenda setting, priming and framing effects of reportage, discussed Chapter 2.3.1. The analyses in Chapters 5 and 6 provide significant evidence that there are interactions between ‘who’ pollsters are, and what topics they cover. It also demonstrated a number of organisational structural factors and cultural norms which mediate these topic selection decisions. In this thesis, we have a starting point for a more sophisticated understanding of the production of polls, the topics, standards, and clients, than we had before. The thesis therefore builds on existing understandings but develops them in important ways – highlighting a wider scope for individual discretion than previously indicated and raising questions for future research about the impact that such discretion has on polling outcomes.

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<sup>753</sup> Interview 11-7

<sup>754</sup> FN423

<sup>755</sup> Interview 11-4

### 8.2.5 The Regulator's Challenge

The complexity of polling practices raised here, including the prevalence of individual decision making, dynamic heuristics, and personal/organisational values, present a challenge to those who wish to scrutinise the practice of political polling. Chapter 7 discussed some of these efforts, detailing a range of previous scrutiny and regulation events relating to UK political polling. In Chapter 7 we saw a contested regulatory space – one in which the formal process of scrutiny could often be outpaced by the speed of the industry's own changes, leaving a good proportion of scrutiny efforts describing and confirming corrective efforts already being taken by the polling industry following significant failings.

On scrutiny and regulation, more than any of the other themes raised in this thesis thus far, we have a wealth of existing information and analysis. This includes the work of previous inquiries into polling failings, and from that of a parliamentary select committee. The evidence produced by these various inquiries includes a broad range of submissions from pollsters, journalists, academics, clients, and other interested parties, reflected on in Chapter 7. Chapter 7 contributed to this crowded space by demonstrating how its specific insights could provide depth and nuance to active political discussions regarding polling. This was shown with the example of the discussion of pressure and scrutiny in Chapter 7.3.2. The themes raised in sequence throughout this chapter also provide an additional consideration for ongoing scrutiny and regulatory efforts.

Much of the attention on polling practice is focused on big events, mistakes, or conduct which is viewed to be extremely out of the ordinary. The themes raised in this chapter, and throughout the thesis, have demonstrated a number of areas of everyday practice which have comparably small impacts on polling. These smaller practices impact not on whether a poll is 'good' or whether it accurately predicts an election, but on the nature, topics and wording of surveys. These effects may seem to be small and inconsequential in isolation, but as has been demonstrated in this chapter and this thesis, the art of polling and the everyday practices of polling involve producing these effects regularly. The cumulative impact of marginal effects are more than the sum of their parts: these practices, pressures and factors seen in polling practices produce real effects in the polls we see.

These diffuse practices, (such as collaboration, conceptions of 'good' polling, and client management) which may vary across organisations, and their significance to polling present a challenge to polling's effective regulation. This contributes to the finding of Chapter 7 that effective scrutiny and regulation is challenging. With the tendency for scrutiny, formal and informal, to focus around voting intention polling and their failures, smaller practices which tend not to apply to the production of voting intention polls, are not identified as problematic, or widely acknowledged.



Increasing our capacity to explain these practices and their effects is the major empirical and theoretical contributions of this thesis. As detailed throughout the thesis, many of these practices are not the consequence of pollsters attempting to introduce bias or other untoward forces in polling (indeed many have a positive effect on the quality of polling). They are the consequences of pollsters constructing practices which guard against poll misuse. Regardless of positive or negative intent, these everyday practices are significant because they explain the process by which we receive the sorts of polling information which we do.

In this section, a number of insights provided across the thesis were threaded together in a way which characterises the thesis, and shows the value of understanding the human everyday practices of political polling; their significance in understanding how and why we end up with the political polls that we do.

### 8.3 Further study of polling practices

Having reviewed a number of the thematic elements of the thesis and considered the significance of some specific empirical and theoretical contributions, this section reflects on the broader nature of the contribution made by this thesis in relation to the study of polling practices.

The first of these reflections relates to the novelty of this thesis – considering the production of data and theory in a new area and addressing why work of this nature has not previously been produced. The second addresses the opportunities for further study which the work reported in this thesis invites and considers how its data and theory can be used to better understand and research the wider sector.

#### 8.3.1 Covering New Ground

Throughout this thesis, and in the summaries of the first part of this chapter, it has regularly been noted that little or no existing work was available on a number of the topics covered. It is worth reflecting why the subject matter of this thesis has not been covered before. To address this question, I note two contributing factors beyond the practical consideration that it can be hard to gain access. The first is one raised earlier in this chapter, grounded in the nuances of the cumulative significance of everyday interactions. This is the challenge that was noted for prospective scrutiny or regulation – the perception of the factors discussed throughout as small and inconsequential when viewed in isolation. The second is grounded in the specific relationship between academic and pollster.

As noted in Chapters 1 and 5, the relationship between pollsters and academics is a close one. Even beyond specific instances of individual academics who are regular clients or well known to a pollster,

a more genial tone is extended than to other clients.<sup>756</sup> Academics are a good source of income for political pollsters, and are perceived by pollsters as having both specific data demands, and, from their perspective, good money.<sup>757</sup> However this perception neither accurately describes nor explains the idiosyncrasies of the wider relationship. Academics fulfil a wider set of roles than solely as a client, and are instead often colleagues and partners, providers of expert advice, and friends.<sup>758</sup> This was evident at YouGov, where their widely publicised MRP modelling for the 2017 election was carried out in collaboration with an array of academics.<sup>759</sup> Academic literature can be found adorning the desks of many a political pollster, often tomes to which they themselves have contributed, and pollsters cite literature from academics such as Zaller as influential or informative in their work.<sup>760</sup> Finally, there is a broader conviviality which is hard to quantify but nonetheless evident. Those who have attended conferences related to public opinion will likely have attended alongside political pollsters – present both to network with large gatherings of existing and potential clients, but also because the events are seen as fun social occasions.<sup>761</sup> At a more everyday level, when client meetings take place, they are more likely to be scheduled in more casual settings when with academics compared to any other client. Indeed the very access on which this research was reliant is indicative of an openness towards academia.<sup>762</sup> This different relationship to that with other clients is identified by political pollsters, with a number noting the different treatment received:

“I mean one very obvious one is academics, if academics send us over a survey, then unless they ask for help... we’ll say, it’s your reputation you’re dealing with, it’s your experiment, we’ll let you try it your way”.<sup>763</sup>

“A question can be quite punchy for instance for an academic and we know that there is a methodological justification behind that, that this question may have been asked consistently and it is not going to be misused. So that goes into the calculation”.<sup>764</sup>

“An academic... will often have a lot of experience in questionnaire design and so, depending on what the academic project is, it almost becomes what we call a field and tab project to some extent... usually [we] don’t have to change very much of their questionnaire but have to do a

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<sup>756</sup> FN501

<sup>757</sup> FN423

<sup>758</sup> As discussed in Chapter 5.4.2

<sup>759</sup> Doug Rivers, *How The YouGov Model for the 2017 General Election Works*, YouGov, 31 May 2017, <<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2017/05/31/how-yougov-model-2017-general-election-works>> [accessed 28 September 2019]

<sup>760</sup> FN516, John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

<sup>761</sup> FN629

<sup>762</sup> As Discussed in Chapter 5.4.2

<sup>763</sup> Interview 11-2

<sup>764</sup> Interview 11-6

lot of work on the sampling and just looking after the project. The trust there is another aspect".<sup>765</sup>

As a result, many of the practices considered within this thesis are obscured from academic clients. This results in a significantly different experience for academics than other clients, because, as demonstrated in the account of polling provided in this thesis, these human interactions around design and autonomy are constitutive of a large amount of the process of polling for most client commissions.<sup>766</sup> Consequently public explanations of the process of polling, for instance the straightforward explanation of resisting pressure given at the House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, are plausible for an observer.<sup>767</sup> Academics' idiosyncratic relationship with pollsters may well be a boon to academics permitting flexibility and collaboration in interactions with pollsters, but it is also a hindrance as it obscures many areas of pollsters' practice from academic scrutiny. As summarised by one pollster:

"You do judge it from your own experience, so essentially if you're [academic] and you commission lots of polls and you think well they've never pushed back on me and given me any difficulty in my question wording its true, we haven't because [academic] will always send over lovely unbiased fair questions so [they'll] have never had us being all demonic and saying no you're not allowed to do that".<sup>768</sup>

Despite this, it is an unreasonable generalisation to assume that all academics are not aware of the experiences of other clients. Indeed, the close relationship between academics and pollsters make it likely that those academics who work regularly with polling organisations will have heard stories detailing the experiences of other clients anecdotally. Rather than suggest that academics are entirely unaware of the different experience they receive of polling, instead this is a suggestion that experiences of polling of other clients are significantly abstracted from their own. This abstraction may render their significance difficult to assess.

In covering new material, and answering its research question, this thesis presents new avenues for research and the opportunity to assess the significance of this field of research. This leads to the final question to be answered in this thesis; what next?

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<sup>765</sup> Interview 11-5

<sup>766</sup> As discussed in Chapter 5.4.2

<sup>767</sup> As discussed in, Chapter 7.3.2

<sup>768</sup> Interview 11-2

### 8.3.2 What next for this area?

To conclude, I will reflect on the implications of this thesis for future research on the practices of opinion polling. This is addressed in relation to two perspectives; what the thesis offers for those external to the polling industry who wish to understand and research its practices, and what it offers for those internal to the industry reflecting on practices and decision making.

The thesis has been a demonstration of the ways in which insider/ethnographic accounts can be approached and produced in this field. Though access to commercial companies can be unusual, it has shown that access and participation can be negotiated, and that there is a willingness on the part of pollsters to participate in research about their work. The methodology chapter explored and assessed the challenges presented and uncovered by researching this area in this way. This work serves to benefit future studies of this kind.

In this research, I took a clear focus on one polling organisation. With the diversity of the industry (noted in Chapter 4.2) the implications of this focus are noted throughout the thesis. Chapter 3.2.1 discussed generalisability in detail, and in each empirical chapter I have noted the broader relevance of the findings. Whilst some generalised inferences about political polling can be made, in the thesis I was primarily concerned with exploratory research and generating theory around polling practices which can inform and be tested through further research. This is the relevance of this thesis for polling, rather than generalisable empirical findings.

As an early ethnographic foray into a sparsely documented political area, this thesis produced a broad account of the practices that make up the everyday of political polling. The research makes explicit to an outside audience the ongoing debates and views from within the polling industry over a number of questions, such as those of practice and responsible decision making. With the identification of these practices and perspectives, and production of theory and frameworks through which to understand and assess polling behaviours, future research is enabled to target and assess areas of research value. It stands as a comparative, preparatory, or theoretical asset to such research.<sup>769</sup> This research might include: Further understanding the interplay between pollster demographics/discretion and agenda setting/decision making, the relationship between the perceived role of polling and standards of good practice, or the views of pollsters on regulatory frameworks and their daily practices.

As this research makes clear to an outside audience the internal debates and perspectives on questions of practice and decision making, so too it contributes to the internal industry conversation. The research

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aggregates and interrogates the views of pollsters and articulates publicly unspoken perspectives and practices. Pollsters involved identified the research as a valuable outlet for introspection and reflection on their work. Providing and critically assessing this introspection and reflection is a valuable contribution to ongoing sector discussions on good practice.

This research also establishes a basis upon which ongoing collaboration and research with organisations in the sector can be founded and developed. Much of the work covered in the thesis is salient to such groups, such as identifying the frameworks which affect day-to-day practice, the perceptions of pollsters on the interaction between regulation and their individual practices, and the concepts which contribute towards good practice. These issues are of specific interest to the aims of polling organisations, and wider organisations in the sector such as the BPC or MRS. This, and further research is valuable for these organisations' ongoing role in the self-regulation and standards setting of the industry. This research might include: Work for organisations such as the BPC on issues around scrutiny and polling guidance, individual ethics and standards setting, and comparative best practice.

To conclude, in this thesis I asked the question, "What are the everyday practices of political public opinion polling, and what is their significance in understanding political polls?". In answering this question, empirical and theoretical contributions were made. Novel accounts and insights were produced, providing depth, nuance and texture to our understanding of how political polling works, and rich opportunities for further research in the area. The thesis serves to demonstrate that political polling is not only a scientific endeavour, it is also a deeply human practice, with all the quirks and idiosyncrasies that entails. To understand the message of the polls, we need to understand not only the science and interpretation of polling numbers but the humanity of pollsters. Polls reveal much about politics but are also themselves constructed and interpreted in a social and political environment. Improving our understanding of these factors, will improve our understanding of their messages.



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