Challenges facing the pollsters next time

Nick Sparrow

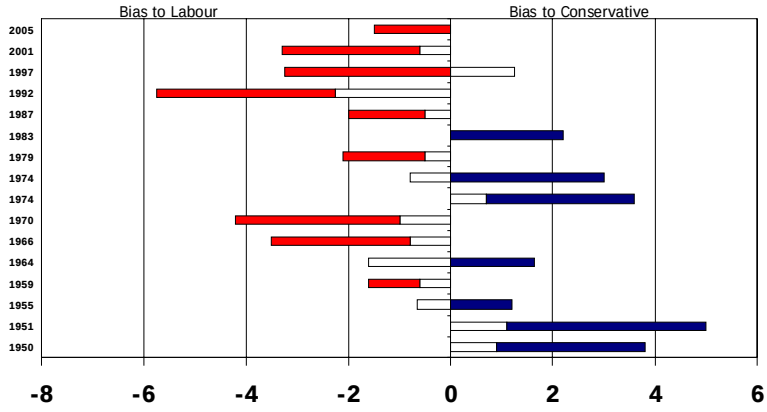
Introduction

The 2005 election was a triumph for the pollsters. All the final polls were very close the actual result and on that basis the pollsters might feel confident about the future. Yet, on closer inspection, it is clear that the methodological routes taken to the final predictions in 2005 were in some cases quite different. The challenges each polling company face looking forward to the next election therefore depend in part on the methods each employ or are prepared to consider. While the approaches may differ, there are some common areas of concern.

Persistent Pro Labour Bias in the polls

Chart one shows the average error in the final polls going back to 1950. The white bar shows the closest estimate and the red bar shows the most inaccurate final poll. To the right of zero indicates a pro Conservative bias and to the left a pro Labour bias. A prefect prediction, as achieved by MORI in 1983 and NOP in 2005 means no white bar appears on the chart. Overall, while the polls show biases both to Labour and the Conservatives, we have to look back to 1983 to find an election when the final polls proved to be too generous to the Conservatives. Since that time only one final poll, by ICM in 1997 has erred slightly in favour of the Conservatives. The first and most important challenge for the pollsters is to remove or at least account for the pro-Labour bias.

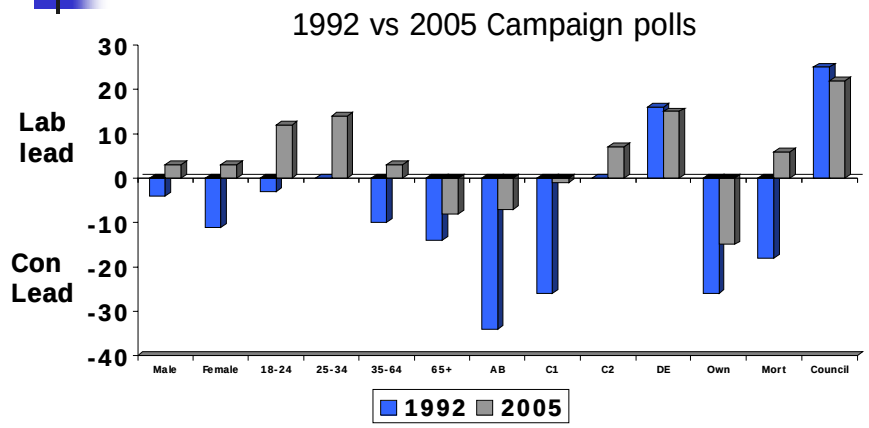
Chart 1. Errors in the polls



Effective weighting.

Historically, demographic variables have been used by pollsters as the primary, and in some cases only means of weighting data to create a politically balanced sample. Nevertheless, demographics have become rather poorly correlated with vote intentions. Chart 2 compares the aggregate data collected during the 1992 and 2005 election campaigns by ICM. It suggests that age and sex have not been especially closely correlated with vote intentions and while social class was helpful to the pollsters in 1992 it too has become relatively poorly linked to vote intentions. Simply this data suggests that for pollsters, getting the right demographic balance in any poll sample is no guarantee of political balance.

Chart 2. Demographics a poor predictor



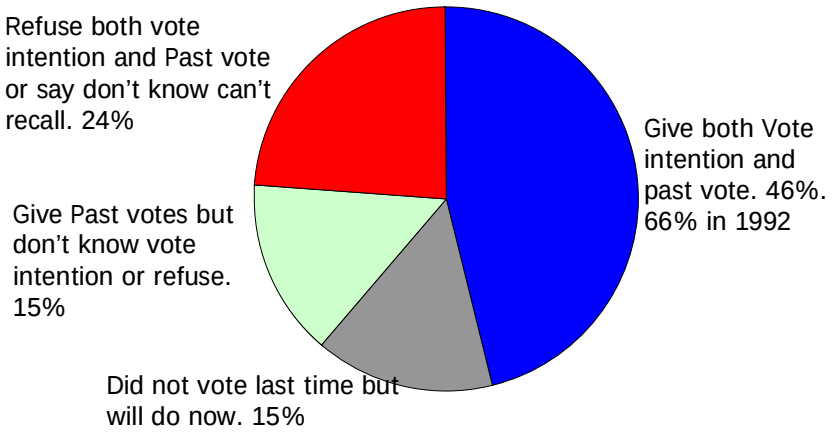
In response to this problem some pollsters have already turned to other measures of affluence, such as car ownership and foreign holidays just as affluence itself is becoming a poor indicator of political preferences. The implications are that pollsters need to devise other weighting variables more closely linked to attitudes and vote intentions to ensure political balance in the samples they draw. The problem is that targets for such variables need to be derived from some other, authoritative data source.

YouGov have adopted newspaper readership as one such measure drawing upon data from the National Readership Survey. The problem is that the base for the NRS estimates are questions that ask respondents about all newspapers they read yesterday for 2 minutes or more. Newspaper editors are keen on such data and are less interested in the fact that some people may have read more than one title. But what pollsters need is single code answers, ideally from a question that asks people which paper they most prefer to read. Such data might be considered in some cases to provide reasonable clues as to a persons political attitudes, but no authoritative data exists on which to base such estimates. Terminal Education age provides a proxy variable linked to newspaper readership, but it too is imperfect.

Of course, the best clue as to how people might vote in future would be their votes at the last election. The problem is some people forget how they voted while others align their past votes to present intentions. The indications from some pollsters (but not all) is that such misremembering is now a relatively minor problem, meaning that the targets for past votes lie close to the actual result last time. In 2005 the past vote estimates employed by Populus, ICM and NOP were similar and gave Labour a slightly higher percentage share of the vote in 2001 than they actually achieved with recall of having vote Conservative or Liberal Democrats slightly lower than they achieved. The effect on the data of this weighting was substantial and made the final estimates much more accurate than they would have been had these companies relied instead only on demographic variables. As noted in another paper, however, past vote weighting was not employed at all by MORI and the targets used for past votes by YouGov were substantially different to the result in 2001 with recall of having voted Labour as high as 52%

Unfortunately for the pollsters, this form of weighting can only be applied to those people who voted last time and are prepared to say which party they voted for. As Chart 3 suggests, in the 2005 election 46% of ICM's respondents gave a past vote and vote intention. These respondents are obviously all subjected to past vote weighting. In 2005 15% of the sample gave a past vote but said they did not know how they would vote in the coming election or refused to answer the question. While these people are also subjected to the past vote weighting the resulting impact on vote intentions was minimal. The vote intentions of other groups (those people who refuse to answer both past votes and vote intentions or say they don't know or can't recall their past votes) cannot be past vote weighted nor can those who did not vote in the last election but declare that they will do in the next election. The vote intentions of such people have to be taken at face value.

Chart 3. Declining power of Past Vote weighting



Looking back to 1992, equivalent data suggests 66% of the final ICM poll gave both past votes and vote intentions. Despite the declining power of past vote weighting it remains the most powerful weighting variable. ICM, NOP and Populus could, in future use actual votes at the last election and this would have the effect of further reducing the percentage of people saying they would vote Labour. That adjustment could remove the persistent pro-Labour bias, if it is imagined that such a bias continues to affect the polls, without addressing the issue of the source of such bias.

Turnout

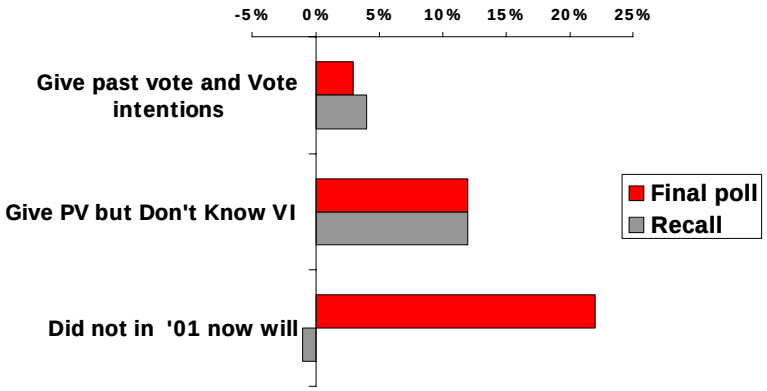
In the run up to the 2005 election most pollsters asked respondents how likely they would be to vote in a new general election and used this information to weight their data. On election day ICM got back to respondents on the final ICM polls and asked whether they had been to vote. These recall interviews indicate that there was a very low turnout among those people who said in the original interview that they had not bothered to vote in 2001 but would do so in 2005 and a high turnout among those who had voted in 2001 and gave a firm vote intention on the final pre-election polls. Chart 4 below indicates that the turnout weights applied by ICM did readjust the final polls in the right direction but not to the extent that the recall poll suggests was necessary.

Chart 4. Which respondents go to make the prediction?

	Demographic weights	Turnout Weights	Recall
Give both intentions and past votes	46%	51%	69%
Did not in '01 now will	15%	13%	11%
Give Past vote, now Don't Know	15%	15%	16%
Others	24%	20%	6%

The data from the recall interviews suggests that while those who did not vote in 2001 but intended to do so in 2005 imagined that they would support Labour rather than the Conservatives by a margin of 22%, the smaller number contacted on election day itself who had been to vote reported that they had supported the Conservatives rather than Labour by a margin of 1%.

Chart 5. Labour's Lead



This data provides us with a possible explanation for the present Labour bias in the polls. The data suggests that Labour may be supported by a somewhat larger proportion of people than are prepared to register that support in a polling booth. The present turnout question (or questions) may be insufficient to get respondents to guess, accurately, whether they will actually go and vote. Maybe respondents themselves are also incapable of making such predictions before polling day.

After election day ICM asked a fresh sample of people whether they had been to vote on election day. A quarter of those asked reported that they had not voted and of those 51% said the reason for not voting was that they thought "labour would win anyway". A further 31% said they thought it was obvious who would win in their Constituency and that this was a reason for not voting in 2005. Again, this data gives us an explanation for a bias in the polls in favour of Labour.

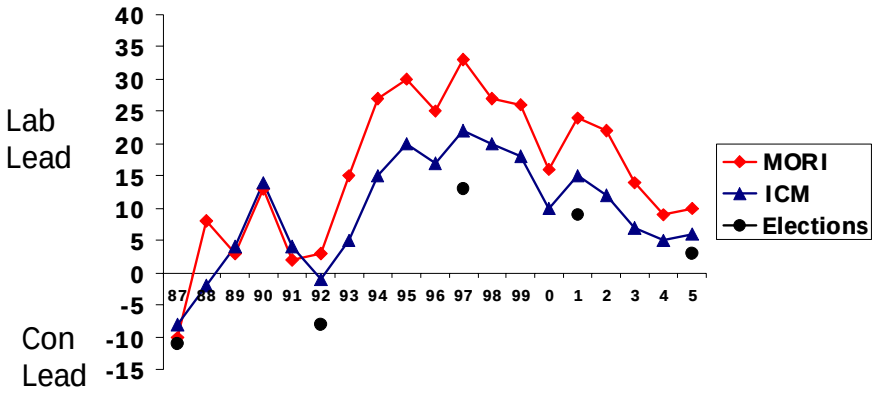
The problem facing all pollsters is that while the demographic profile of all adults is known from census and other data those who vote are a smaller and more indistinct sub sample of those people, who find it rather easier to say which party they support than predict whether they can be bothered to register their preference on the ballot form. With turnout at general elections in long term decline the challenge facing the pollsters is to find more sensitive and sophisticated methods of gauging who will actually register their votes.

Final polls and long term trends

To judge the performance of the polls by reference only to the final poll ignores the fact that vote intention polls are published every month of every year and help feed a climate of opinion about each political party, its performance and prospects at the next election. By this measure the polls have improved in recent years.

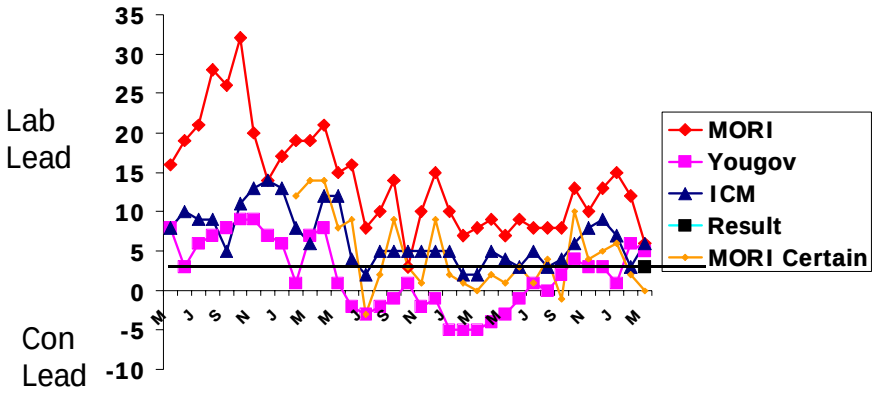
Chart 6 shows the average annual poll leads as measured by ICM and MORI from 1987 to 2005 to illustrate the point. The MORI data is based on all those expressing a preference for a party. Mori have more recently published additional estimates based on those certain to vote. What is clear from this data is that the over-estimation of Labour's advantage, as measured against general election outcomes is still present but is much reduced on the levels witnessed between 1992 and 2001.

Chart 6. Average Annual Poll Leads



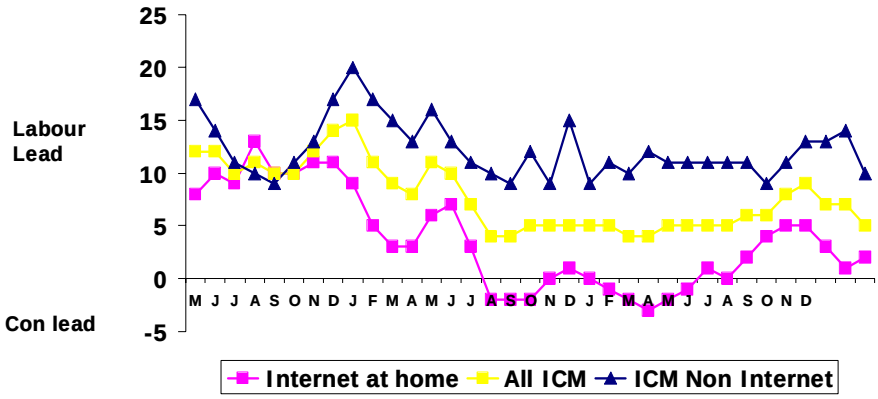
Following the 2001 election YouGov started regular polling and, from February 2003 MORI started producing two estimates of vote intentions, one based on all those expressing a preference for a party and the other concentrating only on those who said they were absolutely certain to vote. Chart 7 shows that, on this basis, MORI's estimates of the lead have been more erratic. Overall, while MORI and ICM have shown a slight bias to Labour, as measured by the final outcome in 2005, YouGov's polls have shown a slight bias towards the Conservatives. The problem for the pollsters is that the more traditional polling methods, employed by ICM and MORI tell a rather different story to YouGov. If YouGov had been right over this period then the Conservatives should have been more confident than they were in the final months of leadership by Iain Duncan Smith and the early period of leadership by Michael Howard. Instead, based on other more negative polls by most other pollsters the mood in the Conservative Party remained decidedly gloomy. For the future, this is obviously a difference we should try and understand.

Chart 7. Polls From May 2002 Onwards



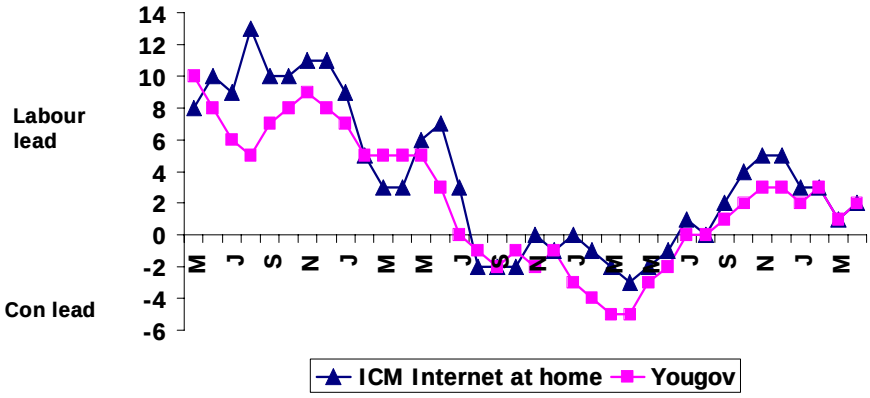
ICM have been tracking vote intentions among people with and without access to the internet at home since 2002. Chart 8 shows the percentage lead for Labour over the Conservatives for the whole sample and for sub samples of people with and without access to the internet. The data is presented on a rolling three month basis, is unadjusted and the sub samples have not been separately weighted. The ICM data suggests that, over this period the non-internet accessible population stayed much more loyal to Labour than did the internet accessible sample. ICM could not therefore produce a story similar to YouGov simply because the non-internet sub sample dragged the estimates in Labour's direction.

Chart 8. ICM. May 2002 onwards. Rolling 3 month data. Percentage lead



Indeed, one very puzzling observation is the similarity between ICM's internet accessible sub sample and YouGov's rolling three month data, producing an estimate of correlation of 0.9.

Chart 9. ICM Internet at Home vs YouGov. Rolling 3 month data



On the basis that pollsters need to answer not only for the accuracy of their final polls but for all polls between elections and the on-going story they tell, there clearly remain questions over the remaining, if small pro-Labour bias among traditional pollsters. Internet pollsters have other problems to wrestle with.

Snapshots or Predictions

When pollsters come up with a final poll that is close to the outcome of an election, with much pride they say their predictions were accurate. When they get it wrong they may often say that the poll was right when it was taken but was a snapshot of a moving situation. Clients who have sponsored an accurate poll will also use the opportunity to poke fun at their competitors who may have carried a somewhat less accurate prediction.

Some pollsters argue that all polls are snapshots but their final poll is a prediction. If this leads to rather different methods being employed on the final poll, it would seem to undermine any claim to accuracy of any poll except one taken immediately before an election.

Having produced the final Guardian poll, based on the methods ICM have used throughout the period between 2001 and 2005 ICM nevertheless advised the Guardian that the election could be closer than the model suggested. This did indeed influence the tone of the report in the paper although the data produced was obtained directly from the polling method. This advice was based on the observations that Labour voters stated that they were less certain to vote than Conservative voters and the concern that non voters in 2001 who said they would support Labour in 2005 would not actually vote. Historical trends also suggested that when polls suggest a clear majority for either party, fewer people bother to vote (because they do not think their vote will make a difference) and the data in 2005 suggested that low turnout would favour the Conservatives. The snapshot was published, but a prediction would have indicated that ICM should have simply taken one percentage point off Labour and add one to the Conservatives.

If polls are snapshots that report what people think they would do in an immediate election, the fact that they have produced estimates a little too kind to Labour over the last few years seems more defendable, simply on the basis that they measure support for each party at any given point in time, and cannot accurately predict who will state that support in the polling booth. If they claim to be predictions then the persistent Labour bias needs to be addressed. The pollsters cannot idly flit between the two.

One solution would be for pollsters and their clients to publish snapshots AND predictions. It would seem to be quite fair to point out to readers where the uncertainties lie in the data and what direction of error those uncertainties imply.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the close predictions of the polls in the 2005 election a number of challenges face the industry if the performance is to be repeated in 2009. Traditional weighting schemes based primarily on demographic variables seem increasingly inadequate to ensure political balance within poll samples. Past vote weighting and/or the development of other variables more closely linked to attitudes and political allegiance need to be developed.

An increasing number of voters either do not vote at all or do so sporadically. The accuracy of polls in future may depend not only on determining party support, but also working out which voters are actually going to bother to register their preferences on a ballot form.

The fact that polls have overstated Labour's advantage in recent years may simply reflect that a greater percentage of people support Labour than are prepared to vote for them in elections. Many people who did not vote in 2005 decided their vote was not needed because Labour looked set to win comfortably and a large proportion would have supported Labour if they had bothered to vote in 2005. In part at least, this may account for the apparent Labour bias in most polls. It therefore remains possible that the bias will reduce further or disappear altogether at the next election if the contest looks to be more closely contested.

This poses a tricky question; should polls be trying to predict outcomes or should they measure public opinion as it stands? Perhaps pollsters and their clients should openly do both, telling consumers of polls what the data says, but also adding notes of caution about any data that may lead to a somewhat different prediction of the actual outcome.