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PUBLIC OPINION POLLING AND POLITICS IN BRITAIN

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CONTENTS

<i>List of tables</i>	vi
<i>Preface</i>	vii
I The history of opinion polling in Britain	I
2 The assumptions and theory of public opinion polling	15
3 The methodology of opinion polling	34
4 The use and impact of national opinion polling	84
5 The use and impact of sub- and supra-national opinion polling	129
6 The opinion polls and political issues	151
7 Conclusion	193
APPENDICES	
I Glossary of technical terms used in polling	202
II Sample questions taken from polls	213
III The polling experience	220
<i>General bibliography</i>	222
<i>Index</i>	226

TABLES

1.1	The five main political polling firms	2
3.1	The main advantages and disadvantages of different data collection methods	71
3.2	A frequency distribution of strength of identification with the Labour Party by Labour Party members, 1989–90	75
3.3	A cross-tabulation of occupation by trade union or staff association membership	76
4.1	The final polls and actual election results, 1970–92	86
5.1	A comparison of exit poll and actual by-election results in selected constituencies	133
6.1	Attitudes to British membership of the European Community	161
6.2	Attitudes to trade unions, 1952–94	169

PREFACE

A book on the theme of public opinion polling and politics in Britain seems particularly apposite in the wake of the general election of April 1992. Inevitably, the 'failure' of the polls to predict correctly an overall majority of twenty-one seats for the Conservative Party has engendered widespread criticism aimed at the use of polls in general as well as their specific value for observers and practitioners of politics alike.

This criticism derives at least in part from the apparently unstoppable growth in the number of polls commissioned and the obsessive poring over the results in the media to the virtual exclusion of alternative sources of information. Additionally, the increase in the number of polls throughout the 1980s was not accompanied by either a broader or a deeper understanding of what opinion polls can and do achieve and what challenges lie ahead for them in the future. The 'classic' textbook on polling in Britain remains Teer and Spence's *Political Opinion Polls*, published more than twenty years ago in 1973.

This lack of comprehension of the finer nuances of polling has not prevented many newspapers, even the tabloid press, from basing more and more stories on polling data. The range of 'poll stories' is enormous, covering topics such as who are the happiest people in the world (the inhabitants of Guernsey) and survey assessments of the impact of violence on television on the behaviour of ordinary people. A regular obsession of the tabloid press in

particular is 'sex surveys', one of which produced the sober conclusion that 'lust is difficult to measure'.

The degree to which polls provide stories which newspapers will print can be exemplified by page 4 of the *Daily Telegraph* on 31 December 1987. On that day, three separate stories were drawn from polls. The first was based on a Gallup poll whose headline read "'Glasnost" failing to make impact on most Russians'. This poll was conducted in thirty-seven countries in all, and countries were classified by the degree to which their populations were 'optimistic' or 'pessimistic' about prospects for 1988 compared to the previous year. It included the first interviews by Gallup in the Soviet Union.

The second story on that day informed readers that 'women in the West are happier than men.' This conclusion was based on a comparative study of the quality of life experienced by people in the United States and the member states of the European Community. Cultural factors were deemed to influence the way that different people in different countries answer when asked about their personal happiness or unhappiness.

The third story told readers that Sir Francis Drake was believed by some children aged between 8 and 14 to be a well-known cricketer. This was part of a poll dealing with basic historical events and people which also examined familiarity with the Spanish Armada and the significance of the date 1066. In the poll, seven out of ten children knew that Guy Fawkes had attempted to blow up the Houses of Parliament. Touchingly, one individual child believed that Guy Fawkes had 'travelled the country organising firework displays'.

The purpose of this book is more specific: namely, to analyse the functions and use of opinion polling and its impact on politics in Britain. In particular, the criticisms of the role and performance of opinion polls during the 1992 general election will be considered.

The first chapter of the book briefly sets out the history of polling in Britain, including the roots of present polling practices and the latest developments in the conduct of polls since 1979. The second chapter discusses the assumptions and theories on which modern polling is based, in particular the dimensions of public opinion and the composition of the 'public' as well as the criticisms of polls as a means of establishing the contours of public opinion.

The methodology of polling is described in chapter 3, comprising the procedures and problems associated with questionnaire

design, sampling, interviewing and data collection, the interpretation of the data and the presentation of the final results. The next two chapters are linked: chapter 4 looks at the use of polling by those most closely involved in the conduct of national British politics, namely, the electorate, the government, political parties, the mass media and pressure groups; chapter 5 looks at the use and impact of polling both *below* and *above* national level, encompassing by-election polls, constituency polls, polls conducted in marginal seats and local and European election polls.

The ways in which the polls attempt to measure the importance and impact of issues in British politics are analysed in chapter 6 by means of considering five specific issues (the European Community, trade unions and industrial relations, immigration and race relations, the environment and electoral reform). The concluding chapter of the book brings together the various strands of the previous chapters in an assessment of the importance of polling in British politics and its likely role in the future.

The book mainly deals with opinion polls and the problems of opinion polling in Britain, but in places it also touches on wider questions of survey research in general. For much of the book, the problems and challenges facing polls and surveys are similar and in those sections, polls and surveys are taken together. Distinctions between polls and surveys are often little more than matters of greater detail and length in the latter although there is sometimes more than a whiff of academic snobbery when survey specialists are commenting upon and using poll data.

There are inevitably a large number of intellectual debts which have to be acknowledged in a book of this sort. Particular encouragement throughout the extended process of writing was received from John Benyon and David Denver as well as Clare Grist of Harvester Wheatsheaf, who displayed great patience in the face of a number of enforced delays in completing the book.

The book has benefited enormously from conversations with pollsters, party officials and media representatives who often gave freely of their time as well as providing much information. My grateful thanks to the following must therefore be expressed:

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All of the above are of course absolved from any responsibility for the interpretation that follows. The errors that remain cannot honestly be ascribed to either sampling error or questionnaire design – they are, however, equally inevitable.

This book is dedicated to two people: firstly, to my late father, Jim Broughton, and secondly, to my niece, Ameenah. They have both influenced the writing of this book in very different but equally vital ways.

David Broughton
Cardiff, March 1995