

HOW MUCH CAN WE TRUST PUBLIC OPINION POLLS?

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Abstract: Peoples trust numbers and likes to give them some significance. Every time we open a newspaper, listen to the radio, watch TV or browse the Internet we'll see some numbers and stats. These numbers can give a brief overview of the world surrounding ourselves and are often used by people or organizations to strengthen their message. Can we trust public opinion poll? Can these polls be manipulated? What method of manipulation can be used to alter the results of these polls? I designed two experiments to see how a person can misinterpret some data and how can a person manipulate a poll to obtain the desired numbers. Experiments are a qualitative market research tool designed to give us an empirical knowledge about the subject we are studying. The objective of this study was to determine whether we can influence subject's voting choices by manipulating their perceptions and their questioners. "Yes Sir" experiment was based on a misleading questioner with a lot of questions that leads the respondent to the desired answer and with formulating the question in such a manner that the respondent feels compelled to give the desired answer. "Fake Poll" experiment is designed to see if previous polls have any influence on voter's intentions and behaviour and is bases on bandwagon effect. The results of these experiments show us that this ways of manipulation works very well and we can influence the way people will vote with a percentage from 3% to 6%.

Keywords: political marketing, marketing experiment, bandwagon effect, polls manipulation, "Yes Sir" experiment, "Fake Poll" experiment.

JEL classification: M31

1. Introduction

Almost every day a new poll appears in mass-media giving us an inside view on what customers and clients want. These polls vary from one area to another. A very active area in which we often receive surveys is political marketing. Political marketing is designed to influence consumers about political issues, particular candidates for public office, or public issues. Although political marketing uses many of the same techniques that other forms of marketing do, it is actually used to promote a concept or an idea, rather than a specific product or service, and to motivate people to vote for that idea.

The way people can interpret the information they come in contact with is very important in political marketing. Political marketing was defined as "the applications of marketing principles and procedures in political campaigns by various individuals and organizations. The procedures involved include the analysis, development, execution, and management of strategic campaigns by candidates, political parties, governments, lobbyists, and interest groups that seek to drive public opinion, advance their own ideologies, win elections, and pass legislation and referenda in

response to the need and wants of selected people and groups in society" (Brătucu, 1995, p 25)

One of the biggest problems in political marketing is the bandwagon effect which occurs in voting: some people vote for those candidates or parties who are likely to succeed (or are proclaimed as such by the media), hoping to be on the "winner's side" in the end. The bandwagon effect has been applied to situations involving majority opinion, such as political outcomes, where people alter their opinions to the majority view (McAllister and Studlar, 1991, p 721). Such a shift in opinion can occur because individuals draw inferences from the decisions of others, as in an informational cascade.

Several studies have tested this theory of the bandwagon effect in political decision making. In the 1994 study of Robert K. Goidel and Todd G. Shields in *The Journal of Politics*, 180 students at the University of Kentucky were randomly assigned to nine groups and were asked questions about the same set of election scenarios. About 70% of subjects received information about the expected winner (Goidel and Shields, 1994, p 807). Independents, which are those who do not vote based on the endorsement of any party and are ultimately neutral, were influenced strongly in favour of the person expected to win. Expectations played a significant role throughout the study. It was found that independents are twice as likely to vote for the Republican candidate when the Republican is expected to win. From the results, it was also found that when the Democrat was expected to win, independent Republicans and weak Republicans were more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate.

A study by Albert Mehrabian, reported in *The Journal of Applied Social Psychology* (1998), tested the relative importance of the bandwagon (rally around the winner) effect versus the underdog (empathic support for those trailing) effect. Bogus poll results presented to voters prior to the 1996 Republican primary clearly showed the bandwagon effect to predominate on balance. Indeed, approximately 6% of the variance in the vote was explained in terms of the bogus polls, showing that poll results (whether accurate or inaccurate) can significantly influence election results in closely contested elections. In particular, assuming that one candidate "is an initial favourite by a slim margin, reports of polls showing that candidate as the leader in the race will increase his or her favourable margin" (Mehrabian, 1998, p. 2128). Thus, as poll results are repeatedly reported, the bandwagon effect will tend to snowball and become a powerful aid to leading candidates.

During the 1992 U.S. presidential election, Vicki G. Morwitz and Carol Pluzinski conducted a study, which was published in *The Journal of Consumer Research*. At a large north-eastern university, some of 214 volunteer business students were given the results of student and national polls indicating that Bill Clinton was in the lead. Others were not exposed to the results of the polls. Several students who had intended to vote for Bush changed their minds after seeing the poll results (Morwitz and Pluzinski, 1992, p 58-64).

Additionally, British polls have shown an increase to public exposure. Sixty-eight percent of voters had heard of the general election campaign results of the opinion poll in 1979. In 1987, this number of voters aware of the results increased to 74% (McAllister and Studlar, 1991, p 725).

In June 2012 in Romania took place local elections and approximately 300.000 people from 96 parties, alliances and independents battled for approximately 45.000

seats. In December 2012 in Romania took place parliamentary elections. During the electoral campaign the candidates and media published hundreds of opinion polls and after the election was over they publish the exit-polls. What was peculiar about these opinion polls was the fact that their results were very often in contradiction in spite of the fact that the polls were made in the same period of time, on the same population, same number of people, same sampling and collecting data method. Theoretically the results should be the same. Was this just a statistical error or a case of manipulation?

To answer this question I designed some experiments which will help me to determine if opinion polls influence or change voter's intentions and behaviour.

According to Oxford Dictionaries manipulation is "the action of manipulating something in a skilful manner" or "the action of manipulating someone in a clever or unscrupulous way." One of the most powerful forms of manipulation used by politicians is to quote numbers and statistics that support their assertions and conclusions. They love to show how people love them by using numbers from polls they ordered.

The key to a successful manipulation is to use as much of the truth as possible. In the case of numbers and statistics it works best to use real numbers rather than making them up. The distortion begins with the source of the numbers. If you hire any market research company to do a study for you they can probably engineer almost any result you wish by setting up the study in a certain way that biases the data. This is the garbage in - garbage out phenomenon. Just because the number was accurately calculated does not mean that what is being measured is being measured properly. The messages and statistics are then released to the media through press releases, advertising or delivered by a spokesperson, or in some cases they are delivered directly by company representatives or politicians. This is remarkably effective because the media will often use these "sound bites" of information without checking to find out if they are accurate - this is especially true of numbers and statistics. As news services continue to cut back on investigative journalism resources and staff this is becoming more and more common.

This is a very unfortunate phenomenon because the general public tends trust the media to be true and accurate. As soon as the numbers appear in the media they become more credible and are usually treated as facts. This makes it much easier for the politicians to mislead us.

2. "Yes Sir" Experiment

In my research I found a lot of ways to manipulate using polls. There are easy and rough ways like just faking the numbers and there are more sophisticated ways like influencing people's answers.

I designed an experiment to see how a person can manipulate a poll to obtain the desired numbers by influencing people's answers. One of the most easiest and used method is to setting up the study in a certain way that biases the data. The way they do that is by putting a lot of questions that leads the respondent to the desired answer or by putting the question in such a manner that the respondent feels compelled to give the desired answer.

The wording of the questions, the order in which they are asked and the number and form of alternative answers offered can influence results of polls. This is also referred to as setting up a "context effect." For instance, the public is more likely to

indicate support for a person who is described by the operator or a previous question as one of the "leading candidates". This method uses the spiral of silence technique. The theory asserts that a person is less likely to voice an opinion on a topic if one feels that one is in the minority for fear of reprisal or isolation from the majority.

Why is this method so efficient? Because it uses a lot of persuasion technique and it manipulate people in so many different ways. When I build my questioner I tried to use different technique like foot-in-the-door and the halo effect.

Foot-in-the-door technique (FITD) is a compliance tactic that involves getting a person to agree to a large request by first setting them up by having that person agrees to a modest request. The foot-in-the-door technique succeeds due to a basic human reality that social scientists call "successive approximations". Basically, the more a subject goes along with small requests or commitments, the more likely that subject is to continue in a desired direction of attitude or behavioural change and feel obligated to go along with larger requests. FITD works by first getting a small yes and then getting an even bigger yes. The principle involved is that a small agreement creates a bond between the requester and the requestee. The other person has to justify their agreement to themselves. They cannot use the first request as something significant, so they have to convince themselves that it is because they are nice and like the requester or that they actually are interested in the item being requested. In a future request, they then feel obliged to act consistently with their internal explanation they have built.

The halo effect is a cognitive bias whereby the perception of one trait (i.e. a characteristic of a person or object) is influenced by the perception of another trait (or several traits) of that person or object. An example would be answering to multiple questions in the same ways just because the questions look alike.

For my experiment I design 3 false questioners, were I tried to influence the respondents answers by triggering some positive and negative emotions with a couple of questions carefully placed right before the question I tried to influence. For the first questioner, who was given to the control group, I used only a simple question.

25. Are you in favour of national service?

- Yes
- No

Figure 1: Form A of the questioner

Source: My own research

For the second questioner, who was given to group B, I used 5 questions before the question I tried to influence.

20. Are you worried about the number of young people without jobs?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
21. Are you worried about rising crime among teenagers?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
22. Do you think our schools lack discipline?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
23. Do you think young people welcome authority and leadership?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
24. Do you think young people like a challenge?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
25. Would you be in favour of national service?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

Figure 2: Form B of the questioner

Source: My own research

For the third questioner, who was given to group C, I used 4 questions before the question I tried to influence.

21. Are you worried about war?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
22. Are you worried about the arms race?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
23. Is it dangerous giving young people guns?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
24. Is it wrong to force people to take up arms?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
25. Would you oppose national service?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

Figure 3: Form C of the questioner

Source: My own research

The purpose of this experiment is to see if this method of manipulating the polls by leading the respondent to the desired answers really works and if so how much did this influence the end result. The null hypothesis from which I'm starting is that this method of manipulation really works and we can influence people's answers. The alternative hypothesis is that this method of manipulation doesn't work and we can't influence people's answers.

The subjects of the experiment are undergraduate students from Transilvania University of Brasov from all years of study. The numbers of participants in this study is 120, 70 male and 50 female. The participants are very homogeneous, all coming from different backgrounds, 60% of them are from Brasov the rest are from nearby counties temporarily living in Brasov during their studies. They were told that they just have to complete a normal questioner about politics as part of a survey. The questioner contained 45 questions but for this experiment I was only interested in analysing question number 25. The sampling has been done by randomly selecting students from a list of all the undergraduate students from Faculty of Economic Science and Business Administration.

First they were split into two groups of 60 people. The first group participated in the first week of the experiment and the other group took part on the experiment in the second week. This way I tried to see if I can replicate the results of the first experiment. The experiment took place in the first two weeks from February 2013.

The subjects were divided into six groups of 20 people. Two groups (40 people) were the control groups. They were given a standard questioner without any alteration and form of manipulation (form A). Their answers will be compared with the answers of the other groups.

The other groups receive a modified form of the same questioner. Two groups got form B of the questioner and the other two groups got form C of the questioner. After all the data was collected the results were analysed using SPSS software and Microsoft Office Excel.

The results of the experiment as we can see from the figure below are: 66% of the respondents from the control group are not in favour of national service, 34% would be in favour of national service.

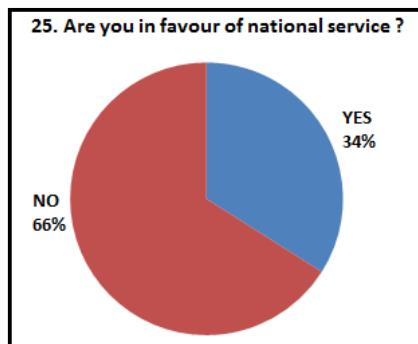


Figure 4: Answers from the control group (group A)

Source: My own research

When we analyse the numbers from group B we see that the respondents who would not be in favour of national service have decrease to 60% while the number of respondents who are in favour of national service has increase from 34% to 40%.

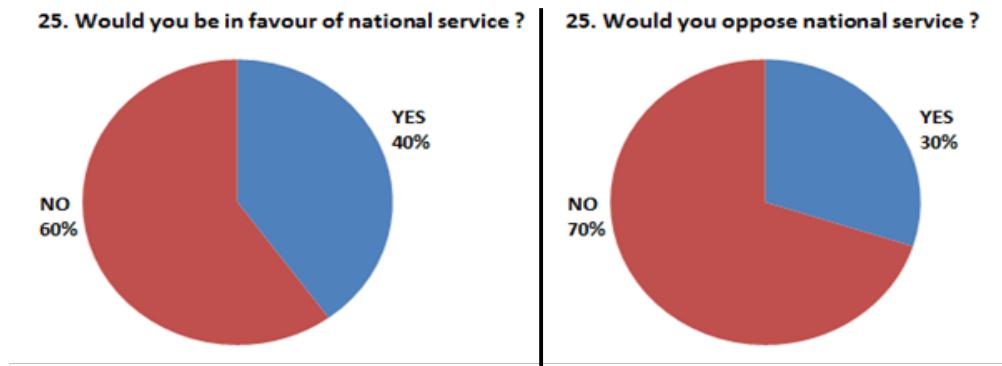


Figure 5: Answers from group B
My own research

Figure 6: Answers from group C
Source: My own research

Source:

Finally when we analyse the numbers from group C we see that the respondents who would not be in favour of national service has increase from 66% to 70% compared with the results from the control group, while the number of respondents who are in favour of national service decrease has from 34% to 30% compared with the results from the control group. Pearson's chi-squared test showed that we can reject the alternative hypothesis and accept the null hypothesis which says that this method of manipulation works and we can influence people's answers.

3. "Fake Poll" Experiment

I designed this experiment to see if previous polls have any influence on voter's intentions and behaviour and can manipulate them. In theory when a person has to take a decision that person will search for all the information that he can find in order to make the right decision. One of the easiest ways to find information's about candidates and their programs is mass-media with all its components: printed media, television, radio and internet. Often, candidates use mass-media to publish opinion polls in order to demonstrate their approval among people. When a person is put in front of two groups he tends to go with the majority or the group that has more followers, because he doesn't want to be in minority and this is called bandwagon effect.

According to Oxford Dictionaries bandwagon effect is "an activity, group, movement, etc. that has become successful or fashionable and so attracts many new people". The bandwagon effect is an observed social behaviour in which people tend to go along with what others do or think without considering their actions.

The null hypothesis from which I'm starting this experiment is that this method of manipulation works and we can influence people's answers. The alternative hypothesis is that this method of manipulation doesn't work and we can't influence people's answers.

The subjects of the experiment are the same students from Transilvania University of Brașov from the previous experiment. The numbers of participants in this study

is 120, 70 male and 50 female. The sampling has been done by randomly selecting students from a list of all the undergraduate students from Faculty of Economic Science and Business Administration. They were told that they just have to complete a normal questioner about politics as part of a survey. First they were split into two groups of 60 people. The first group participated in the first week of the experiment and the other group took part on the experiment in the second week. This way I tried to see if I can replicate the results of the first experiment. The experiment took place in the first two weeks from February 2013.

The subjects were divided into six groups of 20 people. Two groups (40 people) were the control groups. They were given a standard questioner of 45 questions without any alteration or form of manipulation. Their answers will be compared with the answers of the other groups.

The other groups received information about the expected winner supposedly from a recent national opinion poll. We assume that are only two candidates left. Two groups got the information that candidate A is the expected winner of the next elections and the other two groups got the information that candidate B is the expected winner of the next elections. After all the data was collected the results were analysed using SPSS software and Microsoft Office Excel.

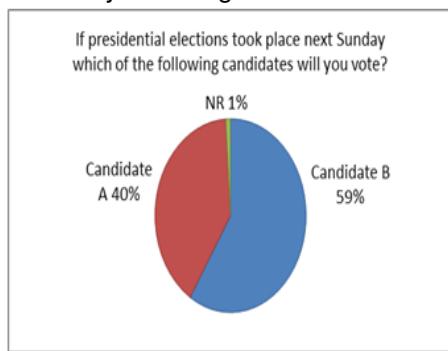


Figure 7: Answers from the control group
Source: My own research

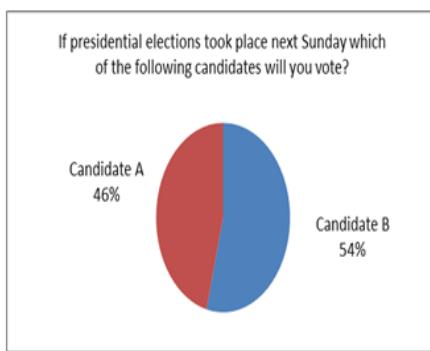


Figure 8: Answers from the group A
Source: My own research

As we can see from the Figure 7, 59% of the respondents from the control group are in favour of candidate B, 40% would be in favour of candidate A and we have a 1% non-response (NR). When we analyse the numbers from Figure 8 we see that the respondents who are in favour of candidate B has decrease to 54% while the number of respondents who are in favour of candidate A has increase from 40% to 46%. Finally when we analyse the numbers from Figure 9 we see that the respondents who would are in favour of candidate B has increase from 59% to 62% compared with the results from the control group, while the number of respondents who are in favour of candidate A decrease has from 40% to 38% compared with the results from the control group.

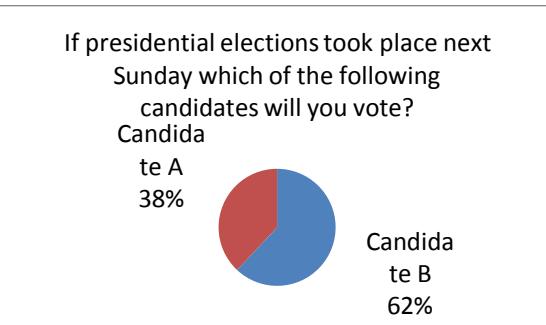


Figure 9: Answers from the group B

Source: My own research

Indeed, approximately 6% of the variance in the vote was explained in terms of the bogus polls, showing that poll results (whether accurate or inaccurate) can significantly influence election results in closely contested elections. In particular, assuming that one candidate is an initial favourite by a slim margin, reports of polls showing that candidate as the leader in the race will increase his or her favourable margin. Pearson's chi-squared test showed that we can reject the alternative hypothesis and accept the null hypothesis which says that this method of manipulation works and we can influence people's answers.

4. Conclusions

Analysing the numbers from "Yes Sir" and "Fake Poll" experiments we can draw the conclusion that this methods of manipulation works very well. Comparing the results from the three groups we can state for sure that we can influence the way people will vote with a percentage from 3% to 6%.

This is due to the so-called bandwagon effect. Bandwagon effect combined with spiral of silence can change some voter's opinions and intentions can increase the percentages for some candidates but it also makes it very hard to quantify on opinion polls and exit-polls thus resulting in large errors.

The limitations of this study are given by the low number of respondents and the way the sample has been selected. Because of the fact that the sampling hasn't been done using a probabilistic method and the fact that the sample is only 120 people, I can't extrapolate the results.

As for future research I will try to find a solution to reduce errors in political opinion polls and exit-polls. I believe that we can accomplish that by doing a more accurate sampling and by moderating the results with a correction factor. I hope we can find this correction factor by analysing the data from previous elections.

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