



HOUSE OF LORDS

Select Committee on
Political Polling and Digital Media

Report of Session 2017–19

The politics of polling

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Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media

The Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media was appointed by the House of Lords on 29 June 2017 “to consider the effects of political polling and digital media on politics, and to make recommendations”.

Membership

The Members of the Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media were:

[Baroness Couttie](#)

[Baroness Fall](#)

[Baroness Ford](#) (until 7 November 2017)

[Lord Foulkes of Cumnock](#)

[Lord Hayward](#)

[Lord Howarth of Newport](#)

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[Lord Lipsey](#) (Chairman)

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[Lord Smith of Hindhead](#)

Declaration of interests

See Appendix 1.

A full list of Members’ interests can be found in the Register of Lords’ Interests:

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Q in footnotes refers to a question in oral evidence.

SUMMARY

Since the first Gallup polls were run in the United Kingdom in the 1930s, political opinion polls have become an established aspect of British politics. For the media and political parties, political opinion polls are integral to understanding the political mood of the nation. Polling results have also come to dominate election coverage, driving the ups and downs, twist and turns of the ‘narrative’ of each election. The public and others are aware that there is always potential for some inaccuracies in polling. Nonetheless, polls that estimate voting intention continue to serve as prominent and highly influential sources of information during election campaigns.

In recent years, however, the polling industry has suffered a number of collective failures. The 2015 General Election was widely considered to be an embarrassment for the polling industry. In the weeks prior to election day much of the focus was on the possibility of a hung Parliament, only for a Conservative majority to emerge. 2015 showed just how influential polling had become, both in the extent to which we have come to rely on poll findings to understand political events, and the considerable impact that polling can have. This realisation prompted serious concerns about both the ability of the polling companies to make accurate and useful estimates of the outcomes of national political events, and around the prominence that polling has come to have. These concerns were only compounded when polling companies were seen to fail again, first in the EU Referendum vote in 2016 and then in the 2017 General Election.

Expert analysis has already been undertaken to understand the reasons behind these polling failures, most notably the Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British general election opinion polls, chaired by Professor Patrick Sturgis. This inquiry and subsequent analysis of the 2016 EU Referendum and the 2017 General Election identified important recommendations on how the industry can continue to innovate and adapt to improve its approach to estimating voting intention.

Despite the efforts made to identify and address the methodological challenges associated with recent polling failures, important questions remain. Does the recent poor performance signal a broader trend that polling is getting less accurate? Is polling getting harder to do and, if so, why? Ultimately, does it matter if polling continues to produce inaccurate predictions? It was these questions that we sought to address, and the last of these we considered the most pertinent. Our central concern was that, if it is becoming less likely that polls can provide accurate estimates of the likely election outcomes, then there is a significant risk that future elections will be affected by misleading information, potentially distorting the democratic process.

The available data on longer-term trends in polling performance suggest that, currently, it would not be correct to say that we are witnessing a decline in the accuracy of polling. That said, although polling performance has not worsened in a statistically significant way, there is little doubt that confidence in polling has been shaken. We saw evidence of this scepticism in the last General Election. The question ‘can we trust the polls?’ featured prominently in the 2017 election coverage and a number of broadcasters told us that they had deliberately reduced the prominence given to voting intention polls in their election coverage.

A combination of factors is making it harder to estimate political opinion accurately. We heard that it is getting harder to persuade members of the public to take part in polls and surveys, and that shifts in demographic predictors of the vote, and an increasingly volatile electorate, have all made polling harder to do. This means that polling companies continually need to adapt and innovate. We believe that this can only be done successfully if polling performance is routinely and thoroughly reviewed after each election.

The polling industry is facing a number of challenges in polling the modern electorate but, in the overwhelming majority of cases, we recognise that polling companies make every effort to ensure accuracy and that they have no reason to deliberately distort poll findings. These efforts, however, can be undermined by the ways in which the media reports on polling. Media coverage of election campaigns has traditionally involved a considerable focus on polling information, but this coverage is not always an accurate reflection of polling data. Headlines that over-emphasise small, insignificant changes in party fortunes are misleading, but is a practice that remains widely prevalent. We believe that the British Polling Council, in collaboration with other expert groups and regulators, should use its considerable expertise to develop further guidance for the media on the reporting of polls, and work proactively to highlight particularly bad examples of media reporting on polling.

There are other types of polls which affect political discourse in the UK, such as those that measure public opinion on political and social issues. We found that some of the key problems we identified for polling, particularly the use of leading questions and misleading presentation of results, were more pronounced for policy issues polls. We feel that there is a clear need for more oversight of the conduct and reporting of such policy issues polls.

In the face of considerable challenges posed by the difficulties of polling the modern electorate and the misreporting of polls, and in light of the damage done to confidence in the accuracy of polling, the oversight of polling also needs to change. There is no overall framework for the regulation of polling. Instead, some oversight of polling is provided by professional bodies such as the British Polling Council and the Market Research Society, while the reporting of polling is regulated to a limited extent by broadcasting and press regulatory bodies. Oversight of polling is fragmented and disjointed, with different elements of regulation disconnected from each other.

The current system is not satisfactory and we therefore recommend a co-ordinated 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. Media regulators should tackle quickly any instances of misreporting of polling. Finally, the Electoral Commission should take on an enhanced role in the monitoring of voting intention polling during election campaigning periods. We hope that these bodies in combination can provide more effective oversight of polling.

When considering the way in which political information, such as voting intention polls, is produced, disseminated and understood, it would be short-sighted to ignore the profound change in the way we access and share news, political developments and opinions. The enormous development of the internet and the rise of digital media has undoubtedly impacted on polling, opening

up the industry and making the polling market easier to enter. It has and will continue to provide risks and opportunities for innovations in polling, such as the use of social media data to help predict or influence elections.

We were also alerted to very serious concerns about the impact of digital media on politics more broadly. These concerns included: the deliberate spread of political misinformation; the reinforcement of the ‘echo chamber’ effect exacerbated by social media; and the lack of accountability and transparency around political advertising and campaigning online. A wide range of issues were described but a clear consensus emerged on the need for further action to better understand the nature and scale of the impact of digital and social media on politics, and to identify the appropriate approach from Government, the regulators and the polling companies themselves. These issues stretched beyond our remit and we simply did not have the capacity to give due attention to them all. However, the issues raised are complex and rapidly evolving, representing a very significant threat to our democratic processes. We therefore recommend that the Government should address these challenges as part of its ongoing work on the Digital Charter.

Both political polling and digital media have the potential to influence the democratic process in the UK. With improvements to the system of oversight for polling, we believe that some of our concerns in this area could be addressed. However, we consider the issues relating to digital media to be far more serious, with grave implications for our democratic processes. We acknowledge that addressing some of these issues will be extremely difficult but we are clear that the challenges we have identified in this report should be tackled urgently and holistically, in order to ensure that the UK’s democratic process is protected and maintained for the future.

The politics of polling

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Political polling in the United Kingdom

1. Political opinion polls have become an increasingly prominent feature of election campaigns in recent decades. In the period between the 2010 and 2017 General Elections, over 2,200 voting intention polls were conducted.¹
2. During the last three years, the United Kingdom (UK) has faced two General Elections and a referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union (EU). For each of those events, albeit to varying degrees, the polls 'called it wrong'. In 2015, most polls predicted a hung parliament, when in fact the Conservative party won an overall majority. Before the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU, a majority of the final polls suggested that there was a majority in favour of 'Remain', whereas 'Leave' won. Then in 2017, most polls suggested that the Conservative party would secure an overall majority, whereas the election actually resulted in a hung Parliament.
3. It is worth noting that each of these elections were close-run contests which are harder to call than less competitive races, and that polling companies made every effort to ensure their polls were as accurate as possible. However, these events have led to a widespread loss of confidence in polling. They also raised concerns about the extent to which inaccurate polls might be shaping the 'narrative' during election campaigns, and therefore how they might be affecting the democratic process.

The Committee's remit

4. It was against this background that this Committee was established. The Committee was appointed by the House on 29 June 2017 "to consider the effects of political polling and digital media on politics".² This followed a proposal put forward by Lord Foulkes of Cumnock (a Member of this Committee) to the House of Lords Liaison Committee. In recommending that this Committee be established, the Liaison Committee suggested that we might wish to consider the following themes:
 - Polling methods and accuracy
 - Regulation of political opinion polling
 - Social and digital media coverage of polling—quality and impact
 - The influence of social and digital media on political debate.³
5. In this report, we have made recommendations which address the first three of these themes. However, as our inquiry progressed, it became clear that the fourth strand was simply too large and complex a topic to cover as part of this inquiry.

1 Anthony Wells, UK Polling Report, 'Voting intention': <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/voting-intention-2> [accessed 20 March 2018]
2 HL Deb, 29 June 2017, [col 563](#)
3 Liaison Committee, *New investigative committees in the 2017–18 Session* (2nd Report, Session 2016–17, HL Paper 144)

6. The rise of digital media has diverse implications for politics, far wider than just its association with political polling. It is not possible to summarise effectively the full extent of this issue here, but to take just a few recent examples, politics can and is being informed and influenced by digital activity in the following ways:
- There is a growing range of online news websites, which do not fit into the traditional categories of either print or broadcast media. The way in which news is communicated is continually changing and frequent charges of ‘fake news’ are changing people’s perceptions about the political information they read online.
 - Raising money for political causes has become easier with digital media, as various websites now support ‘crowdfunding’ for political issues. As an example, in 2017 the Crowdfunder website hosted a campaign to raise money for a ‘Brexit Resistance’ group, in order to pay for billboards and adverts.⁴ However, while it might be getting easier to raise money in these ways, it is becoming ever more difficult to know who is providing the funding for what.
 - Numerous websites offer online platforms for political petitions. Change.org, for example, claims that more than 200 million people in 196 countries have used the website to create change in their communities.⁵ While such websites may make it easier for members of the public to become politically engaged, there is also a potential lack of transparency over who is promoting particular causes and for what purposes.
 - Official public sector websites are also increasingly encouraging members of the public to go online to give their views on political issues. For example, the Government often seeks views using online consultations, and the House of Commons e-petitions website guarantees that if a petition receives at least 100,000 signatures, the Petitions Committee will consider whether it should be debated in the House.⁶
7. Furthermore, social media are being utilised to influence the democratic process, in both positive and negative ways. Some examples include:
- The rise of social media has assisted the organisation of political marches. For example, the series of ‘Women’s marches’ which took place around the world in January 2017 was originally inspired by one woman who posted a single Facebook post to rally women in Hawaii.⁷
 - Politicians are utilising social media to promote their messages and to seek feedback. For example, in 2015, the Leader of the Opposition in

4 Crowdfunder, ‘From the 48% to Theresa May’: <http://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/fromthe48totheresamay> [accessed 20 March 2018]

5 Change.org, ‘About’: <https://www.change.org/about> [accessed 20 March 2018]

6 UK Parliament, ‘Find out more about e-petitions’: <https://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/sign-a-petition/e-petitions/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

7 Perry Stein, ‘The woman who started the Women’s March with a Facebook post reflects: ‘It was mind-boggling’’, *The Washington Post* (31 January 2017): https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2017/01/31/the-woman-who-started-the-womens-march-with-a-facebook-post-reflects-it-was-mind-boggling/?utm_term=.1ba6002bd134 [accessed 20 March 2018]

the House of Commons used online media to ‘crowdsource’ ideas for questions to ask during Prime Minister’s Questions.⁸

- There are increasing concerns that national governments and other actors are abusing social media in order to promote particular political messages. In February 2018, an FBI investigation found that Russian individuals and companies had used social media to influence the outcome of the 2016 presidential election in the United States of America.⁹ There are now mounting concerns that the mid-term elections in the United States and other elections across Europe could be vulnerable to interference. In January 2018, Mike Pompeo, then Director of the United States Central Intelligence Agency and now the Secretary of State, told the BBC that he had “every expectation” that Russia would attempt to influence the mid-term elections in November.¹⁰ A number of European countries have taken action to expose possible Russian interference, including through public condemnations of this activity. In 2017, France’s President Emmanuel Macron publicly denounced Russian media outlets for election meddling,¹¹ and the British Prime Minister, the Rt Hon Theresa May MP, stated that Russia was “planting fake stories” to “sow discord in the West.”¹²
- As we were preparing this report to go to print, serious allegations emerged in the media about social media data being used by private companies to influence the 2016 presidential election in the United States. It was reported that Cambridge Analytica, a political data firm funded largely by a Republican donor and a former adviser to the President, had been hired by President Trump’s campaign team to assist with the campaign. Cambridge Analytica allegedly gained access to private information about 50 million Facebook members and used this to try to influence the election.¹³ On 20 March 2018, the UK’s Information Commissioner announced that she would apply to court for a warrant to search the UK offices of Cambridge Analytica.¹⁴ This raised questions of whether the Information Commissioner’s powers were adequate to deal with such an international and complex problem.
- The personal use of social media, which may seem harmless and politically trivial on a basic level, can create an ‘echo chamber’ effect, which many people are concerned is having a detrimental effect on democracy.

8 ‘Corbyn tackles PM with crowdsourced questions’, *Sky News* (16 September 2015): <http://news.sky.com/story/corbyn-tackles-pm-with-crowdsourced-questions-10346125> [accessed 20 March 2018]

9 ‘Russia-Trump inquiry: Russians charged over US 2016 election tampering’, *BBC News* (17 February 2018): <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-43092085> [accessed 20 March 2018]

10 Gordon Corera, ‘Russia ‘will target US mid-term elections’ says CIA chief’, *BBC News* (29 January 2018): <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-42864372> [accessed 20 March 2018]

11 ‘France Macron, alongside Putin, denounces two Russian media for election meddling’, *Reuters* (29 May 2017): <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-france-russia-influence/frances-macron-alongside-putin-denounces-two-russian-media-for-election-meddling-idUKKBN18PIT8> [accessed 20 March 2018]

12 ‘Theresa May accuses Vladimir Putin of election meddling’, *BBC News* (14 November 2017): <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-41973043> [accessed 20 March 2018]

13 Kevin Granville, ‘How Facebook Users’ Data Was Acquired by Cambridge Analytica, Triggering an Outcry’, *The New York Times* (20 March 2018): <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/19/technology/facebook-cambridge-analytica-explained.html> [accessed 20 March 2018]

14 ‘Cambridge Analytica: Mark Zuckerberg asked to appear before MPs’, *BBC News* (20 March 2018): <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43474760> [accessed 20 March 2018]

8. While all types of media could be accused of creating some sort of ‘echo chamber’, the difference between traditional media and social media is the scale and intensity of social media’s reach, and the lack of context. For example, if a person reads a particular newspaper every day then they will be exposed to articles and comments written with a particular political bias, but the reader will generally be aware of the fact that the newspaper is written from a particular political standpoint and can bear this in mind when reading the articles. However, on social media, the writers of online content are often unknown to the reader, who has no way of knowing the political leanings of the author and no other information on which to judge or scrutinise the information they are reading. Furthermore, if the person checks social media regularly throughout the day, they might be bombarded continually with subtle political messaging without even realising it.
9. The other important point to note here is that digital and social media are neither regulated like broadcast media nor carry the responsibilities of publishers like the print media. Political messages can be spread rapidly around the world with few checks or balances, and without anybody having to verify their veracity. Sometimes, an article or a website might note that the information has been written by a particular lobbying or interest group (though this is not required), and if an advertisement has been authorised by a political party then its cost must be included within the campaign spending that they declare to the Electoral Commission. However, many other types of political messages can be posted online by individuals, private companies, lobbying groups, foreign governments and many others with no oversight or regulation. A member of the public might find it impossible to know who exactly has posted a particular comment or article, or who funded it.
10. During the course of our inquiry, we have only been able to touch upon some of these issues in a very limited way. Assessing the overall impact of these developments on politics would be a vast and highly complex task, and would need to include analysis of state responsibilities, corporate financing, media reporting, developments in artificial intelligence and a whole host of social issues, amongst other things. Such an inquiry would also need to keep pace with the rapidly changing developments which are happening in this area every day.
11. The issues outlined above stretched beyond our remit and could not have been covered in sufficient detail within our reporting timeframe. Furthermore, there are already a number of other bodies investigating some of these issues. To take a few examples, during the course of our inquiry, the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee were undertaking an inquiry into ‘fake news’,¹⁵ the European Commission established a high-level expert group which has now produced a report on fake news and online disinformation,¹⁶ and social media companies have announced new initiatives aiming to restore public trust in the content published on their websites¹⁷ (although the effectiveness of efforts to address tensions between commercial and public interests remains to be seen).

15 House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, ‘Fake news’: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/digital-culture-media-and-sport-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/fake-news-17-19/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

16 European Commission, ‘Final report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake news and Online Disinformation’, (12 March 2018): <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation> [accessed 20 March 2018]

17 Written evidence from Google (PPD0029) and written evidence from Facebook (PPD0030)

12. Given the challenges outlined above, we therefore limited our inquiry to the ways in which digital media impacts upon political polling, and *vice versa*.
13. At the outset, we agreed that our inquiry should not conduct a post-mortem on what went wrong with polling over recent elections. This was comprehensively covered by the Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British general election opinion polls.¹⁸ That inquiry was established by the British Polling Council (BPC) and Market Research Society (MRS) but chaired independently by Professor Patrick Sturgis (who also acted as Specialist Adviser to our Committee). Following the 2017 General Election, the BPC asked those of its members who produced final polls for that election to produce a “lessons learned” report, in order to examine the ongoing challenges facing the industry.¹⁹ We have not, therefore, attempted to replicate this work by delving in detail into the methodological causes of polling errors. Instead, we have taken a wider look at the challenges facing polling organisations and how their work can influence the political process in the UK.
14. As a committee of the UK Parliament, our recommendations are limited to polling in the UK. We have, however, made recommendations to the UK Government on how it might work with international partners to address some of the wider issues relating to digital media.

The Committee’s work

15. In July 2017, we published a call for evidence, which is reprinted in Appendix 4. Over the course of our inquiry we received 31 submissions of written evidence and heard from 40 witnesses in 23 evidence sessions. We are grateful to all those who took the time to provide us with evidence. A list of all these people and organisations is included in Appendix 2.
16. In order to assist our deliberations, we also received informal briefings from a number of academics and other experts, who are listed in Appendix 3. We thank them for giving up their time in order to help us explore the topics in greater detail.
17. Finally, we are also grateful to Professor Patrick Sturgis, Professor of Research Methodology and Director of the National Centre for Research Methods at the University of Southampton, who served as the Committee’s Specialist Adviser. His knowledge and assistance have been immensely helpful throughout the course of our inquiry, though we stress that the views contained in this report are ours alone.

18 Professor Patrick Sturgis, Dr Nick Baker, Dr Mario Callegaro, Dr Stephen Fisher, Professor Jane Green, Professor Will Jennings, Dr Jouni Kuha, Dr Ben Lauderdale and Dr Patten Smith, ‘Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British general election opinion polls’, National Centre for Research Methods, British Polling Council and Market Research Society (March 2016): http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/3789/1/Report_final_revised.pdf [accessed 20 March 2018]

19 British Polling Council, Press Release, ‘General Election: 8 June 2017’ (9 June 2016): <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/general-election-8-june-2017/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

18. The last three UK-wide elections have, with some individual exceptions, represented notable failures for the polling companies. The polls published before the 2015 General Election, the 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the EU, and the 2017 General Election, collectively failed to predict the outcome in each case. To misquote Oscar Wilde, to get one election wrong may be regarded as a misfortune, to get two wrong looks like carelessness, and to get three wrong suggests something somewhere has gone horribly amiss.
19. What was of particular concern following each of these elections was the impact that the polls might have had on driving the 'narrative' of the campaigns and that they may well have influenced the way people voted. We use the term 'narrative' to describe the messages which dominate discussions during election campaigns, whether that is in broadcast news or interviews, newspaper articles, or even general public conversation. For example, election coverage may focus predominantly on a particular policy of a leading party, or on the electoral consequences of a particular result. To the extent that these narratives are driven by flawed polling, then questions legitimately may be asked about whether polling inhibits the functioning of the democratic process.
20. The reasons behind each polling failure are unlikely to be the same, with no overarching methodological issue at fault for every election. We were told, however, that there are specific challenges involved in polling the modern electorate, which are making it more difficult to estimate political opinion accurately.
21. We had three initial questions to answer: Are polls getting worse? If so, why? And does it matter for the democratic process?

This chapter addresses these questions.

What is a poll?

22. There is no universally agreed definition of a poll or any clear distinction between a poll and a survey. Instead, the words 'poll' and 'survey' are used to describe a variety of data collection exercises.²⁰ The use of random sampling is sometimes used to distinguish surveys from polls. However, polls sometimes use random sampling, and research that uses quota sampling is often referred to as a survey. The distinction is therefore more a matter of the purpose and objectives of the research than its methodology.
23. It is broadly accepted that polls are intended to provide snapshots and measure changes in what the population thinks about contemporary issues at a particular time,²¹ often with the intention of influencing the debate on a particular issue. Surveys that measure public opinion, on the other hand, tend to be focused on 'the bigger picture' and are generally used by academics and think tanks to understand changing social and political attitudes from a more normatively neutral perspective—an example here would be the British Social Attitudes survey series.

20 The British Polling Council, 'About the BPC': <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

21 Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, Getting Opinion Polls 'Right', [POSTnote96](#), March 1997

24. There is an added complication when considering the definition of a ‘political poll’ (the term used within our remit). Some polls might ask questions which are obviously political in nature (such as views on Brexit, for example). Other polls might ask more wide-ranging questions on social issues which, while not directly political, could of course have a political angle depending on the context (an example might be questions on satisfaction with and resources for the NHS). Furthermore, some surveys might contain these wider questions on social issues as well as more directly political questions on voting intention and party evaluations.
25. This ambiguity in terminology is a particular problem for members of the public and the media, who have no obvious way of checking the quality of polls or surveys, and this is an issue which we return to in Chapter 3. However, for the purposes of this report, we use the following terms:
- Voting intention poll: This refers to pre-election polls or surveys which aim to gauge how people intend to vote at any one time or in a particular election. For example, such polls might ask which party the respondent intends to vote for in a General Election, or which option they intend to choose in a referendum.
 - Policy issues poll: This refers to polling or surveying undertaken to assess people’s views on issues that might relate to social policy or politics, such as views on the NHS, fox hunting or Brexit, but which do not involve estimating voting intention. This can include opinion polling and surveys conducted on behalf of advocacy groups and are often aimed at influencing public policy.
 - Exit poll: This is a poll conducted of voters as they leave the polling station.
 - Private poll: This refers to the polling or surveying undertaken by political parties, individuals, or private and public companies, where the results are only selectively released to the public.
 - Informal poll (sometimes called a ‘snap poll’ or ‘straw poll’): This refers to a poll which has been conducted without using robust sampling techniques and where the representativeness of the sample is questionable. An example of this would be a newspaper running a limited poll of their own readers on an issue. There is nothing inherently wrong with this approach unless the poll findings are presented as being representative of the wider population.
 - Social survey: This term refers to more comprehensive, longer-running exercises conducted by governments, independent research agencies, academics and think tanks to measure public attitudes on social and policy issues (for example, the Ipsos MORI/Economist’s Issues Index that monitors the public’s perception of the big issues facing the UK every month,²² or NatCen’s British Social Attitudes survey that asks the public what it is like to live in Britain²³). We did not examine this type of polling as part of our inquiry.

22 Ipsos MORI, ‘Ipsos MORI Issues Index: June 2017’: <https://www.slideshare.net/IpsosMORI/ipsos-mori-issues-index-june-2017> [accessed 20 March 2018]

23 NatCen, ‘British Social Attitudes’: <http://natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/british-social-attitudes/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

These definitions are not intended to be exhaustive, or to describe the quality of polls. Issues such as the representativeness of samples, and the presentation of poll findings, are explored in some detail later in this report. Furthermore, in some places in this report, we use the term ‘poll’ in its general sense, to encompass polls which contain both directly political questions, as well as questions on wider issues.

26. In Appendix 5, we outline some basic information about the polling industry.

Who commissions polls?

27. Over the course of an election campaign, polls are commissioned by a diverse range of individuals and organisations, including newspapers, advocacy groups, political parties and businesses. There has been a notable growth in voting intention polling over recent years. Approximately 3,500 polls were conducted over the 65 year period between 1945 and 2010. By contrast, in the five year period from 2010 until 2015, there were nearly 2,000 published polls, with over 90 voting intention polls undertaken over the course of the six week General Election campaign in 2015.²⁴ This increase has been driven largely by the advent of online polling, which has resulted in lower costs and lower barriers to polling.
28. Many polling organisations are commissioned to produce regular voting intention polls for specific newspapers throughout an election campaign. For example, during the 2017 General Election, Ipsos MORI conducted exclusive polling for the Evening Standard²⁵ and ComRes produced polls for The Independent.²⁶ YouGov has carried out polling for The Sunday Times since 2002, regular polling for The Daily Telegraph from 2002 to 2010, daily polling for The Sun from 2010 to 2015, and since 2015 it has polled for The Times.²⁷
29. In contrast, some of the major broadcasters are less inclined to commission their own voting intention polls. The BBC never commissions voting intention polls during election campaigns, in accordance with its Editorial Guidelines.²⁸ The major broadcasters do, however, commission an exit poll for General Elections, which polls a sample of voters as they leave polling stations. In 2010, Sky News formed a broadcasters’ consortium with the BBC and ITV News to commission the 2010 General Election exit poll. The fieldwork was undertaken by the polling organisations GfK and Ipsos MORI. The same consortium undertook the 2015 and 2017 exit polls.²⁹ According to one of our witnesses, the exit poll was reported to have cost around £300,000.³⁰

24 Written evidence from Sky News (PPD0005)

25 Joe Murphy, ‘General Election polls: Theresa May heading for clear majority with Jeremy Corbyn facing probably net loss of seats’, *Evening Standard* (8 June 2017): <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/uk-general-election-polls-theresa-may-heading-for-clear-majority-final-poll-of-campaign-reveals-a3559951.html> [accessed 20 March 2018]

26 Joe Watts and John Rentoul, ‘Election poll latest: Theresa May will win biggest Tory landslide since Thatcher, final survey predicts’, *Independent* (7 June 2017): <http://www.independent.co.uk/News/uk/politics/election-poll-latest-tory-win-results-corbyn-theresa-may-a777781.html> [accessed 20 March 2018]

27 Written evidence from YouGov (PPD0016)

28 BBC, ‘Editorial Guidelines: Surveys, Opinion Polls, Questionnaires, Votes and Straw Polls’, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidance/surveys/guidance-full#heading-polls-at-election-times> [accessed 20 March 2018]

29 Written evidence from Sky News (PPD0005)

30 [Q 151](#) (Ben Page)

30. Exit polling in the UK has enjoyed a greater level of success recently than the pre-election voting intention polls. In 2015 the exit poll indicated there was little doubt that David Cameron would remain as Prime Minister, and in 2017 it suggested that Theresa May had lost her majority.³¹ The key difference between the exit poll and standard voting intention polls is that exit polls do not aim to estimate how many people will vote for each party. Rather, its objective is to estimate the number of seats each party will win. A sample of voters is polled as they leave the polling booth in a sample of polling stations. Wherever possible the same set of polling stations is used at each election, meaning that the data provide an estimate of the change in support for each party in each constituency.³²
31. Dr Jouni Kuha, Associate Professor of Statistics and Research Methodology at the London School of Economics, attributed the success of exit polls to two factors. First, he highlighted the data collection techniques—that the exit polls ask thousands of people how they voted, not how they intend to vote, in the same polling stations as last time. Second, an equally crucial factor was the data analysis—the “fairly elaborate sequence of statistical analysis and statistical modelling” that was applied to produce the predictions.³³
32. Because of the variety of polling which exists, there is no comprehensive oversight of polling. If polls are commissioned by campaigners for the purpose of promoting electoral success for a political party, parties or candidates at an election, then their spending will be regulated under electoral law and the registered campaigners would need to include the spending within their spending returns submitted to the Electoral Commission. However, polls commissioned for different purposes or by different actors, such as newspapers, are not regulated. Meanwhile, polling companies may be members of the British Polling Council (BPC) or the Market Research Society (MRS), and those bodies place certain obligations upon their members, but these are voluntary membership bodies, rather than statutory regulators. In addition, some of the organisations publishing polls online are not subject to any form of regulation at all. There is no overall regulator which monitors the variety of polls being commissioned every day, or monitors who funds and produces them. This is an issue which we examine in further detail in Chapter 5.

The accuracy of voting intention polls

33. The performance of voting intention polls in recent years has, according to commentators, given polling a “bruising”³⁴, a “battering”³⁵ and a “bloody nose”³⁶—placing the accuracy of this type of polling very much under the spotlight.

31 John Curtice, Stephen Fisher, Jouni Kuha and Jonathan Mellon, ‘Focus: on the 2017 exit poll—another surprise, another success’, *Discover Society* (46) (July 2017): http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/83556/1/Kuha_Focus%20%202017%20exit%20poll_2017.pdf [accessed 20 March 2018]

32 *Ibid.*

33 Q 17 (Dr Jouni Kuha)

34 Alan Travis, ‘Can we still trust opinion polls after 2015, Brexit and Trump’, *The Guardian* (8 May 2017): <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/08/opinion-polls-general-election> [accessed 20 March 2018]

35 Ashley Kirk, ‘General Election exit poll: How accurate are exit polls usually?’ *The Telegraph* (9 June 2017): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/08/general-election-exit-poll-accurate-could/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

36 ‘Should we trust the general election 2017 polls?’, *New Statesman* (7 May 2017): <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/june2017/2017/05/should-we-trust-general-election-2017-polls> [accessed 20 March 2018]

34. The polls have been wrong before—the 1992 General Election saw the polls underestimate the Conservative lead over Labour by nearly 9%.³⁷ In 2012, Martin Boon, then a Director at ICM Unlimited, described the performance of polls at the 1997 and 2001 General Elections as “mediocre.”³⁸ In all three cases the polling companies had underestimated Conservative support. Results for the 2005 General Election were more favourable, with analysis conducted by the BPC demonstrating that the average error for its member companies was no greater than 1.5%.³⁹ Again, in 2010, polling companies fared fairly well with the BPC reporting that all but one of the nine companies produced polls that came within 2% of the Conservative vote share, and five companies produced polls that were within 1%, although there was a tendency to over-estimate the Liberal Democrat share of the vote.⁴⁰
35. The 2015 General Election, however, saw a universal failure of the final polls accurately to predict voting intention, resulting in the most significant polling failure since 1992. The combined results of the 2015 and 2017 General Elections, and the referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU, have appeared to show a significant, successive failure to estimate accurately voting intention. This has prompted concerns that polling accuracy may be in systematic decline, placing a renewed emphasis on the question of whether we can trust the polls.
36. A central consideration for our inquiry was, therefore, whether the results of polls over the last three years are evidence of a broader trend, and whether the polls are getting worse.

Are the polls getting worse?

37. We recognise that assessing the ‘accuracy’ of voting intention polling is not straightforward. Professor Will Jennings, Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Southampton, has assembled what he believes to be the largest cross-national data set of voting intention polls for national elections from 45 countries dating back to the 1940s. He told us that: “There is no single, universal benchmark against which the accuracy of polls can be gauged.”⁴¹
38. Furthermore, several witnesses told us that polls are not necessarily intended to be predictors of election outcomes. Instead, they represent a ‘snapshot’ in time, and public opinion can and does shift between the date of a poll and the election.
39. Professor Jennings outlined several ways in which polling accuracy can be measured. These included:
- How close the poll estimate for a given party is to the actual result (the size of the error);

37 Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, Getting Opinion Polls ‘Right’, [POSTnote96](#), March 1997

38 Martin Boon, ‘Predicting Elections, A ‘Wisdom of Crowds’ Approach’, *International Journal of Market Research*, vol 54, (1 July 2012), p 465: [http://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/IJMR_54_\(4\)_Boon.pdf](http://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/IJMR_54_(4)_Boon.pdf) [accessed 20 March 2018]

39 The British Polling Council, ‘Accuracy of the final 2005 Polls’ (May 2005): <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/accuracy-of-the-final-polls-2/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

40 The British Polling Council, ‘Accuracy of the Final 2010 Polls’ (May 2010): <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/accuracy-of-the-final-polls/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

41 Written evidence from Professor Will Jennings ([PPD0009](#))

- Whether the poll has over- or under-stated the level of support for a particular party (the direction of the error);
 - Whether the poll has accurately captured the relative lead of one party or candidate over another (the size and/or direction of the error on ‘the margin’);
 - The absolute or relative size of the error;
 - The accuracy of the poll for all parties contesting an election (calculating the average error); or
 - The accuracy for major parties only and not for those minor parties receiving a smaller share of the vote (calculating the average error for a sub-set of the published headline figures).⁴²
40. Of course the information provided by voting intention polls is more complex than just the final prediction and the final result. Indeed, polling during a campaign can tell us a range of important details about the electorate’s views. The focus on the final Conservative-Labour margin can obscure some of the other political insights that can be garnered from polls. Professor Sir John Curtice, President of the BPC, noted that:
- “I would suggest to you that, even in 2017, the opinion polls told you an awful lot of things that it was rather useful to know. They told you that the public were changing their minds about the merits of the Leader of the Opposition and of the Prime Minister. They also told you that the Labour manifesto was more popular than the Conservative manifesto and that Brexit was indeed dividing voters—that voters who had voted leave were swinging towards the Conservatives and voters who had voted remain were more likely to swing towards Labour ... For the discerning reader, there was an awful lot of political intelligence in the opinion polls.”⁴³
41. While discerning readers may be interested in this additional information, it is reasonable to assume, however, that an average member of the public may not. To the public and the media, which party is ahead—the ‘horse race’ election coverage—is usually the main focal point throughout the electoral campaign and it is this that provokes the most scrutiny.
42. Professor Jennings explained to us that his work, looking at historic datasets of voting intention polls, had: “enabled analysis of the evolution of voter preferences over the election cycle and, most pertinent to the remit of this committee, the degree to which polls at the end of the cycle correspond to election outcomes.”⁴⁴ He had concluded that “there is no evidence of a global crisis in polling”. He also suggested that the historical accuracy of polling in the UK was typical of similar advanced democracies. In reference to the 2015 and 2017 General Elections, Professor Jennings stated that: “While few would suggest that 2015 and 2017 were high points for pollsters, the errors

42 *Ibid.*

43 [Q 140](#) (Professor John Curtice)

44 Written evidence from Professor Will Jennings ([PPD0009](#))

experienced have not been outside the ordinary.”⁴⁵ Professor Jennings has now published his research in the journal *Nature Human Behaviour*.⁴⁶

43. Although this evidence did not support the idea that, overall, polling is getting less accurate, there was no dispute that polls published in the run-up to the last two General Elections and the 2016 referendum did not accurately reflect the eventual outcomes.

Performance of polls: 2015 General Election

44. While the voting intention polls in 2015 and 2017 were notable for their failure to predict the final result, it is, as highlighted by Professor Jennings, “important to put the two elections in quite different contexts. The accuracies of the polls in 2015 and 2017 are quite different.”⁴⁷
45. In 2015, on average the final estimates of the polling companies put the Conservative party on 34% and the Labour party on 34%. No individual poll put the Conservative party ahead.⁴⁸ The final polling result underestimated the Conservative lead by 6.5 percentage points.⁴⁹
46. In response to the result, the BPC and the MRS established an independent inquiry into the causes of the discrepancy between the final polls and the election result. Under the chairmanship of Professor Patrick Sturgis, Director of the National Centre for Research Methods at the University of Southampton,⁵⁰ the inquiry was charged with the task of establishing the degree of inaccuracy in the polls, the reasons for the inaccuracies and whether the findings and the conduct of the polls were adequately communicated to the general public.⁵¹ The inquiry published its findings in March 2016.⁵²
47. According to the inquiry team, the main reason the final polls did not reveal a decisive Conservative lead was that polling samples were not sufficiently representative of the voting population. The report said:

“Our conclusion is that the primary cause of the polling miss in 2015 was *unrepresentative samples*. The methods the pollsters used to collect samples of voters systematically over-represented Labour supporters and under-represented Conservative supporters. The statistical adjustment procedures applied to the raw data did not mitigate this basic problem to any notable degree.”⁵³

45 *Ibid.*

46 Will Jennings and Christopher Wlezien, ‘Election polling errors across time and space’, *Nature Human Behaviour* (published online 12 March 2018): <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-018-0315-6> [accessed 20 March 2018]

47 [Q 1](#) (Professor Will Jennings)

48 Professor Patrick Sturgis, Dr Nick Baker, Dr Mario Callegaro, Dr Stephen Fisher, Professor Jane Green, Professor Will Jennings, Dr Jouni Kuha, Dr Ben Lauderdale and Dr Patten Smith, *op cit.*, p 2

49 Written evidence from Professor Will Jennings ([PPD0009](#))

50 Professor Sturgis was appointed by this Committee to act as our Specialist Adviser.

51 British Polling Council, ‘Details of Opinion Poll Inquiry Announced’ (May 2015): <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/details-of-opinion-poll-inquiry-announced/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

52 Professor Patrick Sturgis, Dr Nick Baker, Dr Mario Callegaro, Dr Stephen Fisher, Professor Jane Green, Professor Will Jennings, Dr Jouni Kuha, Dr Ben Lauderdale and Dr Patten Smith, *op cit.*

53 Professor Patrick Sturgis, Dr Nick Baker, Dr Mario Callegaro, Dr Stephen Fisher, Professor Jane Green, Professor Will Jennings, Dr Jouni Kuha, Dr Ben Lauderdale and Dr Patten Smith, *op cit.*, p 4

Performance of the polls: 2017 General Election

48. Writing shortly after the 2017 General Election, Peter Barnes, Senior Elections and Political Analyst, BBC News, said:

“Once again the polls, taken as a whole, were not a good guide to the election result.

Over the course of the campaign the gap between the main two parties narrowed but, with one exception, the final polls all suggested a clearer Conservative lead than the actual outcome.”⁵⁴

He went on to note that the polls were not “an unmitigated disaster”.⁵⁵ However, it was clear to all those we spoke to that the 2017 polls were not a roaring success either. In fact, the final average polling result showed a mean absolute error on the Conservative-Labour lead of 5.3 percentage points.⁵⁶

49. The reason for the polling failure in 2017 appears to have been the polling companies’ approach to weighting for turnout. Polling companies have to adjust their data to take into account who is likely to vote and who is not. In 2017, most companies used turnout models which assumed turnout patterns would be broadly the same as they were in 2015. However, turnout in 2017 was different in important respects from 2015, notably amongst voters under the age of 50, who were more likely to turn out and proved to be considerably more likely to vote Labour.⁵⁷ This meant that most polling companies over-estimated the Conservative vote share because they under-weighted turnout amongst Labour-voting groups. For example, Ipsos MORI’s unadjusted data had shown the two major parties level, but when they adjusted for turnout, the Conservative party moved to an eight point lead. Similarly, ICM predicted an initial six point Conservative lead—too high, but within the margin of error—but its turnout-adjusted prediction was a 12 point lead for the Conservative party.⁵⁸
50. In response to the result, the BPC acknowledged that “the final polls were not ideal.” However, it stated that it did not consider it necessary to conduct another formal inquiry and instead decided to ask its members to produce a “lessons learned” report for discussion.⁵⁹

Performance of the polls: 2016 referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU

51. The performance of the polls in the 2016 referendum, with most final polls showing a lead for ‘Remain’, is another example of a failure by the

54 Peter Barnes, ‘How wrong was the election polling?’, *BBC News* (13 June 2017): <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2017-40265714> [accessed 20 March 2018]

55 *Ibid.*

56 Written evidence from Professor Will Jennings (PPD0009)

57 Ipsos MORI, ‘How Britain voted in the 2017 election’ (20 June 2017): <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2017-election> [accessed 20 March 2018]. While turnout differences in people aged under 50 were a factor, claims of a ‘youthquake’, a significant increase in young people turning out to vote, have been questioned by the British Election Study, which found “no surge in youth turnout at the 2017 election”: Chris Prosser, Ed Fieldhouse, Jane Green, Jonathan Mellon, and Geoff Evans, ‘The myth of the 2017 youthquake election’, *British Election Study*: <http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-impact/the-myth-of-the-2017-youthquake-election/#.WqpiWa27Lct> [accessed 20 March 2018]

58 Peter Kellner, ‘General Election polls 2017: How the pollsters got it wrong’, *Evening Standard* (9 June 2017): <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/general-election-polls-how-the-pollsters-got-it-wrong-a3560936.html> [accessed 16 March 2018]

59 British Polling Council, ‘General Election: 8 June 2017’ (June 2017): <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/general-election-8-june-2017/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

polling industry, although online polls fared notably better than those using telephone methods.⁶⁰ The end result was that ‘Leave’ won by just under four percentage points. Professor Curtice told us that:

“One of the challenges that faced the polling industry during the EU referendum was that traditionally it has not been the practice of most political polling to attempt to gather information on education. Educational attainment has not usually been particularly important, once you knew somebody’s occupation or class position, but in the EU referendum education mattered much more than social class.”⁶¹

52. Over the course of the inquiry, the Committee has heard varying accounts of the accuracy of the polls for the 2016 referendum, with some witnesses suggesting that several polling companies indicated a likely ‘Leave’ win. Dr Nick Anstead, Assistant Professor at the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science, suggested to the Committee that: “To call this event a polling failure is perhaps unfair. In the run-up to the referendum, the polling data was quite mixed, with some polls showing a leave victory”.⁶² This notion was supported by the evidence from the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), which told the Committee: “It is worth noting that of the 72 referendum polls conducted during the official campaign, 35 polls showed a Remain lead and 33 polls showed a Leave lead, with 4 showing dead heats.”⁶³
53. However, the BPC’s assessment of the performance of the polls in the referendum concluded that, on the whole, the final polling predictions were not an accurate guide to the result:

“Seven member companies issued ‘final’ polls of voting intentions in the EU referendum. While no company forecast the eventual result exactly, in three cases the result was within the poll’s margin of error of plus or minus three points. In one case Leave were correctly estimated to be ahead. In the four remaining cases, however, support for Remain was clearly overestimated. This is obviously a disappointing result for the pollsters, and for the BPC, especially because every single poll, even those within sampling error, overstated the Remain vote share.”⁶⁴

Is it getting harder to poll?

54. We asked many of our witnesses the same thing—is polling getting harder? Their answers were nuanced. Key challenges included: the increasing difficulty of persuading members of the public to take part in polls and surveys; the decline in the value of socio-economic class in predicting voting intention and thus in weighting poll data; the variety of demographic and political variables that polling organisations now need to take into account (such as education and attitudes towards Brexit); challenges associated with predicting who will turn out to vote (turnout); and the financial

60 Daniel Dunford and Ashley Kirk, ‘How right or wrong were the polls about the EU referendum?’, *The Telegraph* (27 June 2016): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/24/eu-referendum-how-right-or-wrong-were-the-polls/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

61 Q 140 (Professor John Curtice)

62 Written evidence from Dr Nick Anstead (PPD0018)

63 Written evidence from the World Association for Public Opinion Research (PPD0006)

64 British Polling Council, Press Release, ‘Performance of the polls in the EU referendum’ (24 June 2016): <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/performance-of-the-polls-in-the-eu-referendum/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

constraints affecting the newspaper industry and the corresponding impact on the commissioning of polling.⁶⁵ Others, however, highlighted the benefits brought by the internet which has made polling faster and cheaper to do.⁶⁶

55. Another issue raised was around ‘voter volatility’. This relates to volatility in electoral choice—the willingness of voters to switch between parties—which has been increasing in the UK.⁶⁷

Persuading the public to take part

56. It is becoming harder to get members of the public to take part in polls. Nick Moon of Moonlight Research told us that: “It will always be hard to persuade enough people to take part in your surveys to make them reliable.” However, he also suggested that it was an issue which was getting more problematic: “That is another thing that has got more difficult for pollsters. It is undoubtedly harder to get people to take part in surveys. You can see it in the response rates of the big government surveys ... that is a problem that pollsters continually have to come up against.”⁶⁸

57. Professor Curtice explained the impact that declining participation rates could have on the accuracy of polling:

“The principal problem is that response rates to surveys of any kind, including public and political opinion polls, are lower ... There is probably a consensus that it potentially creates a problem for political polling in so far as it probably increases the probability that any sample that you obtain, by whatever method, contains disproportionately those who are interested in politics, and therefore contains more people than you would find in the general population who are going to vote.”⁶⁹

Decline in the value of socio-economic class as a weighting variable

58. The methodological issues relating to the changing social base of British politics was a consistent theme in the evidence. Nick Moon, talking about the 2017 General Election, supported this, stating that:

“There is a decline of classbased voting. If someone had said before the election you were going to see the biggest working-class swing to the Tories in any election in living memory, you probably would have laughed at them, yet that is what we saw. It has become harder to work out what kinds of people might be likely to vote for one party rather than another.”⁷⁰

59. These shifts in demographic predictors of voting mean that polling organisations are having to adjust the quotas and weightings used to try to ensure that their samples accurately reflect public opinion. Anthony Wells, Director of Political and Social Research at YouGov and the owner and author of UKPollingReport, explained how this had changed the approach to weighting samples:

65 Written evidence from YouGov plc (PPD0016)

66 Written evidence from the World Association for Public Opinion Research (PPD0006)

67 Jonathan Mellon, ‘Party Attachment in Great Britain: Five Decades of Dealignment’, *Social Science Research Network (SSRN)* (10 August 2017): https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2745654 [accessed 20 March 2018]

68 Q 3 (Nick Moon)

69 Q 140 (Professor John Curtice)

70 Q 1 (Nick Moon)

“... the quotas and weights used to ensure samples are fully representative have changed over time. Fifty years ago ensuring a sample was representative in terms of social class would have been the most important factor, whereas social class now has very little predictive value in voting intention and it is more important to ensure samples are representative on factors like age, education and attitudes towards Brexit.”⁷¹

60. Professor Curtice confirmed that this aspect of polling had become more difficult over recent years, stating that: “The widening and changing social bases of electoral choice in the UK have made things more difficult for the industry.”⁷²

Turnout

61. Predicting and adjusting for turnout has always been a challenge for polling organisations. This was particularly problematic in the 2017 General Election where there was considerable divergence in how different companies adjusted for voter turnout. Professor Richard Tait CBE, Professor of Journalism at Cardiff University, told us that:

“There appear to be two fundamental problems—the failure of the polling companies’ currently constituted samples accurately to represent the electorate in an era of rapid and unpredictable political change; and the polling companies’ equally unsuccessful attempts to turn their raw data into accurate predictions of the outcome by estimating the likelihood of specific groups (such as young people) actually voting.”⁷³

62. The issue of differential turnout—where levels of turnout vary between supporters of different parties—and how polling organisations take this into account, was also identified as a particular issue for current polling. Professor Curtice suggested that turnout in recent years had been “persistently lower than it was through to 1997.” He explained that:

“Clearly, once turnout is lower, there is a greater probability that you will get a differential turnout of a kind that may be relevant to understanding what the outcome of an election is going to be. It is pretty clear from the experience of both 2015 and 2017 that estimating correctly who is and who is not going to turn out, particularly the differences in turnout between different demographic groups, is now one of the principal challenges facing the polling industry.”⁷⁴

Financial constraints and the impact of the internet

63. The MRS noted that it was not just methodological issues which presented challenges, and highlighted the impact that financial constraints could have on accuracy. It said that:

“Commissioning clients will generally ‘get what they pay for’ but dwindling resources and budgetary allocations mean that costs of opinion polling are continually being driven downwards. Larger representative sample sizes for opinion polls can reduce the margin of

71 Written evidence from Anthony Wells ([PPD0015](#))

72 [Q 140](#) (Professor John Curtice)

73 Written evidence from Professor Richard Tait ([PPD0013](#))

74 [Q 140](#) (Professor John Curtice)

error but also result in an increase in the base price. Commissioning clients, particularly news and media organisations which use opinion polls to generate journalist content, make decisions on political polling design which prioritises speed of delivery at low cost.”⁷⁵

64. Polling has undoubtedly been assisted by technological developments that have changed the ways in which polls are conducted. Traditional opinion polling, conducted face-to-face in people’s homes, has seen a significant decline in market share, largely due to the labour costs involved. In its place, telephone and internet polling have become the predominant polling modes. Automated calling systems and internet panels of tens of thousands of people have made polling cheaper and quicker than ever before. Some witnesses suggested that the emergence of internet polls had allowed more polls to be conducted and published.⁷⁶

65. YouGov suggested that using large panels of online volunteers had become an increasingly viable approach to sampling. It added that:

“The movement to online polling offered several advantages in terms of accuracy. Using quota sampling from a panel of volunteers who we already hold extensive demographic data upon allowed for more detailed quotas to be set on who was interviewed, ensuring greater representativeness on more variables. Online interviewing also reduces or removes the interviewer effect (that is, people being embarrassed to give answers seen as socially undesirable to a live interviewer) and addresses the issues of false recall when using past vote weighting, which is now standard across almost the whole industry.”⁷⁷

66. Professor Curtice, however, felt that the internet’s influence on polling was nuanced:

“Clearly, there are arguments about how internet polling should be conducted and about its relative merits as compared with telephone interviewing, but the advent of the internet has radically changed the polling industry’s business model. It has been very successful at reducing costs. To that extent, at least, doing polls has become much easier for the industry than it was 25 or 30 years ago, although it is not clear whether that equates to doing polls well.”⁷⁸

Voter volatility

67. Voter volatility was cited frequently as presenting a difficult and relatively unprecedented challenge for the polling industry. The polling organisations themselves told us that voter volatility was having a profound impact on the context in which polling was conducted, stating that “voter dynamics in the UK are more complex and fluid than at any time any of us can recall.”⁷⁹ After the 2015 General Election, Dr Jonathan Mellon, University

75 Written evidence from the Market Research Society ([PPD0010](#))

76 Written evidence from the World Association for Public Opinion Research ([PPD0006](#))

77 Written evidence from YouGov plc ([PPD0016](#))

78 [Q 140](#) (Professor John Curtice)

79 Written evidence from ComRes, Opinium, Ipsos MORI, Panelbase, LucidTalk, ORB International, BMG Research and Survation ([PPD0014](#))

of Manchester, concluded that the election was the latest in a long-running trend of increasing individual voter volatility.⁸⁰

68. Dr Anstead argued that although recent polling failures had a diverse range of causes, what unified them was “the backdrop of growing political instability, which is making measuring public opinion harder than it is during times of political stability.” Dr Anstead asked: “How does polling work if politics is fundamentally more unstable and volatile from election to election?”⁸¹
69. Professor Jennings indicated that the instability of voter intentions was one of the reasons behind the polling errors in 2017, stating that:
- “The other thing to note about the difference between the two elections is that, in 2015, the vote intentions were relatively stable during the campaign. There was a systematic miss, but there did not seem to be a lot of movement during the campaign, whereas in 2017 we saw a surge in support for one party, Labour, that was historically exceptional since 1945. There has never been an election and a campaign in which there was such a large shift in vote intention. That is the crucial distinction about 2017 that made it a really difficult election to survey.”⁸²
70. There was no clear consensus on how the issue of voter volatility might be addressed. We have no doubt that polling organisations are committed to producing accurate findings, but there are aspects of the modern electorate and the current political climate that are making polling harder to do. Our concern was that polling may now have reached a tipping point and that, from now on, it might produce results which are less accurate than in the past. This is especially worrying given the other key concern raised through the evidence—the impact of polling on the democratic process.

The impact of voting intention polling

71. There are concerns that inaccurate voting intention polling has a negative impact on the conduct of elections due to its influence on voters, the media, and political parties. Throughout our inquiry, we have tried to assess the extent to which such influence is evident.

Impact on voters

72. The question of whether polls influence voting behaviour has been the subject of a number of academic studies and is widely debated. The evidence we received was mixed. There are a number of theories about how polls influence voters. These include the ‘bandwagon’ effect, where it is suggested that information from polls can influence people to alter their opinion to accord with the majority view, and the ‘underdog’ effect, which will cause some people to adopt a minority view out of sympathy.⁸³ There is mixed but weak evidence for both effects.

80 Jonathan Mellon, ‘Party Attachment in Great Britain: Five Decades of Dealignment’, *Social Science Research Network SSRN* (10 August 2017): https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2745654 [accessed 20 March 2018]

81 Written evidence from Dr Nick Anstead ([PPD0018](#))

82 [Q 1](#) (Professor Will Jennings)

83 Ian McAllister and Donley T. Studlar, ‘Bandwagon, Underdog, or Projection? Opinion Polls and Electoral Choice in Britain, 1979–1987’, *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 53, No. 3 (August 1991), p 720: <http://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/612965/bandwagon-jofp-1991.pdf> [accessed 20 March 2018]

73. It has also been suggested that voting intention polling can have an impact on turnout. This is because voters tend to be more engaged in close elections and may believe that their vote is more likely to make a difference to the outcome. Academics told us that there is “good evidence that turnout is higher in elections that are anticipated to be close.”⁸⁴ Professor Ailsa Henderson, Professor of Political Science at the University of Edinburgh, reiterated this point about turnout and suggested that, as well as examining possible negative influences of polls, more attention should be paid “to the positive role that polls play in informing public debate and facilitating voter engagement.”⁸⁵
74. Another area where it is claimed the polls affect voter behaviour is in the practice of tactical voting. David Jordan, Director of Editorial Policy and Standards at the BBC, acknowledged that there was an argument that “in some elections, some members of the electorate have used polls to vote tactically.”⁸⁶ Dr Benjamin Lauderdale, Associate Professor in Research Methodology, London School of Economics, suggested:
- “If one is going to make an argument for the value of electoral polling in advance of an election, it is that it is another kind of information available to the public as they make their decision. This matters in certain contexts for local tactical reasons: if you understand, in your constituency, that two particular parties are going to be very competitive and the others are not going to be competitive, that might shape how you make a decision there, so there is constituency-level relevance.”⁸⁷
75. The polling companies, however, rejected the notion that polling is used to support tactical voting, stating that “voters explicitly reject the notion of polling influencing their vote.” They cited research that showed “the vast majority of the public (87%) reject the idea of tactical voting, with the corollary being that the influence of the sort of information necessary to make decisions about tactical voting, most notably polling, is negligible.”⁸⁸
76. There was considerable scepticism expressed over whether voting intention polls affect voters’ decisions. Dr Lauderdale, along with the WAPOR and the MRS, argued that there was no strong evidence that the publication of polling information had a discernible impact on voters’ decision-making.⁸⁹ Professor Henderson cited the results of her research into the influence of polls on voters during the 2016 Scottish Parliament election campaign, which suggested that “polls do not exert an undue influence on voters” and that “one would be hard pressed to say they exerted an influence at all.”⁹⁰
77. While there may not be clear evidence that polling impacts on voter decision-making, the performance of the polls since 2015 seems likely to have had an impact on the levels of voter confidence in polling. The Royal Statistical Society neatly summarised the impact of recent polling performance on public and media confidence in polls:

84 Written evidence from Chris Hanretty, Oliver Heath and Michael Spagat ([PPD0011](#))

85 Written evidence from Professor Ailsa Henderson ([PPD0012](#))

86 [Q 93](#) (David Jordan)

87 [Q 18](#) (Dr Lauderdale)

88 Written evidence from ComRes, Opinium, Ipsos MORI, Panelbase, LucidTalk, ORB International, BMG Research and Survation ([PPD0014](#))

89 Written evidence from Dr Benjamin Lauderdale ([PPD0002](#)), World Association for Public Opinion Research ([PPD0006](#)) and the Market Research Society ([PPD0010](#))

90 Written evidence from Professor Ailsa Henderson ([PPD0012](#))

“Following the outcome of the 2015 General Election, in which the Conservatives unexpectedly won an outright majority, there was considerable backlash from the media and the public regarding the polls which had largely predicted a hung Parliament. Many said polls should no longer be such a focus for reporting in election periods, with some newspapers saying they would stop using them altogether ... With a further UK general election having taken place since then, as well as a referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union, there remains much debate about the usefulness of polls.”⁹¹

78. Whether or not the results of the polls during the last three years constitute the beginning of a downward trend in accuracy, confidence in polls has been damaged. Even before the results of the 2017 General Election were known, scepticism was being expressed in the media—with the query ‘can we trust the polls?’ featuring prominently in election coverage well before the final result was announced.⁹²

Impact on the media ‘narrative’

79. Voting intention polling plays a significant role in shaping the media coverage and therefore the ‘narrative’ of the election. The evidence was clear about this.
80. Many of our witnesses highlighted the 2015 General Election as a particularly pertinent example of this narrative shaping. The run-up to that election was dominated by media coverage of the ‘race’ between the Conservative and Labour parties. Following the evidence of the polls, the dominant narrative was that the election was neck and neck between the Labour and the Conservative parties and that a coalition was the most likely electoral outcome. Many commentators plausibly suggested that this ‘false’ narrative was shaped, predominantly, by the voting intention polls.⁹³
81. This observation was one that was included in the considerations of the Inquiry into the 2015 British general election opinion polls which stated that: “The poll-induced expectation of a dead heat undoubtedly informed party strategies and media coverage during both the short and the long campaigns and may ultimately have influenced the result itself, albeit in ways that are difficult to determine satisfactorily.”⁹⁴
82. The notion that polls can significantly shape the narrative of an election, and can therefore prove misleading when they are wrong, was echoed by David Jordan, Director of Editorial Policy and Standards at the BBC, who told us:

91 Written evidence from the Royal Statistical Society (PPD0022)

92 Examples of the headlines described can be found in the following: ‘Should we trust the general election 2017 polls?’, *New Statesman*, (7 May 2017): <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/june2017/2017/05/should-we-trust-general-election-2017-polls> [accessed 20 March 2018]; Martin Baxter, ‘Campaign Calculus 2017: Can we actually trust the polls?’, *The Telegraph* (1 May 2017): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/01/general-election-polls-arent-meaningless-rubbish-foolish-trust/> [accessed 20 March 2018]; Alan Travis, ‘Can we still trust opinion polls after 2015, Brexit and Trump?’, *The Guardian* (8 May 2017): <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/08/opinion-polls-general-election> [accessed 20 March 2018]

93 Dr Stephen Cushion and Professor Richard Sambrook, ‘The ‘horse-race’ contest dominated TV news election coverage’, *UK Election Analysis 2015: Media, Voters and the Campaign* (May 2015): <http://www.electionanalysis.uk/uk-election-analysis-2015/section-1-media-reporting/the-horse-race-contest-dominated-tv-news-election-coverage/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

94 Professor Patrick Sturgis, Dr Nick Baker, Dr Mario Callegaro, Dr Stephen Fisher, Professor Jane Green, Professor Will Jennings, Dr Jouni Kuha, Dr Ben Lauderdale and Dr Patten Smith, *op cit.*, p 7

“Our concern about the 2015 and 2017 general elections and the Scottish and EU referendums was the capacity of the polls to influence the journalistic narrative of those election campaigns. In particular, we were very concerned that, in the 2015 election, there was a huge focus on the possibility of a Labour-SNP coalition, which turned out to be fanciful, shall we say, in the context of the outcome, and really rather misleading.”⁹⁵

This view was also supported by Dr Anstead’s assertion that: “Flawed polls can therefore lead to misdirected or irrelevant debates becoming central to media coverage, and the exclusion of other issues.”⁹⁶

Impact on political parties

83. We also heard evidence that voting intention polling can influence the decision-making of political parties. In fact there was more certainty in the evidence about the notion that polling can have an impact on political parties, than for the idea that polling can affect voters’ behaviour.
84. It is well known that political parties take an interest in the results of the bigger and well established newspaper polls. Private polling is also used by political parties to inform decision-making, and this is commonly relied on more heavily than the results of publicly available polls. Deborah Mattinson, Co-Founder of BritainThinks, told the Committee: “Politicians I have worked with have paid a lot more attention to their own private polling than to published polling”.⁹⁷
85. Lord Kinnock shared with us his experiences of polling, in particular those from the 1992 General Election campaign, which is regarded as one of the worst UK polling failures in history. On private polling, Lord Kinnock told the Committee:

“However much you try to guard against it, your disposition will be to think that the private polling, conducted presumably in circumstances of slightly greater intimacy and with a degree of extra thoroughness, although both assumptions are probably wrong, will give you a closer indication of what is really going on.”⁹⁸
86. This can even affect the timing of General Elections. According to his aides, Prime Minister Jim Callaghan’s decision in 1978 to defer a General Election was partly due to a private poll from MORI suggesting that Labour was doing less well in the marginal seats which it needed to win to achieve a majority. In fact, these estimates were not very statistically robust, with small sub-samples subject to large margins of error. However, Jim Callaghan understandably went along with his pollsters’ advice. The rest is history.⁹⁹
87. Another much cited example of private polling that is thought to have influenced crucial strategic decision-making was in 2007, when Gordon Brown, having recently become Prime Minister, decided against calling a snap General Election. According to Damian McBride, Gordon Brown’s

95 [Q 90](#) (David Jordan)

96 Written evidence from Dr Nick Anstead ([PPD0018](#))

97 [Q 46](#) (Deborah Mattinson)

98 [Q 133](#) (Lord Kinnock)

99 David Lipsey, *In the Corridors of Power* (London: Biteback Publishing Ltd, 2012), pp 124-125

special adviser, the polls were “crucial” at this time. He stated, in an article for *The Telegraph* in 2012, that:

“It was argued that if even one Labour MP lost their seat, it would expose the early election as an act of vanity and folly on GB’s part and he would have to resign.

It seems madness now, but that became the consensus in the inner circle right up until October 5, when the final decision was made. And this is where the polls were indeed crucial. Every poll that we ever looked at in those weeks—private or public—said that Labour would win a clear majority. But the same polls, especially after the Tory conference, said he was going to shed at least a dozen South East (and Midlands) marginals ...

People who had previously been arch proponents of the early election had started to play devil’s advocate more frequently and enthusiastically. GB’s pollsters were also—to cover their backs—starting to paint worst case scenarios, all of which ended up with him resigning after a drastic reduction in Labour’s majority.”¹⁰⁰

Despite months of polling in his favour, Gordon Brown announced in October 2007 that he would not be calling a General Election.

88. Lord Kinnock and others also confirmed that public polling results inevitably had some impact on political parties’ perception of the election campaign. When asked about the influence of polls on politicians and their actions, Lord Kinnock said: “The existence of the polls of themselves, producing the results that they do day on day, week on week, means that there is information generally available that the human beings who are leaders cannot be expected to ignore.”¹⁰¹
89. The concern that polling results can have an undesirable impact on politics and political decision-making was highlighted by several of our witnesses. Referring to the events of the 2015 General Election, Ric Bailey, Chief Adviser, Politics at the BBC, told us:
- “ ... that narrative was accepted not just by the BBC and the media, but by the whole political establishment. We then had to report that. It was not just about what we were reporting, it was about the constituencies party leaders were choosing to campaign in, the subject areas they wanted to campaign on, and the interviews and who they gave them to. A whole series of political strategies by the parties themselves were dominated by that narrative. We were all in the same boat, as it were, and perhaps we should have stood back and said that.”¹⁰²
90. Perhaps the most striking example of the impact of polls on political decision-making occurred during the Scottish independence referendum in 2014. During the later stages of the campaign, the polling averages suggested that the election would be relatively close. Then, a single YouGov poll

100 Damian McBride, ‘Gordon Brown and the 2007 election: why it never happened’, *The Telegraph* (5 October 2012): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/gordon-brown/9589561/Gordon-Brown-and-the-2007-election-why-it-never-happened.html> [accessed 20 March 2018]

101 [Q 135](#) (Lord Kinnock)

102 [Q 90](#) (Ric Bailey)

suggested that the ‘Yes’ campaign might be in the lead (51%/49%).¹⁰³ Shortly afterwards, the politicians in support of ‘No’ made what was known as ‘The Vow’ to Scotland of greater devolution of powers if the Scottish people chose to stay in the UK. Some politicians and media commentators suggested that the polling industry was disproportionately powerful and had influenced the future of the country on the back of a single poll.¹⁰⁴ Ric Bailey described the political activity that followed:

“... the cancellation of Prime Minister’s Question Time and three Westminster party leaders dashing on to the first plane north to start making vows to the Scottish Parliament. That may not have been due entirely to the publication of a single poll, but it was certainly influenced by it.”¹⁰⁵

91. It is not, of course, purely the results of the polls which have the ability to influence political discourse—the way in which they are covered by the media is also an important consideration. Carl Miller, Research Director of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media at Demos, said: “The vicious outcome is that the effect of a poll is obviously proportionate to the amount of coverage it receives in either conventional or social media. The amount of coverage a poll receives is itself proportionate to, or reflects, how sensational the outcome of the poll is.”¹⁰⁶ In Chapter 3, we therefore consider in more detail the way in which the media covers voting intention polls.

Conclusion

92. We cannot say conclusively that polls impact directly on voters’ decision-making in any consistent way. But we found that voting intention polls play a hugely significant role in shaping the narrative around political events such as elections and referendums. Given the impact that they can have on political discourse, they will inevitably influence public behaviour and opinions, even if only indirectly. It is therefore vital that work continues in order to try to improve polling accuracy and that this is done as transparently as possible. The Royal Statistical Society noted that: “It is crucial that pollsters and independent parties conduct critical inquiries in public so that the causes of uncertainty can be better understood.”¹⁰⁷
93. **We expect that polling organisations will continue to seek to innovate, in order to improve the methodologies used in polling and to improve their suitability for estimating voter preferences. It is therefore important that every opportunity is taken to learn the lessons from recent elections. It is also crucial that polling companies and others conduct critical inquiries in public so that the causes of inaccuracy can be better understood, as was done after the 2015 General Election.**
94. **Analysis of political polls conducted since the 1940s does not show that polling has become more inaccurate over time. However, the three high-profile failures of polling in the UK in the last three years—**

103 YouGov, ‘Yes’ campaign lead at 2 in Scottish Referendum’ (6 September 2014): <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/09/06/latest-scottish-referendum-poll-yes-lead/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

104 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 20 March 2018]

105 Q 89 (Ric Bailey)

106 Q 24 (Carl Miller)

107 Written evidence from the Royal Statistical Society (PPD0022)

covering two General Elections and the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU—raises the possibility that things might have taken a turn for the worse. The internet has certainly made polling easier and cheaper to conduct. However, a combination of difficulties in persuading a representative range of members of the public to take part in polls, shifting demographic predictors of the vote, and an increasingly volatile electorate, have by common consent made it more difficult to estimate political opinion accurately. It is entirely possible that polling failures will become more common in the future.

95. **Amongst the methodological issues faced by polling companies, the changing utility of demographic variables for the weighting of samples, particularly the declining validity of weighting based on socio-economic class, is a significant challenge. Polling companies can no longer rely on traditional weighting variables, and so will need to continue to develop new ways to adapt their methodological approaches. Further work is needed to better understand the impact of newer variables such as voters' educational level, age and attitudes to policy issues such as the NHS and (currently) views on austerity and the UK's relationship with the European Union.**

CHAPTER 3: MEDIA REPORTING OF VOTING INTENTION POLLS

96. In the previous chapter we highlighted the fact that, while polling practices might not be perfect, polling organisations have every incentive to be accurate and they are continually trying to improve their techniques in order to ensure that their methodologies provide results which are as robust as possible. However, we were concerned to hear that these efforts can sometimes be undermined by the ways in which voting intention polls are presented, interpreted and reported on in the media. While there are undoubtedly good examples of media reports about polls, there are also examples of polls being reported on in a hyperbolic way, overstating the importance of small changes that are not distinguishable from sampling variability. These undermine the efforts of polling organisations to reflect public opinion accurately.
97. In this Chapter we consider media reporting of voting intention polls specifically. In general, the voting intention polls to which we refer in this Chapter are produced by polling organisations which are members of the British Polling Council (BPC) (in Chapter 4 we consider policy issues polls which are produced by a much wider range of individuals and organisations). We discuss the media as a whole, though we recognise that different challenges are faced by individual sectors of the media, and that different guidelines and regulations cover traditional print media, broadcasters and online publishers. The details of such regulations are covered in more detail in Chapter 5.

Concerns about media reporting of polls

98. Will Moy, Director of Full Fact, said: “Lots of claims are made about polling at election time, and we have seen a wide variety of nonsense about polls.”¹⁰⁸ Dr Lauderdale, from the London School of Economics, also told us that: “There are particular pathologies in the way the media presents polls, which are frequent and well known: overemphasising small changes from the last poll or a poll done by a different pollster, changes that are consistent with the random variation inherent in any kind of survey.”¹⁰⁹ In this section, we outline some of the main criticisms of media reporting on polls put to us during the inquiry.

The ‘horse race’

99. A key criticism which emerged from the evidence was that the media often reduces polling to a focus on the ‘horse race’ between the two major parties, and that discussions on policy receive less prominence as a result. Dr Nick Anstead from the London School of Economics and Political Science, told us that “during election campaigns, the media become fixated on who is winning and losing an election, and small movements in the various parties’ level of support, to the exclusion of discussing policy and substantive political issues.” He said that there was some evidence that the pressures of 24-hour broadcast news coverage and online commentary had increased the reliance on such ‘horse race’ coverage in recent years. He added that “such coverage is popular with audiences, so this phenomenon might be demand rather than supply-led.”¹¹⁰

108 Q 47 (Will Moy)

109 Q 19 (Dr Benjamin Lauderdale)

110 Written evidence from Dr Nick Anstead (PPD0018)

100. Focussing on the ‘horse race’ can be a problem for several reasons. First, it can crowd out discussions on policy matters. Professor Tait, Professor of Journalism at Cardiff University, told us that newspapers and polling companies were producing more and more polls and that this encouraged a focus on the ‘horse race’. In his view, broadcast editors always had to consider how much to spend “on who is winning and who is losing” compared to how much to spend analysing attitudes. He added that “the sheer weight of polls is a factor in determining where newspapers and broadcasters focus their attention.”¹¹¹
101. Secondly, this focus means that other important factors highlighted in polls are missed. This point was made by polling companies who noted that undue attention could be placed on small and often statistically insignificant movements in vote shares. They suggested that: “This often manifests in a misunderstanding of elections as horse races and misses out on the other data provided by polls.”¹¹²
102. Thirdly, paying too much attention to the ‘horse race’ is problematic because it frames other discussions about political events. For example, as previously highlighted, during the 2015 General Election campaign, a lot of media coverage focussed on the possibility of a hung parliament and the various coalition deals that might emerge under that scenario. Dr Anstead put it to us that:

“Arguably, these discussions had a material effect on the election result, with the possibility of a Labour-led ‘coalition of chaos’ providing a powerful rhetorical device for the Conservatives. Different polls, showing a significant Conservative lead over Labour, for example, might have led to a rhetorically very different campaign, with Conservative plans for government facing a much higher level of scrutiny.”¹¹³

Such a media focus is particularly problematic when the discourse is based on inaccurate polls.

Lack of reference to important caveats

103. Published polls conducted by reputable polling companies are usually accompanied by information describing the methodologies used, including the sample size, the population represented, question wording, and the margin of error. While many may view these details as unnecessary small print, this information is crucial to assessing the credibility of the poll’s results. Unfortunately, however, this information is not always communicated in media reports, especially secondary reporting.
104. Reporting the margin of error in polling was a particular cause for concern. In general, polling organisations publish estimates for vote shares with a margin of error of plus or minus 3% to take account of sampling variability.¹¹⁴ This means, for example, that if a poll estimates the Labour vote share as 40%, then the true Labour vote share in the population could be anything between 37-43%. If a poll estimates that both the Labour party and the

111 Q 71 (Professor Richard Tait CBE)

112 Written evidence from ComRes, Opinium, Ipsos MORI, Panelbase, LucidTalk, ORB International, BMG Research and Survation (PPD0014)

113 Written evidence from Dr Nick Anstead (PPD0018)

114 YouGov, ‘Understanding margin of error’ (21 November, 2011): <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2011/11/21/understanding-margin-error/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

Conservative party each have a vote share of 40%, this could in fact cover any situation ranging from a 43% Labour / 37% Conservative split, to a 37% Labour / 43% Conservative split.

105. Dr Anstead said that few journalists are polling specialists and that they therefore “stress novelty and a dynamic situation.” As an example, he noted that “statistically insignificant changes in the level of support are often recorded as being meaningful. Methodological caveats are sometimes omitted or, if they are included, not made prominent enough.”¹¹⁵ Johnny Heald, Managing Director, ORB International, told us that when journalists review polls:

“Practically, particularly with social media and the need to push something out overnight, online and so on, there is probably not as much rigour as there should be ... There is a checklist of things that the industry has, but I would argue in my experience that journalists want the story to justify the agenda or to push something out, and they are not necessarily spending enough time looking at the detail.”¹¹⁶

106. Sky News noted that a large majority of polls are commissioned by media organisations, largely newspapers, whose main interest during election campaigns “is to gain first access to the polling figures”. It noted that “parties that are flat-lining don’t make headlines” and that there was a bias towards reporting headline polling figures that emphasised changes in likely voting intention. Sky News highlighted the fact that such changes often fell within the margins of error, but that the headline figures were reported as increases or decreases, “with essential commentary on sampling errors etc. relegated either to a footnote or not mentioned at all”.¹¹⁷
107. The reporting of trends can also be problematic. Will Moy said that Full Fact had seen examples of reporting which took individual polls out of context, in order “to produce the classic, ‘It is on a knife-edge’” report, rather than looking at the full breadth of the polling evidence. He highlighted one example where a newspaper had “compared two different polls, from two different companies, using two different methods, to claim a bombshell showing ‘May plummeting by 11 points’.”¹¹⁸

Headlines and margins of error

108. The lack of nuance and caveats was a particular problem in relation to headlines. This is because, even if the article does contain the necessary methodological detail, the key message that most readers or listeners will draw will be based on the headline.
109. Johnny Heald explained that the margins of error for a poll were often ignored when they were reported. He noted that there was no real difference, for example, between a poll result showing a 49%/51% split of voters, compared to 48%/52%. However, he added, “if it jumps from 48 for leave to 51 for leave, the headline is not, ‘It’s the same’. The whole agenda of the paper changes. The markets react, and 1.2% is lopped off the pound overnight.

115 Written evidence from Dr Nick Anstead ([PPD0018](#))

116 [Q 154](#) (Johnny Heald)

117 Written evidence from Sky News ([PPD0005](#))

118 [Q 47](#) (Will Moy)

That happens on the basis of a question that costs £250 to put to 2,000 people.”¹¹⁹

110. Ben Page, Chief Executive, Ipsos MORI, felt that sub-editors had “a lot to answer for.” He gave us the following example of a misleading headline that did not take account of the margins of error:

“There was one newspaper headline in 2015 where it said, ‘Up 1%’, which is clearly absolute rubbish, but it was seized on in a poll that moved in the direction that that newspaper liked. Being able to control the subs has probably become a little harder. We are making sure that all the details of the surveys are usually in the text and are not too misleading, but there are issues about how much prominence a newspaper will give to a poll that it likes as opposed to one that does not confirm its prejudices.”¹²⁰

Professor Chris Hanretty, Royal Holloway, University of London, noted that teaching people about statistics was challenging, adding that “it is difficult to give a good summary of what a margin of error is, so a sub-editor might say, ‘That is the first thing to go’.”¹²¹

111. Over the course of the 2017 election campaign, Full Fact investigated a number of political claims, including the reporting of a political opinion poll by *The Mail on Sunday*. On 24 April 2017 the newspaper led with a headline claiming: “Tory lead is slashed in half after tax U-turn: Bombshell Mail on Sunday poll shows May plummeting by 11 points ... denting hopes of a landslide”.¹²²
112. Full Fact suggested the paper was not reporting the results of political opinion polling accurately, stating that:

“The paper quotes a recent opinion poll conducted by market researchers Survation at the end of last week, which put the Conservatives on 40% and Labour on 29%—an 11 point lead. The headline gets this slightly muddled, describing it as Theresa May plummeting by 11 points.

It then compares it to another poll from Tuesday last week, from researchers at ICM. It put the Conservatives on 46% compared to Labour’s 25%—a 21 point lead.

That’s a big difference over four days, but not one we can draw a trend from.”¹²³

Full Fact went on to highlight that it is difficult to directly compare different polls because of the sometimes large differences in methodological approaches.¹²⁴

119 [Q 151](#) (Johnny Heald)

120 [Q 154](#) (Ben Page)

121 [Q 37](#) (Professor Chris Hanretty)

122 Simon Walters, ‘Tory lead is slashed in half after tax U-turn: Bombshell Mail on Sunday poll shows May plummeting by 11 points ... denting hopes of a landslide’, *The Daily Mail* (24 April 2017): <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4436044/Tory-lead-slashed-half-tax-U-turn.html> [accessed 20 March 2018]

123 Full Fact, ‘Little evidence the Conservatives’ poll lead is narrowing’ (24 April 2017): <https://fullfact.org/news/little-evidence-conservatives-poll-lead-narrowing/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

124 *Ibid.*

What can polling organisations do?

113. The industry body for the major polling organisations in the UK is the British Polling Council. The BPC told us that it has two main objectives: “The first is to promote transparency in the publication of polls. The second is to promote public understanding of opinion polls.” In order to do this, its rules of disclosure place certain obligations on its members. In particular, member organisations are obliged to ensure that the following information is included in any initial publicity surrounding the publication of a poll:
- Client commissioning the survey;
 - Dates of interviewing;
 - Method of obtaining the interviews (such as whether the poll was conducted in person, on the telephone or online);
 - The population effectively represented (such as whether it covers all adults, or all voters, etc.);
 - The percentages upon which conclusions are based;
 - Size of the sample and geographic coverage;
 - (If possible): Complete wording of questions upon which any data that has entered the public domain are based;
 - (If possible): A web address where full computer tables may be viewed.¹²⁵
114. In addition, the BPC rules oblige members to publish the above information on their own website, together with the following:
- A full description of the sampling procedures adopted by the organisation;
 - Computer tables showing the exact questions asked in the order they were asked, all response codes and the weighted and unweighted bases for all demographics and other data that has been published;
 - A description of any weighting, filtering, modelling or imputation procedures that have been employed, the weighted and (where relevant) unweighted figures for all variables (demographic or otherwise) used to weight the data (irrespective of whether or not such variables appear in any tabulated analyses of the data), and the source(s) of the data used to set weighting targets;
 - An email address for further enquiries;
 - A link to the BPC website;
 - In the case of a poll of voting intentions for an election or referendum (including any election or referendum that has not yet been called), the company must also specify any changes to the way in which those estimates have been obtained since the company’s previous poll of those voting intentions. This includes any changes to the sampling procedures, weighting and the treatment of ‘Don’t Knows’ and ‘Refusals’.

125 Written evidence from the British Polling Council ([PPD0007](#))

The BPC noted that this additional information “should normally be published within two working days of the initial release of the results, though for polls of vote intention conducted during election and referendum campaigns members have committed themselves to publishing this information within 18 hours. In practice, nowadays, most companies publish this information within a few hours, including outside an election period.”¹²⁶

115. While the BPC provides guidance regarding the release of data, it is not always easy for polling organisations to ensure that this is followed by the organisations which commission their surveys. We were told that polling organisations often checked the text and graphics of media reports to ensure that there were no inaccuracies, but that there was little they could do about the prominence given to particular stories, or to the headlines attached to those articles. Ben Page told us that he was powerless if a newspaper, for example, gave undue prominence to a particular poll. He said:

“We will correct them publicly if they are wrong, as we will any client who is misleading about something, but choosing what to publish and ignoring things such as margin of error, or focusing on tiny changes that are not, under any circumstances, likely to be statistically valid, are things that go on. You can ask them not to do it again. You can complain. I suppose you could stop giving them data. But there is a tension there.”¹²⁷

116. Furthermore, while polling organisations work with the media outlets which commissioned their polls to try to ensure accuracy of reporting, there is little they can do to prevent the misreporting of their polls by other media sources. Ben Page noted that it was “the secondary coverage and selective coverage by other outlets” that could be a problem.¹²⁸ Nick Moon, Moonlight Research, also told us that it was the “secondary reporting particularly” which was difficult to control.¹²⁹

The challenges faced by journalists

117. It is important to note that the evidence we received was not uniformly critical of the media. Anthony Wells, of YouGov and UKPollingReport, noted that newspaper reporting had improved in the last decade and he identified journalists who reported on polls with the appropriate caveats. In his view, this was often a result of “regular discussion between the polling company and the journalists responsible about what a poll means and what can be responsibly concluded from the findings.”¹³⁰
118. Polling companies acknowledged that there were problems with some media reports of polls, but also recognised that:

“Generally speaking, the media report on opinion polls appropriately. There are many fine political journalists working today who properly recognise, understand and even contribute to the world of political

126 *Ibid.*

127 [Q 154](#) (Ben Page)

128 *Ibid.*

129 [Q 9](#) (Nick Moon)

130 Written evidence from Anthony Wells ([PPD0015](#))

polling. Recent rises in the popularity of data journalism add credence to this trend for responsible journalism.”¹³¹

119. Throughout the evidence, there was also a recognition of the challenges that journalists face. Members of the media are tasked with reporting on an increasingly volatile and unpredictable electorate, while also keeping up with changes in the media landscape, including the rise of digital media and a desire for constant updates as part of a 24-hour news cycle. Sue English, Former Head of Political Programmes, Analysis and Research at the BBC, noted that “an election campaign is probably the hardest test of any media organisation, because you are attempting to report developments in the campaign and the issues underlying them in a very fast-paced environment, when the stakes are incredibly high. For most journalists, those are the most difficult things to do.”¹³²
120. We are also aware of the pressure affecting some journalists due to proprietorial and editorial demands, where there may be a desire to generate an exclusive story or to further the cause supported by their particular news outlet, particularly when that outlet might have commissioned the poll in the first place. As Deborah Mattinson, Co-Founder of BritainThinks, said: “Published polling is for editorial purposes—to generate a story. That is its aim. They will be looking for a sensational angle or a big headline.”¹³³
121. Professor Tait noted that while there was greater numeracy and literacy about polls among political correspondents and editors, on the other hand, there were also a lot more polls to contend with. He said: “There seems to be almost an arms race among newspapers and polling organisations to have lots of polls. To me, that encourages a less desirable development—a focus on the horse race in the election, or the referendum, rather than a focus on issues and analysis of policy.”¹³⁴
122. Compounding these problems is the fact that there is no clear definition as to what constitutes a poll, or any benchmark by which to judge it, as we noted in paragraph 22.
123. In the light of these challenges, most witnesses felt that it was important to provide more information and support in order to improve media coverage of voting intention polling. Professor Ailsa Henderson from the University of Edinburgh pointed out some of the common errors in reporting of polls, but added: “Each of these is an issue of education rather than regulation, though.”¹³⁵ Polling companies expressed a similar opinion:

“Although considerable efforts are made to ensure fair representation of data on our part (including briefing our media clients and promoting data literacy), it is up to readers of all media to decide whether and what to believe. To regulate the publication of opinion polls rather than any other type of information disseminated via newspapers is to underestimate the ability of readers to determine such matters for themselves.

131 Written evidence from ComRes, BMG Research, Ipsos MORI, LucidTalk, ORB International, Opinium, ORB International, Panelbase, and Survation ([PPD0014](#))

132 [Q 71](#) (Sue English)

133 [Q 46](#) (Deborah Mattinson)

134 [Q 71](#) (Professor Richard Tait CBE)

135 Written evidence from Professor Ailsa Henderson ([PPD0012](#))

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that regulatory intervention or even a code of conduct for reporting political polling would represent an overbearing sledgehammer to crack a nut, let alone that the ramifications for democracy would be wholly negative.”¹³⁶

Views on what could be done to improve media reporting of voting intention polls

Giving polls less prominence

124. Given the uncertainty surrounding the ability of polls to predict accurately the outcome of elections, there is a strong case for the media to give less prominence to voting intention polls. Some sections of the media have already started to move in this direction.
125. David Jordan, Director of Editorial Policy and Standards at the BBC, told us that the BBC’s guidelines “start from a pretty sceptical position about opinion polling”. Ric Bailey, Chief Adviser, Politics at the BBC, confirmed that the BBC’s guidelines have for some time recommended “never leading or headlining a bulletin with the reporting of a poll.” For the 2017 General Election campaign, the guidelines were strengthened further to say that a news story would not normally be based on a single opinion poll.¹³⁷
126. Sky News told us that they had moved in the same direction. Jonathan Levy, Director of News Gathering and Operations at Sky News, told us that ahead of the 2017 General Election, their guidance to staff “asked them to be very clear when a poll fell within the margin of error—and to be clear about that to our viewers or readers.” They also ensured that they had a polling expert on hand so that reporters could draw on their expertise.¹³⁸
127. ITV News also moved away from polls during its 2017 General Election coverage. During the campaign, ITV News did not commission a poll, but instead decided to extend its 10pm bulletin by 10 minutes to allow time for reporters in the field to talk directly to voters.¹³⁹ ITV News presenter, Tom Bradby, said on Twitter: “It should be abundantly clear by now that the polls are a total waste of time. We have refused to commission any in this campaign.”¹⁴⁰
128. We heard that newspapers might also be less inclined to commission polls. Deborah Mattinson told us that:

“... because of the experience of the last election in particular, there will probably be fewer polls. There already are, actually, because quite a lot of newspapers feel that they had their fingers burned a bit and are looking at other ways of tapping into public opinion. But it is not going to stop.”¹⁴¹

136 Written evidence from ComRes, Opinium, Ipsos MORI, Panelbase, LucidTalk, ORB International, BMG Research and Survation (PPD0014)

137 Q 89 (David Jordan, Ric Bailey)

138 Q 83 (Jonathan Levy)

139 Jake Kanter, ‘TV news broadcasters have ditched general election polls as a ‘total waste of time’’, *Business Insider*, (2 June 2017): <http://uk.businessinsider.com/bbc-itv-channel-4-channel-5-and-sky-news-shun-election-polls-2017-6> [accessed 20 March 2018]

140 Tom Bradby (@tombradby), Tweet on 30 May 2017: <https://twitter.com/tombradby/status/869780244403761152> [accessed 20 March 2018]

141 Q 43 (Deborah Mattinson)

Training for journalists

129. We support the move to give voting intention polls less prominence in election coverage, and to focus more on policy issues. However, as the electorate in the UK is so accustomed to voting intention polling, it is unlikely that the demand for reports on such polls will reduce significantly in the near future. The key is therefore to provide journalists with appropriate training and support so that they can report on polls accurately.
130. While virtually all witnesses agreed that more support and guidance for journalists would be beneficial, it was less clear who should take the lead on this.
131. There are already various sources of guidance on the reporting of polls. The BPC has sponsored a number of events on the conduct of polls, often in collaboration with the National Centre for Research Methods at the University of Southampton, in order to enable the public, including journalists, “to come to an informed view about the conduct and effectiveness of polling as it is currently practised.”¹⁴² The BPC has also published a ‘Journalist’s Guide to Opinion Polls’ on its website¹⁴³ (reproduced in Appendix 6 of this report). The Journalist’s Guide provides useful guidance on what makes a poll “scientific”, including details about the selection of respondents and the sampling methods used. The Guide also contains a list of questions which journalists should consider when deciding whether to report on a poll. It does not, however, provide a strict definition of what constitutes a poll.
132. Jane Frost CBE, Chief Executive Officer of the Market Research Society (MRS), told us that the MRS also worked with the Royal Statistical Society and other bodies to provide guidance to the media on reporting of polls.¹⁴⁴ The Royal Statistical Society thought that there had been improvements in the reporting of polls since the 2015 General Election, though there were still some simple errors being made. The Society supported “the right training” for journalists, and suggested that: “If journalists had access to more comprehensive training, as well as better links with the statistics community, significant improvements could be made in their reporting of poll findings.”¹⁴⁵
133. The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) does not have any immediate plans to produce specific code-based guidance on the reporting of opinion polls, but said that it would “continue to monitor complaints and may develop such information in the future.” It also said that it would support the development of broader guidance by other specialist bodies, as long as this did not conflict with, or cause confusion about, the application of the Editors’ Code of Practice. It also supported increasing the availability of training opportunities for journalists.¹⁴⁶
134. When asked whether the Independent Monitor for the Press (IMPRESS) would welcome more training for journalists in the use of polls, Jonathan Heawood, the Chief Executive Officer, said:

142 Written evidence from the British Polling Council (PPD0007)

143 British Polling Council, ‘A Journalist’s Guide to Opinion Polls’: <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/a-journalists-guide-to-opinion-polls/#q13> [accessed 20 March 2018]

144 Q 160 (Jane Frost CBE)

145 Written evidence from the Royal Statistical Society (PPD0022)

146 Written evidence from the Independent Press Standards Organisation (PPD0021)

“It is a very good point. It may sit within a wider issue about the reporting of statistics more generally—not just polls, but all sorts of statistics, which are notoriously difficult for people who are non-specialists to understand and communicate. We have already done a number of training modules for our members on aspects of our code of standards. This is the kind of issue we may well want to think about for the future.”¹⁴⁷

135. We also asked the Society of Editors the same question and Ian Murray, the Executive Director, said: “If you are asking me whether I think that there should be more training at local level in particular, and whether more thought should be given to it, obviously the answer is yes.”¹⁴⁸

136. Dr Lauderdale felt that academics should also play a role in helping the media to present information more accurately. He told us that:

“There is value in trying to help the members of the media who would like to present this information more accurately to do so by providing them models of how you would do it ... As academics, we have many things to do. We have many things to do in advance of elections, as people who study elections. I would certainly encourage my colleagues who know about polling to be engaged.”¹⁴⁹

137. **Recent high profile polling failures can be attributed to a range of methodological challenges, but this is not the whole picture. There are disturbing problems with the way in which voting intention polls are represented by the media. While British Polling Council members are now required to report whether a poll shows a statistically significant change since the previous poll, this information is not always included in media reports. The way in which voting intention polls are represented by the media is often misleading, with a particular tendency to over-emphasise small changes in party fortunes that are indistinguishable from sampling variability. This practice remains largely unchecked.**

138. **Although the British Polling Council rules require that details of methodological approaches are published, this is insufficient to combat poor reporting practice. This is particularly true of election coverage, where dramatic headlines may not represent the full results of the poll, or may only represent the narrative preferred by a particular editor, which may be misleading.**

139. *We welcome the efforts which the British Polling Council currently makes to inform journalists and others about polls, including its ‘Journalist’s Guide to Opinion Polls’ published on its website. We recommend that the Guide should be developed to include an authoritative definition of what constitutes a properly conducted poll (as opposed to a small unrepresentative survey), and a list of criteria which must be met for a survey to be recognised as a poll. We recognise that arriving at such a definition will be difficult, but believe that it is essential in order to deliver clarity to members of the public, journalists and others. Once developed, we hope that journalists will be able to use the definition when reporting on polls,*

147 [Q 114](#) (Jonathan Heawood)

148 [Q 97](#) (Ian Murray)

149 [Q 19](#) (Dr Benjamin Lauderdale)

and include in their reports a statement as to whether the particular survey met the BPC's definition of a poll.

140. *We also recommend that the British Polling Council should develop its 'Journalist's Guide to Opinion Polls' to include guidance on the types of information that should be included within articles that report on polls. This might include guidance on how to frame headlines to reflect accurately poll results, how to explain the margin of error, and possibly a health warning to remind readers that polls simply represent a snapshot in time, rather than necessarily being predictions of the future. When reporting on particular polls, journalists should be expected to note in their reports whether the organisation which conducted the poll is a member of the British Polling Council or not. To support transparency, journalists should also include in their articles a reference to the published poll.*
141. *Where relevant, the British Polling Council should make public any examples they find of particularly poor practices of media reporting on polls. The polling companies themselves should also be encouraged to state publicly where they think their polls have been misused or misreported.*
142. *The British Polling Council should also develop a programme of training opportunities for journalists on how to read, interpret and report on polling data. It would be helpful if this guidance could be produced as part of a collaborative approach in conjunction with the Market Research Society, IPSO, IMPRESS, the Society of Editors, Ofcom, the Royal Statistical Society and academics.*

CHAPTER 4: THE USE OF POLICY ISSUES POLLS

143. Although the core focus of our inquiry was on voting intention polls and their impact on the democratic process, we also encountered a further and important set of problems that are associated more closely with policy issues polls. While most professional polling organisations carry out polls using robust methodologies, many other polls are carried out on poor quality samples, using leading questions. From what we have seen, the most egregious examples of such practices do not attempt to estimate voting intention. They instead aim to measure opinion on political or social issues, with the intention of influencing political discourse. These policy issues polls can cover a wide variety of subjects, ranging from assisted dying, to views on the NHS or opinions on fox hunting.
144. Such polls are potentially of value in shaping the national debate on important issues. What people think on issues such as fox hunting is something which is of interest to policy-makers and politicians, although that is not to say that they necessarily have to be slaves to public opinion on such matters.
145. However, we have concerns about this type of polling, particularly polls which have been commissioned by campaigning institutions who have an interest in demonstrating that they have public opinion on their side. In such circumstances, there will always be a temptation to devise questions more likely to get more favourable answers. We have therefore considered policy issues polling of this nature as part of our inquiry.

Methods used by polling organisations

146. A variety of people and organisations commission polls and each will have their own aims and objectives. When the commissioner is a campaign group that advocates a certain policy position, inevitably they will be hoping that the results of that poll will show public support for their position. There is therefore a temptation for such commissioners to encourage polling companies to use leading questions that are designed to push poll respondents in a particular direction. This is understandable and it would be naïve to believe that this pressure does not exist.
147. However, it is the duty of responsible polling organisations to resist this pressure. Johnny Heald, Managing Director of ORB, noted: “If 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. At that point, any upstanding pollster will say, ‘You cannot ask that in that way’.”¹⁵⁰
148. Damian Lyons Lowe, Chief Executive of Survation, noted that the BPC’s rules on transparency meant that other polling organisations and experts could quickly check the ways in which a poll had been conducted and then “shoot it down” if it had been conducted inappropriately. He told us that it was therefore “a matter of professional reputation” to make sure that questions were framed neutrally. In his view: “Professional reputation is all that a company such as mine has. Where we make mistakes, or where a question has been misframed, it is easy for that to be subject to scrutiny. It is not good for business to be seen as a company that gets the campaign and exactly the result that it wants.” In his experience, he had found that when

150 [Q 149](#) (Johnny Heald)

his company had had to “push back” on question wording, it was “unusual for that not to be taken on board.”¹⁵¹

149. Nonetheless, we were concerned that there were some issues with the methodological approaches used in policy issues polling.

Methodological approaches

150. One of the areas of concern about policy issues polling is the representativeness of the samples used for such polls. In particular, we were concerned that polling on social issues can sometimes rely on small samples which are then claimed, dubiously, to be representative of a wider group.

151. A particular problem is where the overall sample is adequate, but the sizes of particular sub-sample groups are insufficient to allow any firm statistical conclusion to be drawn. For example, in 2005, a Faith Survey¹⁵² conducted by ICM Research for BBC News had 1,019 respondents. To report the findings of the survey, BBC News published an article with the headline “Britons ‘back Christian society’”.¹⁵³ The article claimed that “31% of Jews said they knew nothing about their own faith,” and also that “Jews were the least likely to attend services—just over half said they never went to a synagogue.” These conclusions correspond to the data values in the survey, but considering that only five of the 1,019 respondents were Jewish, it could be argued that this was not a reliable sample size to help understand common Jewish beliefs and practice in society. Anthony Wells, of YouGov and UKPollingReport, highlighted this particular survey in an article for Full Fact where he warned about the dangers of misreporting. He said:

“Pay particular caution to national polls that claim to say something about the views of ethnic or religious minorities. In a standard GB poll the number of ethnic minority respondents are too small to provide any meaningful findings. It is possible that they have deliberately oversampled these groups to get meaningful findings, but there have been several instances where news articles have been based on the extremely small religious or ethnic subsamples in normal polls.”¹⁵⁴

152. Differential response rates are also a serious problem. Some polls—for example those which require people to pay in order to take part—virtually ensure that there will be differential response rates which therefore cause bias in the results. However, they can sometimes be misused to make claims about the views of the population as a whole. Other, more subtle, biases can also creep in. For example, if a survey is sent to a group of people asking about a particular problem, understandably those who believe that this problem exists will be more likely to respond than those who do not.

153. We were concerned about the way in which small informal polls with unrepresentative samples could be reported on with the same significance as a more representative poll.

151 [Q 149](#) (Damian Lyons Lowe)

152 ICM, ‘Faith Survey Fieldwork’ (November 2005): http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/14_11_05_bbc_faith.pdf [accessed 20 March 2018]

153 ‘Britons ‘back Christian Society’’, *BBC News* (14 November 2005): <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4434096.stm> [accessed 20 March 2018]

154 Full Fact, ‘How not to report opinion polls: A guide from YouGov’s Anthony Wells (4 July 2012): <https://fullfact.org/news/how-not-report-opinion-polls-guide-yougovs-anthony-wells/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

154. David Jordan said that part of his job as Director of Editorial Policy and Standards at the BBC was to tell people that they could not make general statements about wider populations on the basis of smaller samples. He noted that:

“... all kinds of people have realised that they can try to generate headlines by carrying out surveys with self-selecting samples, particularly online. Essentially, they put up a question online and say, ‘Please respond’. They then publish the results as if it is a bona fide piece of polling.”¹⁵⁵

155. Ric Bailey, Chief Adviser, Politics at the BBC, made the point that it was not always inappropriate to report on small surveys, as long as they were put into the appropriate context. He told us:

“Surveys of MPs or chief constables are clearly a different animal from polls, but they are something that we also police pretty strictly, particularly if we are going to commission them ourselves. If it is a BBC survey, we have pretty high criteria for what it needs to achieve ... Obviously, when reporting other surveys, done by other people, we need to be really careful around the language, to make sure that we are not implying that something is more scientific than it is, and that we put due scepticism into the reporting of surveys of that sort.”¹⁵⁶

He also suggested that it was important to cover such surveys if they were informing the political debate:

“I would not say that you should not report that sort of thing at all, as it may well be part of a campaign. As long as you put it in the appropriate context and are clear about who has commissioned it and what its basis is, either online or by providing links, that is better than having some sort of prohibition that says, ‘We would never report that sort of survey’.”¹⁵⁷

156. The problems come, however, when such informal polls are not put into the appropriate context. In the case studies below we highlight examples of some of the methodological problems explained above. In each case, we have used the terminology quoted in the sources, but note that their uses of the terms ‘poll’ or ‘survey’ may not necessarily correspond to the working definitions we set out in Chapter 2 of this report.

*Case study: IPSO complaint upheld against the Daily Express*¹⁵⁸

157. On 26 July 2016, the Daily Express published an article headlined “98% say no to EU deal” in its print edition and “98 per cent say NO to EU deal: Forget talks with Brussels and quit NOW, urges new poll” in the online version. The print article reported that 98% of people who took part in a phone survey said that the decision to leave the EU should be enacted now, rather than after talks with Brussels. The online article referred to the poll as an “online poll” but it was otherwise substantively similar to the article that appeared in print.

155 Q 91 (David Jordan)

156 Q 91 (Ric Bailey)

157 *Ibid.*

158 The information contained in paragraphs 157 to 161 is taken from IPSO’s Decision, 07016–16 *McDonald v Daily Express* (January 2017): <https://www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=07016-16> [accessed 20 March 2018]

158. IPSO received a complaint from Tony McDonald who argued that the headline was misleading because it did not make clear that the 98% figure had come from a phone survey of Daily Express readers, rather than representing the view of the public at large. He also asserted that the sample in the survey must have been screened or tested in advance, and that a responsible poll would have ensured a representative sample.
159. The Daily Express denied that the article was misleading and said that the headline needed to be read with the text of the article, which made it clear that the result came from a phone survey. The survey question was “Should UK end all talk of deals and quit the EU now?” and was printed on the previous day’s edition of the newspaper. The newspaper explained that readers had to pay to register their response to the question. The online version of the article originally stated that the results came from an “online poll”, but this was later corrected.
160. Mr McDonald argued that the article was misleading because it did not say that participants in the survey had to pay to register their response and that, because of this, it was likely that only people with strong views would have responded. He also added that, in any event, the poll could not even claim to be representative of the newspaper’s readers, as only approximately 1% of its readership had participated.
161. IPSO’s Complaints Committee concluded that “the article gave the impression that it was reporting the significant results of a representative poll carried out by a third-party for the publication. In fact, the poll was conducted through a premium rate phonenumber, which allowed a self-selecting sample of the newspaper’s readers to express their views.” The Committee found that the newspaper had breached Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Editors’ Code of Conduct and ruled that the newspaper should publish an upheld adjudication.

Case study: Survey of members of the Royal College of Physicians

162. On 26 February 2012, The Observer published an article headlined “Nine out of 10 members of Royal College of Physicians oppose NHS Bill”. The article was based on a poll which asked about the proposals contained within the Health and Social Care Bill (now the Health and Social Care Act 2012), introduced by the then Secretary of State for Health, the Rt Hon Andrew Lansley MP. The poll had apparently canvassed the views of members of the Royal College of Physicians (RCP), and the article stated that: “The findings, showing that 92.5% of RCP members want the health and social care bill withdrawn, have been passed to the *Observer* as the college prepares for an extraordinary general meeting on the reforms on Monday.”¹⁵⁹
163. However, further down the article, it became clear that the poll had not been conducted by a reputable polling company. Instead, the findings had come from an open-access survey conducted by callonyourcollege.blogspot.com, which the article described as “a website co-ordinating moves by anti-bill medics to persuade the royal colleges ... to reject Lansley’s plans”.¹⁶⁰

159 Denis Campbell and Toby Helm, ‘Nine out of 10 members of Royal College of Physicians oppose NHS Bill’, *The Observer* (26 February 2012): https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/feb/26/hospital-doctors-oppose-nhs-bill?CMP=tw_t_gu&guni=Article:in%20body%20link [accessed 20 March 2018]

160 *Ibid.*

164. Anthony Wells blogs about surveys which he describes as ‘voodoo polling’ and put this particular poll into this category. With regard to this poll, he said:

“The survey was open access, so there could have been no attempt at proper sampling and contained no demographic information that could have been used to weight it. It should go without saying that a survey from a website campaigning against the NHS reforms and co-ordinating opposition to it amongst the Medical Royal Colleges is more likely to be found and completed by [those] opposed to the bill ...

Any poll actually measuring the opinion of members of the RCP would have needed to randomly sample members, or at least contact members in a way that would not have introduced any skew in those likely to reply. For all we know this may have also shown overwhelming opposition—but we cannot judge that from an open-access survey liable to have obtained an extremely biased sample.”¹⁶¹

165. In this instance, the newspaper’s own Readers’ Editor acknowledged that the survey should not have been given such prominence. He said: “I’m not suggesting that the survey is invalid; we know opposition among hospital doctors is extremely high, but readers have a right to expect that things that we proclaim to be polls are properly conducted, using scientifically weighted samples of a population or group.” He added: “In this case, the poll was not conducted by a polling company, but by a group lobbying against a bill ... this should have sounded the first alarm bell.”¹⁶²

The use of polling results

166. Even where polls are conducted by reputable polling organisations and they have resisted pressure from poll commissioners, there is a potential for the results to be misrepresented accidentally, or manipulated to fit a predetermined agenda. Despite standards set by the BPC and MRS on how poll findings should be used in communications, and standards set by media regulators, we are aware that poll findings can be poorly communicated.
167. Anthony Wells noted that poor reporting of polls tended to be more common where journalists with little experience of polling wrote the stories. He also thought that media coverage tended to be poorer when “covering policy and political issues, particularly those commissioned by advocacy groups pushing a particular angle. Some newspapers will report such polls with findings that coincide with their own political viewpoint in a very uncritical manner.”¹⁶³

Two examples of inaccurate reporting of polls are outlined below.

161 ‘The Observer and Voodoo polling’, *UKPollingReport* (27 February 2012): <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/blog/archives/4891> [accessed 20 March 2018]

162 Stephen Pritchard, ‘The readers’ editor on ... when is a poll not a poll?’, *The Observer* (18 March 2012): <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2012/mar/18/observer-readers-editor-on-polls> [accessed 20 March 2018]

163 Written evidence from Anthony Wells ([PPD0015](#))

*Case study: IPSO complaint upheld against The Sun*¹⁶⁴

168. On 23 November 2015, The Sun published an article headlined “1 in 5 Brit Muslims’ sympathy for jihadis”. The article featured on the front page of the printed edition, with further coverage inside the newspaper, and was also published online. The article was based on the results of a poll commissioned by the newspaper from Survation, a member of the BPC.¹⁶⁵ The article reported that “nearly one in five British Muslims has some sympathy with those who had fled the UK to fight for IS in Syria.” A bar chart printed inside the paper showed that respondents to the poll were asked “which of the following statements is closest to your view”, and the results were that 5% of those surveyed had a lot of sympathy, 14% had some sympathy and 71% had no sympathy with “young Muslims who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria”.
169. IPSO received a large number of complaints about the coverage and formally accepted a complaint from Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) as the lead complainant. MEND argued that the newspaper’s presentation of the poll was misleading. The complainant noted that the question about sympathy had referenced those “who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria” but that the possible answers did not mention IS. The complainant’s argument was that people responding to the question might not have intended their answers to be understood as relating to those joining IS, or as demonstrating sympathy for jihadis. Furthermore, the question had asked about sympathy “with” those leaving the UK, not sympathy “for” them and their ideals.
170. The Sun denied breaching the Editors’ Code of Practice. It emphasised that it had not tried to sensationalise the information which it had obtained, and stressed that the coverage had included the wording of the questions in full. The newspaper argued that the meaning of the question was not ambiguous, and that it had been asked as part of a longer telephone survey which had taken the form of a discussion, and that a number of previous questions had made explicit reference to IS. The newspaper therefore considered that respondents would not have been in doubt about the question’s meaning.
171. Furthermore, The Sun argued that the question would have been understood by respondents as referring to IS because the overwhelming majority of those who left the UK to join fighters did join IS. It also said that the media narrative around such people had focussed on those joining IS. The newspaper argued that the term “jihadis” was commonly accepted to mean those pursuing their religious beliefs via a violent struggle, so it did not consider this to be an inaccurate description of young Muslims fighting in Syria in a conflict inspired by religion. Furthermore, the newspaper suggested that the sentiment of “sympathy” in the sense of sorrow or regret was still sympathy and that it considered sympathy with those who had elected to join an organisation such as IS was improper, regardless of the motivation.
172. IPSO’s Complaints Committee concluded that the newspaper article breached Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Editors’ Code of Conduct, which states that:

164 The information contained in paragraphs 168 to 174 is taken from IPSO’s Decision, *09324–15 Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) v The Sun*, 17 February 2016: <https://www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=09324-15> [accessed 20 March 2018]

165 ‘Islamic Identity & Community Relations Survey’, *Survation*, 20 November 2015: <http://survation.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Islamic-Identity-Community-Relations-Survey.pdf> [accessed 20 March 2018]

“i) The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information, including pictures.

ii) A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion once recognised must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence, and—where appropriate—an apology published.

(iii) The Press, whilst free to be partisan, must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact.”

173. In its Decision of 17 February 2016, IPSO’s Complaints Committee said:

“While the newspaper was entitled to interpret the poll’s findings, taken in its entirety, the coverage presented as a fact that the poll showed that 1 in 5 British Muslims had sympathy for those who left to join ISIS and for ISIS itself. In fact, neither the question nor the answers which referred to “sympathy” made reference to IS. The newspaper had failed to take appropriate care in its presentation of the poll results, and as a result the coverage was significantly misleading, in breach of Clause 1.”

Having upheld the complaint, IPSO required The Sun to publish an upheld adjudication.

174. IPSO was not the only body concerned about this poll. Jane Frost CBE, Chief Executive Officer of the MRS, told us that the MRS had also looked into this particular case. She told us that:

“We looked into the rather notorious *Sun* poll on Muslims, which was entirely inappropriate. We initiated disciplinary action against the member of MRS that was involved. During the inquiry, that member not only left the business but left the sector entirely. The issue was raised and dealt with in other matters.

In general, we get very good traction if we raise the handling and the reputation of research. We need to be vigilant and to ensure that editors and policymakers know that we are putting consistent attention on them. If we went away, it is very likely that matters would not come to a head.”¹⁶⁶

175. The polling company, Survation, defended its methodology but noted that it was not responsible for the way in which the poll’s findings had been interpreted. On its website, it said:

“Survation do not support or endorse the way in which this poll’s findings have been interpreted.

Neither the headline nor the body text of articles published were discussed with or approved by Survation prior to publication ...

Furthermore, Survation categorically objects to the use of any of our findings by any group, as has happened elsewhere on social networks, to incite racial or religious tensions.”¹⁶⁷

166 Q 160 (Jane Frost CBE)

167 Patrick Brione and Damian Lyons Lowe, ‘Statement on Survation’s Poll of Muslims for The Sun’, *Survation*: <http://survation.com/statement-on-survations-poll-of-muslims-for-the-sun/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

*Case study: Press Complaints Commission complaint resolved with the Daily Mirror*¹⁶⁸

176. On 20 July 2012, the Daily Mirror published an article which said that one in four young drivers had a crash in the first six months after passing their driving test. This article was based on a survey conducted by the AA in conjunction with Populus, a member of the British Polling Council.
177. Full Fact complained to the Press Complaints Commission (the predecessor to IPSO) to say that the newspaper had not reported on the survey accurately. Full Fact argued that the survey had in fact questioned drivers who had been involved in a crash, and that of the 18–24 year-olds polled, 23% had been involved in a crash within six months of passing their test. Given the discrepancy between the results of the survey and the message given in the article, Full Fact argued that the newspaper had breached Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Editors' Code of Conduct.
178. The complaint was resolved when the Press Complaints Commission negotiated the removal of the online article, and the publication of the following correction in print and online:

“In an article reporting on a survey by AA/Populus on page 37 on 20 July we said that 1 in 4 young drivers have a crash in the first six months after passing their driving test. We should have made it clear that the survey was of drivers who had been involved in a crash, and that 23% of the 18 to 24 year-olds polled had been involved in their first crash within 6 months of passing their test.”

Conclusion

179. While the case studies outlined above highlight articles for which the relevant newspapers or polling companies have been criticised or sanctioned, we believe that there are numerous other examples of such misuse or misreporting of policy issues polls, which are never complained about. We expect that many members of the public simply accept such reports as being true without questioning the methodology which lies behind them. Given that all of the possible 'regulators' involved in this area operate through a reactive, complaint-driven process, it is not surprising that such stories go unchallenged. This is an issue that we explore in more detail in Chapter 5.
180. We also acknowledge that it is not just the media that are guilty of misreporting, and that it is not a practice which is limited purely to polls. In particular, we note that the use of surveys and statistics by Government departments and political parties should not be immune from criticism. We did not seek specific examples of this from our witnesses, but evidence from the British Social Attitudes survey suggests that there are low levels of public confidence in the way the Government present official statistics, such as unemployment rates and crime levels. Its findings suggested that although four in five (78%) people with an opinion on official statistics believe that they are accurate,

¹⁶⁸ The information contained in paragraphs 176 to 178 is taken from the Press Complaints Commission's list of resolved cases. Complainant name 'Full Fact' / Publication 'Daily Mirror' (October 2012): <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cases/adjudicated.html?article=ODA0MQ==&type> [accessed 20 March 2018]

only 26% of those who gave an opinion trust the Government to present official statistics honestly when talking about its policies.¹⁶⁹

181. **Numerous polls are conducted every week which affect political discourse in the UK. In some cases, there is a failure by those who publicise such polls to communicate all of the relevant details about the selection and framing of questions to obtain a desired answer. We believe that most of these examples are deliberate attempts to manipulate polling findings, in order to distort evidence around public policy issues. We conclude that there is a case for the British Polling Council to play a greater role in proactively overseeing the conduct and reporting of polls.**
182. In the next Chapter, we outline the ways in which the British Polling Council might do this.

169 NatCen, 'Four in five trust official statistics, but not how they are presented by Government' (27 February 2017): <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/news-media/press-releases/2017/february/four-in-five-trust-official-statistics,-but-not-how-they-are-presented-by-government/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

CHAPTER 5: OVERSIGHT OF POLLING

183. In previous chapters we highlighted the fact that recent high profile polling failures have dented confidence in the industry, that polling is getting harder to do, and that there are incidences of misleading reporting in the media that are undermining the efforts of responsible polling organisations. Therefore we examined the current system of oversight for polling to judge whether its mechanisms were adequate to meet the challenges associated with polling now and in the future.
184. This Chapter focuses on the extent and limitations of current supervisory arrangements for polling, and the arguments for and against further regulation.

Current oversight of polling

185. The Representation of the People Act 1983 prohibits, before the poll for an election has closed, the publication of the following:
- “(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.”¹⁷⁰
186. Aside from these provisions, there is no legal regulation of polling in the UK. Instead, most of the polling organisations belong to one or both of two industry bodies which require them to comply with their codes of conduct: the British Polling Council (BPC) and the Market Research Society (MRS).

British Polling Council

187. The BPC describes itself as “an association of polling organisations that publish polls.”¹⁷¹ Membership of the BPC is voluntary and is open to “any organisation that conducts for multiple clients polls or surveys designed to ascertain the views of a representative sample of a specified population, such as all voters in Great Britain.” The BPC described its activities as forming the “current system of self-regulation” for the polling industry.¹⁷²
188. Self-regulation is described by the National Audit Office in the following terms:
- “An industry or a profession can self-regulate, for example through the use of codes of conduct, customer charters, standards or accreditation. In many cases rules and codes of conduct will be formulated by a trade association, or other industry representative under their own initiative. In other cases, an industry or profession self-regulate in response to delivering a stated government objective. In self-regulation, the industry is solely responsible for monitoring and enforcing members’ compliance.

170 Representation of the People Act 1983, [section 66A](#)

171 British Polling Council, ‘About the BPC’: <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

172 Written evidence from the British Polling Council ([PPD0007](#))

This enforcement can be achieved either first hand or through other bodies set up by the industry.”¹⁷³

The BPC broadly meets this definition—its first stated objective is to “promote transparency in the publication of polls.” It told us that it does this by “providing and enforcing a detailed specification of the information that should routinely be made available whenever a poll is published”.¹⁷⁴

189. In August 2017, the BPC told us that it had 16 companies registered as members, including all of the UK-based organisations that conduct polls of voting intention across the UK, with the exception of Lord Ashcroft Polls. The BPC is run by a team of three officers: a President, a Secretary/Treasurer, and a Committee Member. By convention, the President is someone not currently involved in commercial polling and who thus can act as a neutral chair. All three perform their duties in a voluntary capacity. The BPC also maintains a Committee of Disclosure, which can be required to make judgements as part of the BPC’s complaints procedure, and which consists of a mixture of those working in polling organisations, journalists, and academics.¹⁷⁵
190. Members of the BPC are required to abide by the Council’s rules on disclosure (which apply to all polls and surveys conducted, not just voting intention polls) and to publish a range of information at publication of a poll (as outlined in paragraphs 113 and 114 of this report). The rules of disclosure are aimed at facilitating transparency—providing the information necessary to allow anyone to evaluate whether a poll and its claims are robust. The BPC can investigate complaints against member companies in respect of its rules of disclosure and has the power to suspend or expel the organisation from the BPC. However, this enforcement power has not been used extensively. The BPC told us that:

“During the last five years, the council has received under this procedure only four complaints that fell within its remit. Of these, two concerned polls that the member incorrectly thought were not covered by the BPC’s rules, and one involved an administrative error by the member. In all four cases the complaint was either partially or wholly upheld by the officers and each time the member organisation made the relevant data available immediately. Since the BPC was established 13 years ago, an investigating sub-committee has only had to be convened on one occasion since the BPC was established; it upheld the initial judgement of the officers that the details of a poll should be released and the member company duly complied.”¹⁷⁶

191. The BPC told us that it does not (and practically, cannot) express a view on “the merits or otherwise of a particular poll.” It was clear that this constraint was perceived as being due to limited resources, as the BPC stated that “it lacks the financial resource to sustain any legal action to which any such expression might give rise.”¹⁷⁷ Professor Sir John Curtice, President of the BPC, told us:

173 National Audit Office, *Using alternatives to regulation to achieve policy objectives* (June 2014) p 15: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Using-alternatives-to-regulation-to-achieve-policy-objectives1.pdf> [accessed 20 March 2018]

174 Written evidence from the British Polling Council ([PPD0007](#))

175 *Ibid.*

176 *Ibid.*

177 *Ibid.*

“There is undoubtedly one constraint on what the British Polling Council can do. This is not an organisation with thousands of pounds of resources. It has a few thousand quid. One of the simple reasons why we as a council are not in a position to say, ‘This poll is good. This poll is bad’, is that we cannot afford to fight a court case brought by a company that says it is bad.”¹⁷⁸

192. We also noted that the BPC’s stipulations around transparency of funding only extended to printing the name of the client commissioning the survey, rather than requiring the publication of the source of funding which might lie behind the commissioner of the poll. When asked whether information on who commissioned and financed the polls was readily available, Professor Susan Banducci, Professor and Director of the Exeter Q-Step Centre at the University of Exeter, said:

“I have to say no. That information could be improved, and it might improve public understanding of polls. Of course, it relies on journalists reporting on and investigating those sorts of questions. It is an area where there can be greater transparency about who is commissioning polls and who is paying for them.”¹⁷⁹

Market Research Society

193. Standards for the industry are also set by the MRS, of which the major polling companies are also members. The MRS “promotes, develops, supports and regulates standards and innovation across market, opinion and social research and data analytics.”¹⁸⁰ Its standards for the research sector are contained in its Code of Conduct, which covers commissioning and design, client confidentiality, informed consent, participant anonymity, data collection, analysis and reporting of findings, and data security.
194. The MRS stated that its Code “supports those engaged in market, opinion and social research in maintaining professional standards and reassures the general public that research is carried out in a professional and ethical manner.” MRS accredited individuals and organisations must comply with the Code and its associated disciplinary and complaint mechanisms.¹⁸¹
195. Under the MRS Disciplinary Regulations, if a member is found to have breached the Code, a number of disciplinary actions can be recommended, including giving a warning or reprimand, requiring a member to give a written undertaking to refrain from continuing or repeating the unprofessional conduct in question, or ultimately suspending or expelling a member from the MRS.¹⁸² Jane Frost CBE, Chief Executive Officer of the MRS, confirmed that the MRS had not yet had cause to expel a company, but that it had found against companies and had had cause to amend its regulations:

“We have not expelled a company. This year we had an issue on which we found against someone. We have only two a year that go to that length. As a result of the way in which previous inquiries were conducted, we have changed our regulations to ensure that nobody can resign before a

178 Q 146 (Professor John Curtice)

179 Q 24 (Professor Susan Banducci)

180 Written evidence from the Market Research Society (PPD0010)

181 *Ibid.*

182 Market Research Society, MRS Disciplinary Regulations 2017 (June 2017): <https://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/MRS%20Disciplinary%20Regulations%2014.06.2017.pdf> [accessed 20 March 2018]

finding is made against them. They will get an automatic finding against them, which they will carry with them. They cannot resign and get away with it.”¹⁸³

196. Jane Frost told us that around 80% of research companies were accredited through its system.¹⁸⁴ She also confirmed that the MRS worked closely with the BPC, ensuring they were always in contact “whenever there is a big occasion that is likely to generate interest.”¹⁸⁵
197. While we were in no doubt that the MRS’s regulatory coverage is extensive, Jane Frost highlighted that not all of the polling organisations that were members of the BPC were covered by the MRS as well: “Most of the members of the British Polling Council—all except three—are accredited by us or include accredited members. We have about 530 accredited companies. The BPC is much smaller”. Given that not all companies are members of both organisations, some polling organisations could therefore be adhering to different standards. When asked whether polling, in particular that done during a General Election, needed more careful monitoring than other surveys, Jane Frost replied:

“Yes, I think that the issue has to be handled properly. Having two organisations for this one area may not be optimal, but the fact that 95% of the area is covered by our wider regulations means that a lot of pollsters have been under regulation and training for lots of issues for a lot of time. Therefore, they are very experienced and well aware of what the rules are.”¹⁸⁶

Media regulators

198. Different sectors of the media are regulated in different ways. Traditional print media is self-regulated. Most national newspapers are members of the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), though some instead choose to regulate themselves (for example, the Guardian has a Readers’ Editor which considers complaints and a review panel which considers appeals). Other publications may be members of the Independent Monitor for the Press (IMPRESS). By contrast, broadcasters are statutorily regulated by the Office of Communications (Ofcom). In the digital sphere, there is a wide variety of outlets which publish what purports to be news. These range from the online arms of reputable sources, such as the BBC News and Sky News websites, to small digital-only platforms, for which there is minimal regulation. While each of the regulatory bodies outlined above produces guidance on fair and accurate reporting, individual media outlets may also have their own codes of conduct on the reporting of polls. This means that there are a variety of codes and guidance which might be relevant in relation to the reporting of polls, and a number of different places towards which complaints might be directed when polls are misreported.

Newspaper regulators

199. As the media’s reporting of polling was a key concern for this inquiry, we considered the role of the press regulators. We took evidence from both IPSO and IMPRESS.

183 [Q 158](#) (Jane Frost)

184 [Q 155](#) (Jane Frost)

185 *Ibid.*

186 [Q 159](#) (Jane Frost)

200. IPSO is a regulator for the newspaper and magazine industry in the UK. It is paid for by its members but carries out its work independently from them. IPSO provides a free-to-use complaints service regarding possible breaches of its Editors' Code of Practice. Adjudications are made by IPSO's Complaints Committee, a panel of twelve with expertise in journalism and a lay majority. If a complaint is upheld, the Committee can require publications to publish a correction or its adjudication, of which it can determine the nature and placement. IPSO told us that it also monitors complaints for thematic issues (such as the misrepresentation of statistics) and works with publishers to improve their compliance with the Code.¹⁸⁷
201. IPSO's Editors' Code of Practice sets out the rules that newspapers and magazines regulated by IPSO have agreed to follow. The Code's Clause 1 has the most relevance for the reporting of polling, as it sets out requirements for journalists to ensure the accuracy of their reporting and to correct inaccurate information promptly with appropriate prominence. This includes considerations such as whether the data are presented in the proper context or whether basic information about methodology has been published.¹⁸⁸
202. IMPRESS is an independent press regulator, established by press reform campaigners, that is recognised by the Press Recognition Panel (the body established by Royal Charter as a result of the Leveson Inquiry into press standards). Up until 24 July 2017, IMPRESS used the Editors' Code of Practice, before switching to its own Standards Code. The Standards Code has a clause on accuracy and IMPRESS can accept complaints up to 12 months from the date of the publication or act complained of. If a complaint is upheld, IMPRESS can impose fines of up to 1% of a publisher's annual turnover, up to a maximum of £1 million; order corrections; and order apologies.¹⁸⁹
203. We recognise that press regulation is still a controversial topic and that many people believe that the current system of press self-regulation is not strong enough. Both regulators operate via a complaint-driven approach. Matt Tee, Chief Executive of IPSO, told us that it did "not receive a lot of complaints about the coverage of political polling."¹⁹⁰ Similarly Jonathan Heawood, Chief Executive Officer of IMPRESS, told us that they had not received any complaints relating to polling.¹⁹¹ We did not find this reassuring as, given the complexity of polling methodology, members of the public may not be sufficiently well informed to question whether polling findings, data and methodological details are reported accurately. However, as we noted in paragraphs 133 and 134, both IPSO and IMPRESS were supportive of the idea of further training for journalists on the reporting of polling, which could help to improve broader understanding of what polling findings mean and how they should be presented accurately.

Broadcaster regulator

204. In the UK, Ofcom's Code requires broadcasters to refrain from publishing the results of any polls on election day itself, until the voting period for the

187 Written evidence from the Independent Press Standards Organisation (PPD0021)

188 *Ibid.*

189 IMPRESS, 'Complaints FAQ': <http://impress.press/complaints/complaints-faq.html> [accessed 20 March 2018]

190 Q 77 (Matt Tee)

191 Q 111 (Jonathan Heawood)

election or referendum closes. It also requires that broadcasters preserve impartiality in their coverage of elections.¹⁹²

Digital media

205. When it comes to digital media, the Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP, then the Minister for Digital, said:

“Whereas, historically, we had a highly regulated broadcast sector and a self-regulated press, we now have a highly regulated broadcast sector and, essentially, a self-regulated press, with a small part under Impress with the royal charter, but mostly self-regulated through IPSO, and then huge, vibrant and largely unregulated social media.

The analysis of that is difficult, because there is a mix between the three. You have only to follow the BBC news on Twitter to be engaging in two. If you watch a video on the *Telegraph* feed on Facebook, you are looking across all three. The separate forms of regulation in the two that have a regulatory structure have grown up separately.”¹⁹³

The overall landscape

206. Together with the BPC and the MRS, the press and broadcaster regulators make up the broad supervisory framework, such as it is, that currently governs polling.

207. During the course of the inquiry, the Government made it clear that it did not see the regulation of the polling industry as an issue for the state. Chris Skidmore MP, then Minister for the Constitution, told us that “polling methods and their impact on accuracy is a technical area, which is primarily a matter of debate for academics rather than Government.” He added: “We have no plans for intervention in the private polling industry and no current view, for example, on questions of minimum standards required to operate in the polling industry.”¹⁹⁴

208. Matt Hancock felt that it was not for Government to interfere in media reporting either. In his view, “saying that newspapers make something of an opinion poll and that newspapers have a political view is a perfectly reasonable complaint, but if you ask what the government action is it is hard to see it. I believe in a free press, and politics is robust.”¹⁹⁵

209. One of the important considerations for this Committee was whether more formal—in particular statutory—regulation would offer a more appropriate system of governance. To help answer this question, we looked at the example of France, which does have a system of statutory regulation for polling.

International comparison: France—Commission des Sondages

210. In France the Commission des Sondages is an independent body tasked with reviewing published opinion polls to ensure that companies use a reputable methodology and that the publication of results conforms to existing

192 Ofcom, *The Ofcom Broadcasting Code, Section six: Elections and referendums* (3 April 2017): <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code/section-six-elections-referendums> [accessed 20 March 2018]

193 [Q 172](#) (Matt Hancock MP)

194 Written evidence from the Cabinet Office ([PPD0028](#))

195 [Q 176](#) (Matt Hancock MP)

regulations.¹⁹⁶ It is a statutory body funded from State funds, through the French Ministry of Justice. The Commission des Sondages comprises members of the *Conseil d'État* (Council of State), the *Cour de cassation* (Court of Cassation) and the *Cour des comptes* (Court of Auditors), overseen by a president, who is elected by other members of the Commission.¹⁹⁷

211. The Commission des Sondages said that its main function is “to ensure that polls on the electoral debate which are made public are not tainted by any methodological error or manipulation which may affect the fairness of the election to which they relate.” The Commission does not set the methodological approaches that polling organisations should take, rather: “The Commission merely satisfies itself that those methods are not inherently biased, and that the samples are sufficiently numerous and representative. It also satisfies itself as to the traceability of the methods used.”¹⁹⁸
212. The Commission des Sondages told us that its main power is to issue notices—known as *mises au point* (clarifications)—in the press when it feels that a poll does not meet an acceptable standard. The Commission said that: “Sometimes, a *mise au point* might lead the concerned polling organisation, or the director of the study, to leave the poll sector. It might also lead the media to terminate contracts with targeted polling organisations.” The Commission told us that it had issued 7 *mises au point* in the 2012 presidential election but none in 2017.¹⁹⁹
213. Despite the fact that the Commission des Sondages is a statutory body, it was not clear that this meant it necessarily provided a stricter system of oversight than exists in the UK. Professor Nicolas Sauger, Professor of Political Science at the Sciences Po in Paris, expressed a degree of scepticism about the Commission and suggested that the Commission’s approach was not very “rigid” and “less effective than we might wish in monitoring surveys in France.”²⁰⁰
214. Professor Sauger informed the Committee:
- “There is no survey specialist within the commission itself. In fact, most members of the commission are either professors of law or members of the highest court of justice in France, the *Conseil d'État*. They are not specialists in surveys. They are specialists in two major things. One is conflict of interest, so that regulations about how to commission a survey are clear enough. For instance, we cannot use surveys commissioned by private persons from a party as public results, if that was not the intention in the first place. The second is political appraisal of whether it is good or bad to have this kind of practice. The commission then gets experts—mostly from the public statistics institute, the INSEE—to provide reports on any cases that are seen as potentially problematic.”²⁰¹
215. Although the Commission des Sondages was a useful example for our inquiry, it did not convince us that statutory regulation based on this model

196 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, France, Presidential and Parliamentary Elections 2017* (11 April 2017): <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/france/337346?download=true> [accessed 20 March 2018]

197 Written evidence from the Commission des Sondages ([PPD0027](#))

198 *Ibid.*

199 *Ibid.*

200 [Q 106](#) (Professor Nicolas Sauger)

201 *Ibid.*

offered any distinct advantages for the UK. It appeared that its powers were not extensive in practice.

The case for action on regulation

216. The concerns outlined in the preceding chapters—the incidence of inaccurate polling, the poor reporting of polling findings and the potential impact of this on the democratic process—mean that different regulatory arrangements should be considered.
217. In terms of the general oversight of polling in its totality, the evidence we received was consistent in its rejection of introducing statutory regulation. There were a variety of reasons for this, including the need to protect freedom of speech and the desirability of ensuring that polling information is available as freely and transparently as other types of information.
218. It was also argued by a number of professional witnesses that there is a diversity of methodological approaches within the industry and that statutory regulation of polling would be likely to stifle methodological experimentation and innovation.²⁰²
219. Respondents were generally supportive of the system of self-regulation provided by the BPC,²⁰³ with Dr Lauderdale arguing that the “UK polling industry is more transparent regarding methodology, and methodology changes, than the industry elsewhere, precisely because of the BPC’s disclosure rules.”²⁰⁴
220. Given the evidence received, our broad observations are that:
- The present framework for the oversight of polling is characterised by voluntary membership and adherence to voluntary codes of practice, reliant on a complaint-driven system. This means it has limited disciplinary strength.
 - Experts, academics and the industry itself have told us that conventional polling is getting harder to do and there is a growing mistrust of polling amongst the public and the media.
 - It is clear that polls continue to influence debates within political parties, within the media and amongst the general public.
 - Greater transparency is required regarding the sources of funding which lie behind polls.

The Committee is therefore convinced of the need for further action in order to ensure that polls of all types (not just voting intention polls) are monitored more effectively.

221. We had concerns about the financing of polls. The BPC demands a considerable level of transparency on the methodological approaches, and also requires reports of poll findings to include details of the client who commissioned the poll. However, this requirement does not stretch to full

202 Written evidence from ComRes, Opinium, Ipsos MORI, Panelbase, LucidTalk, ORB International, BMG Research and Survation ([PPD0014](#))

203 [Q 36](#) (Professor Jane Green); [Q 47](#) (Will Moy); Written evidence from Professor Alisa Henderson ([PPD0012](#))

204 Written evidence from Dr Benjamin Lauderdale ([PPD0002](#))

transparency on all the sources of finance which might lie behind the client who acts as the commissioner of a poll. Furthermore, these rules do not apply when polls are conducted by non-BPC members, such as those conducted by unregulated online polling companies.

222. We recognise that this is not a problem which is limited to the polling industry. In fact, the challenge of identifying who pays for what, particularly with regard to political advertising, is one of the big issues facing the digital world at the moment (an issue which we touch upon in Chapter 6). This is not an issue which we have been able to consider in depth and more attention should be given to these matters. Nevertheless, as polls form an important part of the political information that is available to the public over the course of an election campaign, we consider it very important to ensure there is as much transparency as possible about all financial transactions which lie behind published polls.
223. We therefore considered whether the Electoral Commission could extend its remit to play a specific role in overseeing voting intention polls during campaign periods.

The Electoral Commission

224. The Electoral Commission was established by the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. Its objectives are to ensure:
- well-run elections, referendums and electoral registration, and
 - transparency in party and election finance, with high levels of compliance.²⁰⁵
225. The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 sets out the rules which apply to candidates, political parties and non-party campaigners, including rules on how much can be spent on campaigning during certain election campaigns and rules which provide transparency about the sources of funding and spending by campaigners at elections. As part of its role as a regulator of political party finances, the Electoral Commission provides advice and guidance for political parties and other groups and individuals on how to comply with these rules within the ‘regulated period’.²⁰⁶
226. As we noted in Chapter 2, with respect to polling, spending on polling is only regulated under electoral law if it is undertaken and used for the purpose of promoting electoral success for a political party, parties or candidates, or for promoting a referendum outcome. If it falls within this category, registered campaigners must include the spending details for such polls as part of their spending returns submitted to the Electoral Commission.
227. We asked the Electoral Commission whether it might be able to take on a greater regulatory role relating to polling. Claire Bassett, Chief Executive of the Electoral Commission, said:

“There are two things. First, we have general powers to make recommendations and to look forward, but we also have very specific

205 The Electoral Commission, ‘Roles and responsibilities’: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/our-work/roles-and-responsibilities>

206 The Electoral Commission, ‘Our role as regulator of political party finances’: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/our-work/roles-and-responsibilities/our-role-as-regulator-of-political-party-finances>

regulatory powers. Those specific powers are focused almost entirely on campaigning, parties and money. That is where our expertise sits. Our infrastructure is set up to deliver that. The regulation of polling would require quite a different set-up. Although it would be practically feasible, it would be about creating a new bit within the Electoral Commission to do that, rather than building on the particular skills that we have.

I touched on the other point earlier. We are very wary of getting involved in the content of campaigning, or getting anywhere near being a truth commission. That is not what Parliament intended us to be. It would make our regulatory activity in relation to parties very difficult if we were also opining on the content of their campaigning; it would create a conflict. That would be the biggest risk. That would need to be taken seriously into consideration if Parliament was thinking of this.”²⁰⁷

A co-ordinated approach

228. Given these considerations, we believe that there needs to be a co-ordinated approach to the oversight of polling, which takes into account the variety of challenges it poses and the number of stakeholders it affects.
229. First, we recognise the high levels of respect within the industry for the work of the BPC. We note that self-regulatory models, in which fee-based membership societies are also the bodies overseeing the industry, can sometimes be accused of having a conflict of interest. However, we have seen no evidence of this in the case of the BPC. We are of the view that the BPC’s disciplinary and oversight powers are too limited and, in the light of the serious concerns we have about the oversight of polling, we consider that its remit should be expanded to take on a greater oversight role. Together, the BPC and the MRS should continue to be the bodies which are responsible for setting the standards for the polling industry and for monitoring their compliance.
230. Secondly, media regulators and self-regulators need to step up to the plate by taking a stronger approach towards monitoring the reporting of polling, assisted by the BPC and the MRS. When the BPC and MRS identify instances of bad reporting of polling, IPSO, IMPRESS and Ofcom need to ensure that these are investigated and dealt with quickly through their existing regulatory systems.
231. Thirdly, we believe that steps need to be taken to ensure that the sources of funding for polls conducted in the run-up to elections are made known publicly as transparently as possible. We recognise that there are commercial sensitivities to consider and do not, therefore, suggest that the actual costs of polls need always be disclosed. We also recognise the Electoral Commission’s reservations about becoming an arbiter of truth. However, we believe that the Electoral Commission should play a greater role in overseeing the publication of voting intention polls during the ‘regulated period’ in the run-up to elections. This should involve a requirement that all published voting intention polls be declared to the Electoral Commission, which should then publish the sources of funding for such polls.

232. We therefore recommend the following steps which we believe should lead to a strengthened, more co-ordinated approach towards oversight of the polling industry.
233. **The different bodies involved in the oversight of polling need to respond to the challenges involved in the polling of the modern electorate, and to the misreporting and misrepresentation of polls. There are limitations in the current system of self-regulation for polling, and clear areas where the system could be strengthened.**
234. *We recommend that the remit of the British Polling Council should be expanded to take on a more substantial oversight function. The British Polling Council should adopt a collaborative approach, involving both industry and independent representation. In taking on this expanded role, it will clearly need to work closely with other regulatory stakeholders in this area, including the MRS, IPSO, IMPRESS, the Society of Editors and Ofcom. Some of the functions of the newly-expanded British Polling Council should include:*
- *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.*
 - *Ensuring that its members declare not just the client commissioning the poll, but the full details of all sources of funding for polling (excluding actual costs).*
 - *Conducting a post-election review of the conduct of the polling industry after every General Election and referendum, and publishing its findings.*
 - *Co-ordinating a programme of training opportunities for journalists on how to read, interpret and report on polling data.*
 - *Developing its guidance for journalists on best practice for the reporting of political polls.*
 - *Providing specific advice to the media on how to report on particular polls. This advice could be made public in certain cases.*
 - *Proactively reviewing selected samples of media coverage of polls on an annual basis, in order to monitor standards of media reporting. This should include analysis of print media, broadcaster coverage and digital media, and analysis of polls in general, not just those conducted by its members.*
 - *Continuing to run an effective complaints procedure, with speedy investigations of complaints.*
235. *It is often difficult for members of the public to recognise when polling results have been taken out of context or misreported, so it*

is not enough to simply wait for complaints to be made. We therefore recommend that the BPC and MRS should identify and report instances of bad reporting of polling (whether or not the polls have been conducted by their members) and draw them to the attention of IPSO, IMPRESS or Ofcom as appropriate. Such cases should then be investigated and dealt with quickly through the existing regulatory systems for the media.

236. *In order to ensure transparency around voting intention polling in the run-up to elections, we also recommend that the Electoral Commission should take on an enhanced role in monitoring voting intention polling conducted and published during the regulated periods which precede UK elections. In particular, there should be a requirement for the details of all published voting intention polls to be declared to the Electoral Commission, regardless of who the poll was commissioned by, what its purpose was, or how much it cost. The details of all the sources of funding for such polls should then be published by the Electoral Commission, although we recognise that, in order to protect commercial confidentiality, the actual sums of money involved need not be made public. We acknowledge that this will require an extension of the Electoral Commission's existing remit and recommend that action is taken to achieve this.*
237. We realise that expanding the Electoral Commission's role in this way would extend their involvement in the electoral process, but believe that this would be a proportionate response to the issues we have identified above. We do not envisage its role competing with that of the BPC. Instead, we hope that all the relevant bodies would be able to work together and take co-ordinated action to ensure that polls are used to benefit the democratic process, rather than to undermine it. For example, if the BPC identified a voting intention poll which had not been declared to the Electoral Commission, it should proactively flag this up to the Electoral Commission for investigation. Likewise, if the Electoral Commission identified a poll which it suspected of being conducted in a misleading way, it could flag it up to the British Polling Council for detailed examination.
238. Furthermore, we recognise that expanding the role and remit of the British Polling Council will require significant additional resources and funding. Part of this additional funding may need to be generated through increased subscription costs for its members. However, we hope that by expanding its remit, the British Polling Council will become the one, clearly identifiable body that can be trusted to ensure standards of accuracy in relation to polls. Any media sources which report on polls would be able to check the accuracy of its sources with the British Polling Council. In turn, the BPC and the MRS could highlight particular concerns about particular polls to either the media regulators, or the Electoral Commission, as appropriate.
239. If the co-ordinated approach we outline above does not prove to be successful, it is likely that politicians and others will return to this issue in order to reassess whether statutory regulation is required instead.

Banning of polling

240. We also considered whether the publication of polls should be banned for specified periods in the run-up to election days.

241. Many countries restrict the publication of the results of polls during the period leading up to an election. Within the EU, 16 out of 28 countries have a ban on the publication of opinion polls, ranging from one day before the election (such as in France) to 15 days (Italy) to one month prior to voting (Luxembourg).²⁰⁸
242. It would also be possible to ban the carrying out of opinion polls in the run-up to elections, rather than just their publication.
243. There were some arguments for the introduction of a ban on polls. The main reason given was that it would allow voters the space to make their decision without undue influence from polls. Professor Sauger suggested that, in the absence of polls: “The assumption is that people have to think about the election, without any interference from anyone.”²⁰⁹ Restrictions on the publication of polls could also limit the focus on the ‘horse race’ and enable a greater emphasis on discussion of policy issues.²¹⁰ Finally, a clear advantage of restricting the publication of polls would be that it would limit the risk of incorrect poll estimates affecting voters’ choices in elections.
244. The banning of polling is, nonetheless, a controversial approach. In many of the countries that have implemented a ban on polling, legal challenges in recent years have reduced the time period over which the ban applies.²¹¹ Bans have been reduced due to concerns around protecting freedom of expression, and specifically the electorate’s right to receive and communicate information.²¹² For example, in Canada, a Supreme Court decision reduced the previous 72 hour ban on the publication of opinion survey results prior to elections, to 24 hours. The Court claimed that the 72 hour ban violated freedom of expression as protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and could not be justified as necessary to protect the integrity of the electoral process.²¹³
245. It is sometimes assumed, by proponents of a ban, that a ban on polling would mean that voters would make electoral choices on the basis of normatively superior criteria, such as policy issues and the quality of candidates. However, it is also maintained that voters will still rely on expectations about the likely outcome of the election and that, in the absence of polls, the accuracy of their expectations will be even worse.
246. That a ban on polling would be a threat to freedom of expression was, in fact, the most prevalent argument we heard against the banning of polling. Several witnesses suggested that banning polls or their publication would be undemocratic and that it would restrict useful information for the public, or risk creating inequalities in access to information. The difficulties of social media were also frequently cited, with many witnesses pointing out that the

208 Information taken from Houses of the Oireachtas Library and Research Service note No. 1 2009, *Spotlight: Political Opinion Polls* (2009), p 16: https://oireachtas.ie/parliament/media/housesoftheoireachtas/libraryresearch/Polling_web.pdf [accessed 20 March 2018]

209 Q 102 (Professor Nicolas Sauger)

210 David Cowling, ‘Should polling be banned before and election?’, *BBC News* (20 January 2016): <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-35350419> [accessed 20 March 2018]

211 The Electoral Knowledge Network, Ace Project, ‘Media and Elections’: <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/me/mea/mec03c> [accessed 20 March 2018]

212 Article 19, ‘Comparative Study of Law and Regulations Restricting the Publication of Electoral Opinion Polls’, January 2003: <https://www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/publications/opinion-polls-paper.pdf> [accessed 20 March 2018]

213 *Ibid.*

advance of social and other online media would render entirely nugatory any attempt to ban the publication of polls.

247. Critics cited concerns that the banning of polls might create a black market for polls conducted by actors outside the jurisdiction of the country in question. The World Association for Public Opinion Research claimed that a ban in the UK could create a black market with polls being conducted outside the UK and “no guarantee of the polling companies’ competence or even the provenance of the poll.”²¹⁴ There is evidence that this does happen. In France it is apparently common for francophone Swiss and Belgian media with websites available in France to start reporting the results of election day exit polls well before the ban is lifted.²¹⁵ In the most recent presidential elections in France, “Polls show French backing Macron”, was reported by the Associated Press, at a time when millions had yet to cast their votes. This was based on multiple polls cited by the Swiss newspaper *La Tribune de Geneve* and Belgium’s *RTBF* and *Le Soir*.²¹⁶ A ban on polls in the UK might result in the publication of polls on the websites of Irish or French newspapers and their results would soon be disseminated via social media and other channels.
248. **We are not convinced of the case for introducing a ban on the undertaking and publication of voting intention polls in the run-up to elections. In the future, if polls continue to be a poor predictor of the eventual outcomes of elections, and if the media reporting of such polls continues to influence public and political discourse in a misleading way, then arguments by supporters of a ban would be strengthened.**

214 Written evidence from WAPOR (PPD0006)

215 ‘Belgian, Swiss media circulate report Macron leads French vote’, *Reuters* (23 April 2017): <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-election-belgium/belgian-swiss-media-circulate-reports-macron-leads-french-vote-idUSKBN17P0O5> [accessed 20 March 2018]

216 Caoilfhionn Gallagher QC and Jonathan Price, ‘Breaking the election silence: cross-border reporting of election day polls’, *The International Forum for Responsible Media Blog* (18 May 2017): <https://inform.org/2017/05/18/breaking-the-election-silence-cross-border-reporting-of-election-day-polls-caoilfhionn-gallagher-qc-and-jonathan-price/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

CHAPTER 6: DIGITAL MEDIA

Introduction

249. We were appointed “to consider the effects of political polling and digital media on politics”.
250. It soon became clear to us that the impact of digital media on politics was far too large a topic to be covered adequately within our reporting timeframe. A wide range of digital media issues have emerged, spanning topics beyond concerns about political opinion polling. Most notably, these include the use of social media deliberately to spread misinformation about politics and political topics, the use of artificial intelligence to analyse online commentary and target political advertising, and related questions around the legal and regulatory status of social media platforms. These issues are incredibly fast-moving and, at the point this report was agreed, several new stories about these issues were emerging every day. Various committees and organisations are already studying some of these issues. In particular, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee is conducting an inquiry into fake news, which is examining the impact that fake news is having on the public’s understanding of the world and its response to traditional journalism.²¹⁷
251. It has been suggested that a key impact of digital media on politics is the use of algorithms that “curate”²¹⁸ our news feeds, cherry-picking what we are most likely to be interested in, thereby creating ‘echo chamber’ effects. “Deliberate and concerted”²¹⁹ attempts by foreign governments, amongst other actors, to manipulate the online information space have been cited. We were also aware of the complex arguments around the legal and regulatory status of social media platforms and the tensions that exist for platforms (and other digital media sites) between allowing freedom of expression, including the ability to post anonymous content, and the calls for greater transparency about how content, particularly content relating to political issues, is produced, by whom, and for what aim. Although these issues are not directly related to political polling, they are nonetheless relevant to considerations around how political information is promoted, shared and understood in a digital age.
252. As we explained in Chapter 1, it would not have been possible for us to have considered all these matters within the context of this inquiry and we have not therefore gathered the evidence in order to draw conclusions about these issues. In November 2017, we wrote to the House’s Liaison Committee to suggest that another *ad hoc* committee be appointed in 2018 in order to assess these wider issues in more detail (the letter is reprinted in Appendix 7). We appreciate that the Liaison Committee has not recommended this proposal for an *ad hoc* committee this year.²²⁰ However, the Liaison Committee is

217 House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, ‘What is ‘fake news?’ (15 September 2017): <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/digital-culture-media-and-sport-committee/news/fake-news-inquiry-launch-17-19/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

218 David Robert Grimes, ‘Echo chambers are dangerous—we must try to break free of our online bubbles’, *The Guardian* (4 December 2017): <https://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2017/dec/04/echo-chambers-are-dangerous-we-must-try-to-break-free-of-our-online-bubbles> [accessed 20 March 2018]

219 [Q 31](#) (Carl Miller)

220 Liaison Committee, *New ad hoc Committees in 2018–19* (2nd Report, Session 2017–19, HL Paper 103)

currently conducting a review of the House’s investigative and scrutiny committees, and we would strongly urge it to consider the establishment of such a committee in the future. We see this report as a first stage in the scrutiny of these issues and, if the House saw fit to establish a committee to consider the wider impact of digital media on politics, we hope that it would be able to build on our work so far.

253. For the purposes of our inquiry, we chose to focus most of our attention on the ways in which digital media impacts upon political polling, and *vice versa*.

Digital media and polling

254. Digital media refers to digitised content (text, graphic, audio and video) that can be created, viewed and distributed on digital electronic devices. It is a term which has evolved to cover a vast range of media products and technologies and often refers to a blend of technology and content.²²¹
255. In the context of our inquiry, our focus was on digital news media and how digital media technologies have revolutionised the way in which we consume, interact with and share news and information. We wanted to understand what impact these changes have had on polling. Specifically, we asked whether the capability and demand for 24-hour news and an increasingly competitive media market had led to an increase in the number of polls and, if so, whether that had meant a decline in quality in both polls and the reporting of polling.
256. Although there was broad agreement that there had been an increased volume of polling in recent years, there was less agreement that this was as a result of demand from the media (or the increase in digital media channels). YouGov told us that “the increased volume of polling has been driven by an increased number of polling companies, lower costs and lower barriers to entry to the industry, rather than demand from the media.”²²² Others supported the suggestion that the increase in digital media channels and a broader online environment had opened up the industry and made the polling market easier to enter.²²³ However, the MRS, with reference to its own system of regulation and accreditation, warned us that: “The growth of digital media channels represents a challenge for researchers and the regulatory framework as there is greater proliferation of non-accredited individuals without a professional and/or ethical approach to research.”²²⁴
257. Echoing an issue that we touched on in Chapter 3, we also heard that the digital media environment encouraged a tendency to inflate polling stories to help compete in a crowded and competitive market, particularly during election campaigns. Jim Waterson, the Politics Editor at BuzzFeed, highlighted a good example of this:

“One of the most viral poll stories of the entire general election campaign was published on 3 June in the *Independent*. It stated, ‘Labour ahead of Conservatives in unadjusted poll of voters’. Most members of the Committee understand that the reason you adjust polls is precisely to weight them. The top line said, ‘A new poll suggests Labour could be

221 The Centre for Digital Media, ‘What is digital media?’: <https://thecdm.ca/program/digital-media> [accessed 20 March 2018]

222 Written evidence from YouGov (PPD0016)

223 *Ibid.*

224 Written evidence from the Market Research Society (PPD0010)

on course for a shock win at the general election—but only if all those considered least likely to vote turn out ... on Thursday.’

That was shared 40,000 times on Facebook. You could probably put a substantial multiple on that for the number of people seeing it. To make a complete guess, you might be talking of 500,000 to 1 million people in the UK who saw the headline. If we had written up, ‘Conservatives still ahead’, it would not have been shared anything like as much as that. Given the state of online publishing, you have an enormous incentive to sensationalise, because that is the way in which you will get your headline shared and people reading your material.²²⁵

258. The example provided by BuzzFeed alluded to one of the core themes highlighted by the evidence on digital media, which is the impact of social media on politics and the way in which people view, share and form opinions about political issues. Although this is in no way a recent or unstudied phenomenon—the impact of social media on society is one that is being covered by a vast range of experts and academics—our inquiry did provide an opportunity to highlight some specific concerns around the impact that social media are having on the way people engage with political issues.

Social media

259. Social media are defined as websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.²²⁶
260. Our lines of inquiry relating to social media fell into three broad categories:
- the data generated by social media and how this might be used to better understand public opinion on political issues;
 - how people view, share and understand political information through social media and how this process is being manipulated by the deliberate spread of misinformation; and
 - the impact of social media on the political campaigning process.

The use of social media data for predicting elections

261. The data generated by social media presents a very significant opportunity to better understand public opinion on, amongst other topics, politics. One example of the way in which social media are being utilised to measure public opinion is through attempts to predict election results using data gathered from social media platforms. A number of different organisations have claimed to have accurately predicted recent elections using social media data.²²⁷ One example of this is the company BrandsEye, which claimed to have accurately predicted the outcome of the 2016 referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU and the 2016 presidential election in the United States of America.²²⁸

225 Q 65 (Jim Waterson)

226 Oxford English Dictionary, ‘Definition of social media in English’: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/social_media [accessed 20 March 2018]

227 Patrick Evans, ‘Can social media be used to predict election results?’, *BBC News* (10 November 2016): <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-us-2016-37942842> [accessed 20 March 2018]

228 BrandsEye, ‘About us’: <https://www.brandseye.com/about-us/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

262. BrandsEye undertakes what it calls ‘opinion mining’, predominantly for corporate clients, effectively scouring the internet and online conversations for mentions of specific keywords. To do this it uses algorithms to evaluate the mentions of a specific topic for relevance. A common issue for this type of practice is the ability of algorithms to accurately measure sentiment—for example, sarcasm or irony. BrandsEye explained that it had attempted to address this problem by complementing the data generated by the algorithms with crowdsourcing—paying large teams of people to categorise comments and verify the sentiment and topic.²²⁹

263. Jean Pierre Kloppers, Chief Executive Officer of BrandsEye, explained how BrandsEye trialled the use of social media data to predict the outcome of a political event, in this case, the referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU:

“We had half a million people speaking on social media in the week before the referendum. We took a statistically significant sample of that half a million conversation and put it through what we call the BrandsEye crowd—people who work on our platform ...

When somebody mentions something about Brexit, we select it on a key-word basis. If people are speaking about Brexit, leave or remain—whatever language they are using—we use key words to find it. If an individual mention—whether a Facebook post, a tweet or a comment on a blog somewhere—is selected by the system as part of the sample, it is sent to multiple raters within our crowd. Those are people, like anybody here, who work on our platform and earn money by competing with other people to verify the sentiment of the author. If somebody says very simplistically, ‘I am going to vote remain’, it is easy to understand. If somebody says, ‘David Beckham is voting remain, so I will, too’, there is probably a bit of sarcasm. These people compete with one another to try to understand what the author meant. An algorithm cannot do that. We have gamified the way in which data is verified by people.”²³⁰

264. Mr Kloppers acknowledged however that these new techniques were supplementary to traditional polling, rather than a substitute. He stated that: “Social media give a view of how the public feel about an issue that is not captured by an opinion poll, in the same way that an opinion poll captures a view about an issue that is not captured by social media. The future lies in a combination of the two approaches.”²³¹

265. Elsewhere in the evidence, there was considerable scepticism of the value of using social media data to predict the outcome of elections. Respondents identified a number of issues relating to the use of social media data for measuring public opinion. A key challenge is that social media users are often not representative of the general or voting populations. Dr Christopher Prosser and Dr Jonathan Mellon from the University of Manchester undertook a study using the 2015 British Election Study Face-to-Face survey to examine demographic and attitudinal differences between Facebook and Twitter users and non-users. They stated that:

229 BrandsEye, ‘How it works’: <https://www.brandseye.com/how-it-works/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

230 Q 38 (Jean Pierre Kloppers)

231 *Ibid.*

- “The short answer to the question of whether social media users are representative of the population in terms of their political attitudes is no, social media users are on average younger and better educated than non-users, and they are more liberal and pay more attention to politics. Despite paying more attention to politics, social media users are *less* likely to vote than non-users, but they are more likely [to] vote Labour party when they do.”²³²
266. Polling companies also alluded to issues relating to representativeness, suggesting that Labour supporters were more prominent on Twitter than Conservatives, which made “gauging public opinion over social media data cumbersome at best and extremely difficult at worst.”²³³
267. Dr Prosser and Dr Mellon did highlight that “these differences in political attitudes and behaviour arise due to the demographic composition of social media users” and that “with appropriate demographic adjustments, it might be possible to use social media users to gauge levels of political support.” However, they went on to clarify that: “It is important to note that we are addressing attitudinal and demographic differences of social media users *in general*. A further question remains about the representativeness of *people who use social media to talk about politics*. The likely answer to this question is that they are even less representative of the population than social media users in general.”²³⁴
268. Professor Hanretty, Royal Holloway, University of London, highlighted further issues with the representativeness of social media users, stating that:
- “The use of social media data in predicting elections is very fraught. We know from some of Professor Green’s colleagues on the British Election Study team that the Twitter population is not representative of the general UK population. We also know that the degree to which it is not representative is changing over time. As the population ages, there may be more people who have been brought up on Twitter. The age profile changes, so the character of Twitter changes.”²³⁵
269. Dr Mark Shepard and Dr Narisong Huhe from the University of Strathclyde echoed the point that social media data are susceptible to considerable shifts over time, reducing the extent to which it can be considered representative. They further explained that:
- “Polls can be representative of the public (typically plus or minus 3% sample error accuracy) at any time. Social media is very different as it is a) rarely representative; and b) changes over time as different types of groups mobilise online at varied times ... Consequently, if you take your social media data too soon, you might be overly capturing the views of activists, compounding any online biases that we know exist.”²³⁶
270. The Alan Turing Institute suggested that social media data are harder to understand and more open to interpretation—more “difficult to calibrate than is the case for other political polling data collection methods.” As a

232 Written evidence from Dr Christopher Prosser and Dr Jonathon Mellon (PPD0008)

233 Written evidence from ComRes, Opinium, Ipsos MORI, Panelbase, LucidTalk, ORB International, BMG Research and Survation (PPD0014)

234 Written evidence from Dr Christopher Prosser and Dr Jonathon Mellon (PPD0008)

235 Q 34 (Professor Chris Hanretty)

236 Written evidence from Dr Mark Shepard and Dr Narisong Huhe (PPD0003)

newer form of data, the Institute also highlighted that “vulnerabilities in the data are less well understood and more difficult to detect and to correct for.”²³⁷

271. However, many respondents suggested that it was plausible that social media would have a place in future developments in political polling, following further research into the challenges outlined above. Dr Prosser and Dr Mellon noted that “more sophisticated techniques can be developed that are able to adjust for the compositional differences of social media users and could be used to predict election outcomes.” They noted, however: “Whether they are able to do so accurately will be a question for future empirical research.”²³⁸
272. It is also possible that analysis of social media data might be used more widely to analyse trends in political opinion. Dr Nick Anstead from the London School of Economics and Political Science suggested that, instead of trying to replicate the work of polling companies to predict elections, “researchers might think of this new tool as being a powerful aid to qualitative research, more akin to focus groups or even a twenty-first century version of the mass observation.”²³⁹

Spread of misinformation on social media

273. It is well established that social media are “changing the way that people participate in political and democratic debate.”²⁴⁰ The way in which people view, share and discuss political issues online has led some commentators to argue that it has revolutionised political engagement, facilitating connections to the causes people care about.²⁴¹ Others have suggested that it actually limits political awareness, and that although social media provides a “mobilising force that builds passionate partisanship”²⁴², this is often to the detriment of interactions between supporters of different parties.²⁴³ A number of witnesses referred to the idea that because social media platforms provide users with information that they agree with, and sometimes suppress the content they disagree with, a series of echo chambers are created. One commentator suggested that this creates “a strengthening of existing biases and political prejudices, and a narrowing of political, cultural and social awareness.”²⁴⁴ Anthony Wells, of YouGov and the UKPollingReport, said that:

“Like most other political news, the results of opinion polls are widely shared on social media. Often this reflects the same ‘echo chamber effect’ that is seen in much online political discourse. People are more likely to retweet or share poll results that they agree with or see as being

237 Written evidence from the Alan Turing Institute (PPD0019)

238 Written evidence from Dr Christopher Prosser and Dr Jonathon Mellon (PPD0008)

239 Written evidence from Dr Nick Anstead (PPD0018)

240 Carl Miller, ‘The Rise of Digital Politics’, Demos (October 2016): <https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Demos-Rise-of-Digital-Politics.pdf> [accessed 20 March 2018]

241 Pew Research Center, ‘The Political Environment on Social Media, 3. Social media and political engagement’ (October 25, 2016): <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/10/25/political-engagement-and-social-media/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

242 Angela Phillips, ‘Social media is changing the face of politics—and it’s not good news’, *The Conversation* (February 2016): <https://theconversation.com/social-media-is-changing-the-face-of-politics-and-its-not-good-news-54266> [accessed 20 March 2018]

243 Written evidence from ComRes, BMG Research, Ipsos MORI, LucidTalk, ORB International, Opinium, ORB International, Panelbase, and Survation (PPD0014)

244 Alex Krasodomski-Jones, ‘Talking to ourselves? Political Debate Online and the Echo Chamber Effect’, Demos (January 2017): <https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Echo-Chambers-final-version.pdf> [accessed 20 March 2018]

‘good’ for their side, less likely to retweet or share poll results they disagree with.”²⁴⁵

274. In addition, it is possible that the ‘personalisation’ of news stories online may be making political polarisation even worse. A report by Demos on the echo chamber effect suggested that there is a strong connection between a user’s ideology and the users and news sources they interact with. It added that “users with published support for political parties in the UK are more likely to share ideologically-aligned media, are more likely to keep within ideologically-aligned communities”.²⁴⁶
275. As social media plays an increasing role in political engagement around election campaigns, these issues have been thrown more sharply into focus. In the United States, the ongoing investigation into possible Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election has alerted the world to the way in which social media enables the deliberate spread of misinformation and skewing of attitudes, for the purpose of influencing or forwarding a political agenda. Although we were not able to examine this considerable topic in full, we were informed about a range of concerns relating to the way people access, share and discuss political information, how this can be manipulated and distorted, and (although not limited to election campaigns) what specific impact this might be having on our electoral process in the UK.
276. Professor Farida Vis, Professor of Digital Media at Manchester Metropolitan University, outlined what she saw as the key problem—“global information pollution”—which she said comprised three issues:
- “The first is the spreading of misinformation—information that was not intended to cause harm by whoever shared it but that was misleading or false none the less. The second is the spreading of disinformation, where the intention is knowingly to cause harm. The third is the spreading of mal-information, where information that was previously thought to circulate only in private is leaked to the public.”²⁴⁷
277. We were also alerted to concerns around what Carl Miller of Demos termed as the “capacity of social media to misinform and systematically manipulate.”²⁴⁸ Jim Waterson provided an example of where the results of a poll had been distorted to spread misinformation on social media:
- “... a lot of dubious, unregulated polls are done with just a Facebook page or something like that. Those can go very viral on their own, and an unscrupulous site can post the results. I once went to the Russian embassy and was handed a printout of a Twitter poll that it had run on its own Twitter page asking, ‘Is UK criticism of Russian operations in Syria hypocrisy? Yes: 78%’. They handed that out to journalists as evidence that they had done polling of our people, who agreed that we were being hypocrites. If you stick a headline on examples like that and you are an unscrupulous site, you can spread them quite far.”²⁴⁹

245 Written evidence from Anthony Wells (PPD0015)

246 Alex Krasodomski-Jones, ‘Talking to ourselves? Political Debate Online and the Echo Chamber Effect’, Demos (January 2017): <https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Echo-Chambers-final-version.pdf> [accessed 20 March 2018]

247 Q 123 (Professor Farida Vis)

248 Q 27 (Carl Miller)

249 Q 67 (Jim Waterson)

278. This type of activity has been referred to as ‘computational propaganda’, which the Oxford Internet Institute defines as “the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks.”²⁵⁰ This can be conducted through the use of bots. Bots are programs that perform simple, repetitive tasks. They can deliver content to people—retweeting fake news, for example—but they can also exploit social network algorithms to get a topic to trend. A single individual can use them to create the illusion of large-scale consensus.²⁵¹ Professor Vis highlighted a deeply worrying example of the spread of false information for the purposes of influencing a political issue:

“A particular example that goes to the heart of some of this related to the Westminster attacks in March. Some of you may have seen a photograph that was shared on social media of a Muslim woman in a headscarf on her mobile phone, seemingly walking past one of the victims of the attack, who, in how it was framed, was dying on the bridge. What is problematic here is that the picture was real. This happened; there was nothing doctored about it. However, the fake account presented the information by framing it in a very anti-Islam, anti-Muslim way, essentially to suggest, ‘This is where the UK is headed if we go down this political trajectory’.

At the time, people may have picked up on the fact that this was a troll account, but it seems that they did not link it to Russia. What is even more problematic is that the account, and the information that it spread, went viral. The image was highly emotive and tapped into a national sentiment, and it was picked up in over 80 media reports in the UK. What we have here is a problem of mass amplification by a different agent that has not yet really been mentioned: the mainstream media. This is not a bot account. It is an account, sponsored by Russia, that is pretending to be a right-wing Texan citizen but that now seems to be meddling in UK politics.”²⁵²

279. Professor Vis told the Committee that the spreading of misleading and false information to shape political discourse was pushing us towards a “crisis point in terms of the threat to liberal democracies.”²⁵³
280. There have been efforts to tackle this issue—for example, the then Minister for Digital, the Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP, highlighted that “many institutions are now putting more effort into what are essentially fact-checking mechanisms or organisations” and that this included Google, the BBC and Channel 4.²⁵⁴ Will Moy, Director of Full Fact, an independent fact-checking charity, explained:

“We are trying to create technology that can automatically recognise the repeating of claims that we have checked and found to be wrong, and begin to check certain kinds of claims that can be checked automatically. There are many claims that cannot be checked automatically and that

250 Oxford Internet Institute, *Computational Propaganda Worldwide: Executive Summary* (June 2017): <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/06/Casestudies-ExecutiveSummary.pdf> [accessed 20 March 2018]

251 Tse Yin Lee, ‘Bots used to bias online political chats’, *BBC News* (21 June 2017): <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-40344208> [accessed 20 March 2018]

252 [Q 124](#) (Professor Farida Vis)

253 [Q 123](#) (Professor Farida Vis)

254 [Q 101](#) (Matt Hancock MP)

no realistic future technology will be able to check, but some types of claims—statistical claims, for example—are more susceptible to automated checking.”²⁵⁵

281. Professor Helen Margetts, Director of the Oxford Internet Institute, was also supportive of the use of fact-checking services, stating that: “We need public, political and, potentially, legal pressure to make sure that they carry on with the initial effort to employ fact-checkers and to block bogus accounts, which are responsible for disseminating false information—in some countries, to a huge extent.”²⁵⁶

282. A number of witnesses suggested that better education to support improved digital literacy amongst the population could help to tackle some of the issues associated with social media. Education, they argued, could remedy issues such as the spread of online misinformation by encouraging more critical thinking. Will Moy highlighted that:

“If you really want to think about the long term—where we want to be in 50 years—there are urgent questions about how we educate a generation that, for the first time, does not have dominant sources of news, is exposed to an absolute proliferation of information sources and has to make very difficult judgments very quickly between them.”²⁵⁷

283. Professor Margetts highlighted what she saw as the limitations of the current education system, in relation to digital literacy:

“The trouble is that our education system has not in any way adapted to that. Many children are blocked from using the internet and social media at school. With resources, they could be educated to understand what they look at and whether it is a fact or unreliable information—to look at the source and think about where it comes from. Building digital media into any sort of civic education, and ramping up civic education, would be one way of tackling that. It is definitely a place to put resources.”²⁵⁸

284. Similarly Professor Vis spoke of the “enormous potential” of the “overhauling of the national curriculum so that we can teach young people, and all citizens, how to deal with information online”.²⁵⁹ Matt Hancock confirmed that the Government was also convinced of the importance of improving digital skills:

“The second thing that we can improve, and are improving, is how we teach young people to engage with this sort of information, and how they should think about their use of data online and the veracity and sources of news media. That is incredibly important, but it is a generational challenge to improve that sort of education.”²⁶⁰

285. Efforts to tackle the deliberate spread of misinformation on social media are not currently underpinned by any regulatory mechanism. Carl Miller told us: “We have seen the emergence of one of the most important arenas

255 [Q 54](#) (Will Moy)

256 [Q 50](#) (Professor Helen Margetts)

257 [Q 51](#) (Will Moy)

258 [Q 52](#) (Professor Helen Margetts)

259 [Q 125](#) (Professor Vis)

260 [Q 172](#) (Matt Hancock MP)

in political debate in this country with no rules around how it works.”²⁶¹ He added:

“People can say whatever they want on there. Third-party campaigners can do whatever they want. People from any country can send whatever information they want into British political debate. Just as a matter of priority, putting some kind of enforceable regulatory system in place to begin to defend the integrity of online political discourse would be the thing I would spend political time and wherewithal to try to put in place.”²⁶²

286. The question of the feasibility and the desirability of further regulation for the social media sphere was a consistent theme, drawn into sharpest focus by the evidence we received on the impact of social media for political campaigning.

Social media and political campaigning

287. In recent years, political campaigns have been exploring the potential of advanced data analysis tools to help win votes.²⁶³ A combination of big data and social media are increasingly being used to attract support from particular voters through demographically targeted political messaging. Rapid increases in the use of digital campaign techniques have included more sophisticated use of data to support direct targeting techniques. Furthermore, the use of bots as campaign tools have allowed campaigners to reach more voters at a lower cost than before.

288. Social media have allowed parties to wage a different sort of election campaign. Digital electioneering, in which political parties buy adverts that target users of social media, was first used on a large scale in Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential bid.²⁶⁴ Since then it has grown. Dominic Cummings, who was campaign director for Vote Leave ahead of the Brexit referendum, has said that 98% of the campaign’s money was spent on digital advertising.²⁶⁵

289. Comprehensive spending reports are not published until a significant period of time has passed since the election or referendum concerned and only cover registered campaigners. However, according to a report by the Electoral Commission, identifiable social media spend on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter ahead of the 2015 General Election ranged from £1.21m by the Conservative party, to £160,000 by Labour, £22,245 by the Liberal Democrats and £5,466 by the Scottish National Party.²⁶⁶ For the 2017 General Election, it has been reported that during the 12 month period before the election the Conservative party spent around £2.1 million on

261 [Q 26](#) (Carl Miller)

262 [Q 28](#) (Carl Miller)

263 Information Commissioner, ‘The Information Commissioner opens a formal investigation into the use of data analytics for political purposes’ (May 2017): <https://iconewsblog.wordpress.com/2017/05/17/information-commissioner-elizabeth-denham-opens-a-formal-investigation-into-the-use-of-data-analytics-for-political-purposes/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

264 ‘How online campaigning is influencing Britain’s election’, *The Economist* (27 May 2017): <https://www.economist.com/news/britain/21722690-social-media-allow-parties-target-voters-tailored-messages-and-cat-videos-how-online> [accessed 20 March 2018]

265 *Ibid.*

266 The Electoral Commission, *UK Parliamentary General Election 2015: Campaign spending report*, p 29 (February 2016): http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/197907/UKPGE-Spending-Report-2015.pdf [accessed 20 March 2018]

Facebook advertising alone, while the Labour party spent just over £500,000 on Facebook advertising.²⁶⁷

290. Will Moy described the way in which social media have altered the level and type of access that political parties have to constituents:

“Fascinatingly, they now have the ability to communicate directly with the public in their millions. That communication used to be intermediated by the media and was at least open to challenge. The political parties put out claims that are, of course, tendentious—that is their job—and unscrutinised. The claims go directly to the public, backed by massive online advertising campaigns with highly targeted information, and with limited or no scrutiny or public visibility to people who are not targeted by those campaigns. That is a deeply concerning phenomenon, if you believe that an effective election campaign should be a debate between different people on different sides. If it is actually two conversations, in two different places without interaction, that is something to be worried about.”²⁶⁸

291. Similarly, Sue English, Former Head of Political Programmes, Analysis and Research at the BBC, highlighted the lack of transparency of this type of campaigning. She asked:

“ ... how do you control political advertising on Facebook? It seems to me—again, looking from the outside—that in the 2017 election political parties targeted very small groups of voters in key marginal constituencies, through Facebook, with political advertising that none of us saw, unless we happened to be part of that target group.”²⁶⁹

292. This type of political advertising activity can be supported through the use of thousands of automated accounts, or bots. Professor Tait, Professor of Journalism at Cardiff University, outlined how bots can lead to subversion of the democratic process:

“ ... there is clear evidence that bots, some of which have come from outside this country, are being used to enhance one argument or another. That is potentially a very dangerous development. You have to distinguish between legitimate, targeted advertising, which people are entitled to do, and the use of bots to create an impression that your side is the winning side or to troll or attack people who disagree with you—which, in many ways, is diminishing the quality of British public and political discourse, frankly. Some of the attacks on journalists, for example, that one now sees on social media are very serious and need to be addressed.”²⁷⁰

293. A number of witnesses highlighted that this type of political campaigning through social media was posing challenges for governments and regulators, and indeed for democracy. It has become harder, and often impossible, to define what constitutes political advertising and, crucially, what falls under the category of campaign material. Professor Vis told us:

267 Peter Walker, ‘Tories spent £18.5m on election that cost them majority’, *The Guardian* (19 March 2018): <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/mar/19/electoral-commission-conservatives-spent-lost-majority-2017-election> [accessed 20 March 2018]

268 Q 48 (Will Moy)

269 Q 76 (Sue English)

270 Q 76 (Professor Richard Tait CBE)

“When we think about advertising, we still think about messages that we can recognise as advertising. One of the things that came out of the congressional hearings in the States was that some of this sponsored content was about fake events, such as a rally of miners for Trump. How do you regulate against that? At an emotive level, the event is potentially highly persuasive. Here is a politician who is coming to my town and is doing something about an issue I care deeply about, but the event is entirely fake.”²⁷¹

The Electoral Commission

294. The most pertinent of the concerns raised about political advertising came from the Electoral Commission, who highlighted the regulatory challenges associated with applying existing expenditure rules to campaign activity conducted through social media.

295. In its recent report, *Political finance regulation at the June 2017 general election*,²⁷² the Electoral Commission acknowledged that more action was needed to ensure compliance with the political finance rules for future elections, due to:

- The rapid increases in recent years in the use of digital and online campaign techniques at elections, including increasingly sophisticated use of data;
- The increased use of more personalised and targeted messaging; and
- The capacity for campaigners to reach more voters at a lower cost than ever before.

296. The report notes that there was commentary and concern raised during and after the election about the use of enhanced direct targeting techniques and the use of bots as campaign tools. It noted that spending on the creation or use of such campaigning techniques to produce and disseminate election campaign material was covered by the existing expenditure rules, but acknowledged that online campaigning presented some specific regulatory challenges. Bob Posner, Director of Political Finance and Regulation and Legal Counsel at the Electoral Commission, articulated the concerns that have been raised by the rise in campaigning through social media:

“Campaigning has a wide definition, whether you are a party or a non-party campaigner. If you are seeking to influence voters for or against, it is campaigning, under our law. There is quite a low threshold of spending where our regulation comes in. For the referendum, for example, spending of upwards of £10,000 brought it within our regulatory remit, if you were campaigning. For the election, in parts of the UK, it was £10,000; in England, it was £20,000. We monitor that.

Bots are a form of amplification of a message. They are a very effective way of amplifying something, but it is still campaigning, at root. The challenge that you are raising is how you spot it. That goes into our live monitoring and into other people observing things and reporting them

271 [Q 125](#) (Professor Farida Vis)

272 Electoral Commission, *Political finance regulation at the June 2017 UK general election* (November 2017): https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/237550/Political-finance-regulation-at-the-june-2017-UK-general-election-PDF.pdf [accessed 20 March 2018]

to us, but we recognise that it is a challenge. Part of what we are doing at the moment is talking to the main social media platform providers and looking forward, to see where there can be improvements.”²⁷³

297. In its 2017 report, the Electoral Commission called for improved transparency and the regulation of online campaign material, stating that:

“We want to see changes to electoral law to help improve transparency and the regulation of online campaigns at UK elections.

We first recommended in 2003 that online campaign material produced by political parties and non-party campaigners should—like its printed equivalent—be required to include an imprint stating who has published it. This would enable voters to identify who is spending money on trying to influence them at elections.

Our recommendation would require secondary legislation to be introduced by the UK Government and approved by the UK Parliament. It will also require secondary legislation to be made by the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales in relation to elections to those legislatures.

We have also highlighted how the rules could be improved to ensure that campaigners report more detailed breakdowns of spending, including on different types of advertising such as online and social media promotion.

The UK Government, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government should take steps to amend electoral law so that these changes are in place ahead of the next major elections in 2021 and 2022.”²⁷⁴

298. The Electoral Commission also noted that there were wider questions about social media in elections that it felt went beyond its remit.²⁷⁵ It stated that:

- It does not regulate the content of political campaign messages or advertisements, including mis-information. Neither can it regulate spending on activities which are not intended to influence voter’s choice at UK elections.
- Asking the Electoral Commission to arbitrate on the truthfulness of political advertising would risk damaging its ability to carry out its political finance regulatory role.
- The rules set by the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 do not apply to individuals or organisations outside the UK.²⁷⁶

Options for tackling the challenges posed by social media

299. Social media are having and will continue to have a considerable impact on the political process. The issues outlined in this Chapter are provoking serious

273 Q 164 (Bob Posner)

274 Electoral Commission, *Political finance regulation at the June 2017 UK general election* (November 2017): https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/237550/Political-finance-regulation-at-the-June-2017-UK-general-election-PDF.pdf [accessed 20 March 2018]

275 *Ibid.*

276 *Ibid.*

and wholly warranted concerns. This has naturally prompted consideration of how these might be tackled from a regulatory perspective.

300. The evidence was in no way conclusive about what, if any, regulatory solutions should be considered. The Minister, Matt Hancock, confirmed that tackling these issues was difficult. He said:

“The challenge is right, but the questions are, ‘What is the role for government?’, and, ‘How do you get there?’ As we all saw five years ago, in a very different press environment, when the whole Leveson debate was going on, getting to an answer is extremely difficult.”²⁷⁷

301. The Minister highlighted that some action was already being taken:

“A number of things can be done. The first is that the big platforms themselves can take action, and in some cases are taking action, to ensure that people have to hand information about the veracity and the source of news and information, as well as the news itself. The moves in that direction by the big social media companies are welcome, but there is much more to do.

The second thing that we can improve, and are improving, is how we teach young people to engage with this sort of information, and how they should think about their use of data online and the veracity and sources of news media. That is incredibly important, but it is a generational challenge to improve that sort of education.”²⁷⁸

The Minister went on to confirm that: “Getting a handle on the unregulated space is very difficult, because we need to approach the solution to the problem in a way that does not undermine the very values by which we are trying to govern the country.”²⁷⁹

302. Professor Vis also suggested that further regulation might not provide a workable solution:

“Regulation is a very slow beast. By the time it has gone through all the checks and balances, it will be outdated; what we are regulating for will no longer be the current situation, so I am not highly optimistic about that route. That does not mean that it should not be discussed—it absolutely should be discussed, and exhausted as a potential solution—but I see more potential in a middle ground that tries to avoid regulation, to reshape the conversation with the platforms and to explore what is possible at a platform level. There are different ways in which inroads can be made very positively, and much more quickly.”²⁸⁰

303. There was also some discussion on the role and responsibilities of the platforms themselves. Professor Margetts told us: “The big internet corporations and social media platforms have to do something. They must stop saying that it is not their problem, which is what we have seen until now. We are beginning to see some movement on that.”²⁸¹

277 [Q 174](#) (Matt Hancock MP)

278 [Q 172](#) (Matt Hancock MP)

279 *Ibid.*

280 [Q 124](#) (Professor Farida Vis)

281 [Q 50](#) (Professor Helen Margetts)

304. Google told us that it was starting to take action:

“Google wants to make it easier for people to get their news from legitimate and verified sources to help tackle misinformation. We are also looking to tackle the issue of misinformation through a series of measures, including removing advertising from sites that misrepresent content, promoting trusted and vetted news sources, and supporting factchecking organisations that can provide independent verification of news items.”²⁸²

On political advertising, Google added that:

“Google believes it is important that people have platforms to communicate and make themselves heard, and election advertising has long served a positive and inclusive role in elections.

However, all political adverts are subject to our policies on advertising content and targeting practices, and we require all political ads and landing pages to comply with the local campaign and election laws.”²⁸³

305. Facebook told us about the action it was taking to ensure that advertising on its site was more transparent. It said:

“We are also going to require more thorough documentation from advertisers who want to run election-related ads. We are starting with federal elections in the US, and will progress from there to additional contests and elections in other countries and jurisdictions. As part of the documentation process, advertisers may be required to identify that they are running election-related advertising and verify both their entity and location.

Once verified, these advertisers will have to include a disclosure in their election-related ads, which reads: ‘Paid for by.’ When you click on the disclosure, you will be able to see details about the advertiser. Like other ads on Facebook, you will also be able to see an explanation of why you saw that particular ad.

For political advertisers that do not proactively disclose themselves, we are building machine learning tools that will help us find them and require them to verify their identity.”²⁸⁴

306. Twitter also told us about the action it was taking to tackle the issue of malicious automation, stating that:

“For example, in December 2017, our systems identified and challenged more than 6.4 million suspicious accounts globally per week—a 60% increase in our detection rate from October 2017. We currently detect and block approximately 523,000 suspicious logins daily for being generated through automation. Furthermore, since June 2017, we’ve removed more than 220,000 applications in violation of our developer and API rules, collectively responsible for more than 2.2 billion low-quality Tweets.”²⁸⁵

282 Written evidence from Google ([PPD0029](#))

283 *Ibid.*

284 Written evidence from Facebook ([PPD0030](#))

285 Written evidence from Twitter ([PPD0031](#))

307. We have not been able to assess these issues in detail but we do not believe that the steps taken so far by social media companies will address satisfactorily the ongoing public concerns about the possible threats to democracy.

308. The issue of whether social media companies should be defined as ‘publishers’ rather than ‘platforms’ was raised. This argument was made more recently in a debate in the House of Lords, moved by Baroness Kidron. Baroness Kidron highlighted that:

“In common with publishers and broadcasters, these companies use editorial content as bait for advertising. They aggregate and spread the news, and provide data points and key words: behaviours that determine what is most important, how widely it should be viewed and by whom. In common with news publishers, they offer a curated view of what is going on in the world.

The Silicon Valley companies are content creators, aggregators, editors, information cataloguers, broadcasters and publishers. Indeed, severally and together they publish far more media than any other publisher in any other context—but, in claiming to be ‘mere conduits’, they are ducking the responsibilities that the rest of the media ecosystem is charged with.”²⁸⁶

309. When giving evidence to us, Carl Miller explained some of the complications associated with regulating platforms as publishers:

“In doing that, we would make it legally impossible for those entities to exist. Legally, they cannot take responsibility for the content on their platforms; they never would be able to, and they would all shut down in a day. We need a new kind of legal settlement, seeing them not as publishers and not as completely objective, almost like utility companies. Something else has to happen. We need to be creative in the new legal fictions we create, in order partly to empower our own law enforcement and regulatory agencies to be more powerful online and partly to hold the large tech companies to their responsibilities.”²⁸⁷

310. The Government struck a more positive note about the approaches that could be taken internationally. Matt Hancock said: “I would strongly caution against the idea that, just because the global internet platform companies are global, we have no influence. That is not the attitude we take in the UK Government at all.” He highlighted the Government’s Digital Charter, which aimed to change people’s attitudes towards the internet, and highlighted other areas of internet regulation where the Government had been working internationally. He stated that: “Do not think for one minute that we are powerless in the face of the big institutions. We are in fact leading the world in ensuring that the internet is ultimately a force for good in the world, rather than a free-for-all.”²⁸⁸

311. The Council of Europe has started to look into some of these issues. In 2016, it adopted an Internet Governance Strategy 2016–2019 which aims “to ensure that public policy for the Internet is people-centred, meaning that it should respect the core values of democracy, human rights and the

286 HL Deb, 11 January 2018, [col 368](#)

287 [Q 30](#) (Carl Miller)

288 [Q 179](#) (Matt Hancock MP)

rule of law. Its strategic objectives are to build democracy online, to protect Internet users, and to ensure respect and protection for human rights online.”²⁸⁹ The Council of Europe has commissioned a number of studies and reports on internet governance. It has also taken steps to establish a framework for a partnership for human rights, democracy and the rule of law between itself and internet companies, “with a view to creating a space for closer consultation with intermediaries on issues related to the exercise and enjoyment of human rights online. The Council of Europe thus also aims to promote dialogue between internet companies and other stakeholders.”²⁹⁰

312. The concerns outlined above will also need to be tackled alongside wider issues relating to digital media, artificial intelligence and their role in people’s daily lives. These matters are moving quickly up the political agenda. For example, we welcome the announcement that the Nuffield Foundation is to fund and establish a new institute, independent of government, to better understand and examine the impact of artificial intelligence, data, and algorithms on people and society.²⁹¹ The purpose of the institute will be to ensure that the use of data—and the use of automated technologies that serve to augment it—is harnessed to promote social wellbeing, both for society as a whole and for different groups within it.
313. Collaborating with industry, civil society and other sectors, the new institute will promote and support ethical practice in the public interest through its convening role, by initiating research, and through deliberation and dialogue. The Foundation’s partners developing the new body include the existing and respected Nuffield Council on Bioethics, as well as The Alan Turing Institute, the Wellcome Trust, the Royal Statistical Society, techUK, the Royal Society, the British Academy and the Omidyar Network’s Governance and Citizen Engagement programme. It is expected that the institute will be established before the end of 2018, and that the terms of reference will be published soon. The institute is expected to complement existing regulatory frameworks, including that provided by the Information Commissioner’s Office, as well as the oversight provided by the Government’s Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation.
314. In January 2018, the Government published its policy paper for its Digital Charter.²⁹² The introduction says:

“The internet is a powerful force for good. It serves humanity, spreads ideas and enhances freedom and opportunity across the world. Combined with new technologies such as artificial intelligence, it is set to change society perhaps more than any previous technological revolution—growing the economy, making us more productive, and raising living standards.

Alongside these new opportunities come new challenges and risks. The internet can be used to spread terrorist material; it can be a tool for

289 Council of Europe, *Internet Governance—Council of Europe Strategy 2016–2019* (September 2016): <https://rm.coe.int/16806ad2a8> [accessed 20 March 2018]

290 Council of Europe, *Internet Governance—Thematic Focus*: <https://rm.coe.int/leaflet-internet-governance-en/1680735bf6> [accessed 20 March 2018]

291 Nuffield Foundation, ‘Data Ethics and Artificial Intelligence’: <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/data-ethics-and-artificial-intelligence> [accessed 20 March 2018]

292 Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, *Policy paper: Digital Charter* (25 January 2018): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-charter/digital-charter> [accessed 20 March 2018]

abuse and bullying; and it can be used to undermine civil discourse, objective news and intellectual property. Citizens rightly want to know that they will be safe and secure online. Tackling these challenges in an effective and responsible way is critical for digital technology to thrive.

The Digital Charter is our response: a rolling programme of work to agree norms and rules for the online world and put them into practice. In some cases this will be through shifting expectations of behaviour; in some we will need to agree new standards; and in others we may need to update our laws and regulations. Our starting point will be that we will have the same rights and expect the same behaviour online as we do offline.

The Charter's core purpose is to make the internet work for everyone—for citizens, businesses and society as a whole. It is based on liberal values that cherish freedom, but not the freedom to harm others. These are challenges with which every nation is grappling. The internet is a global network and we will work with other countries that share both our values and our determination to get this right.”

315. Little detail has been announced by the Government so far on what the Digital Charter's work will involve and its likely timescales. However, its work programme is intended to be “a broad, ongoing programme, which will evolve as technology changes”. Its current priorities include “online harms”, “liability” and “disinformation”. The Government also plans to develop the Charter in conjunction with the technology sector, businesses and civil society, convening the various stakeholders in order to find solutions.²⁹³ The recent allegations regarding Cambridge Analytica and Facebook, which we noted in Chapter 1, have placed the challenges relating to digital media under a new and glaring spotlight, which makes the importance of Government action on the Digital Charter an even more urgent priority.
316. Overall it appears that there is a good deal of uncertainty amongst governments, regulatory bodies and the platforms themselves about how these issues should be tackled. Professor Vis stressed that the issues we are facing “were not anticipated and are not well understood.” She highlighted that social medial platforms have only existed for around 15 years and that they were not necessarily originally conceived as being “built for the purposes of furthering democratic principles and ideals.” Professor Vis concluded that: “We are only just starting to understand the breadth of that. Therefore, we can only just start to think about remedies.”²⁹⁴
317. The Minister Matt Hancock concluded: “It is the work of a generation to ensure that this amazing new technology allows for the flourishing of humanity rather than its undermining. It is no smaller than that.”²⁹⁵
318. *The evidence received by the Committee on the use of social media to influence political debate adversely was deeply concerning. We appreciate the complexities of considering a regulatory solution to these issues. We are, however, acutely aware of the urgency of the situation, as many witnesses highlighted that governments, regulators and the platforms themselves are on the ‘back foot’ on*

293 *Ibid.*

294 [Q 123](#) (Professor Farida Vis)

295 [Q 179](#) (Matt Hancock MP)

many of these issues and have been too slow to address the spread of misinformation and the manipulation of political information on social media platforms. We believe that these issues warrant serious and concerted investigation, and recommend that the Government urgently conducts further research into this issue.

319. *One way to combat the spread of misinformation online and to limit its potential impact on democratic debate is to ensure that people have the critical literacy skills to match digital skills to enable them to assess and analyse the information they read online. The Department for Education must ensure that such skills are taught to people of all ages, including children and young people at schools and colleges, as well as adults in further education.*
320. *We were concerned to hear the issues raised by the Electoral Commission and support its calls for more transparency in online campaign material. The Electoral Commission has called for the Government to introduce secondary legislation to ensure that online campaign material must, like its printed equivalents, include an imprint stating who has published it. This will be crucial in helping to ensure that public confidence is maintained in the electoral system and we endorse this recommendation. However, we recognise that this will do little to address the challenges posed by international actors who try to operate below the radar.*
321. *We have already recommended that the Electoral Commission should play a greater role in overseeing voting intention polling during election campaigns. In the light of the current challenges posed by digital media, and its ongoing work to ensure transparency relating to online campaign material, it is likely that the Electoral Commission will need to play an increasingly important role in helping to ensure that the democratic process in the UK is not subverted.*
322. *We welcome the Government's announcement of the Digital Charter, which will agree new standards for online behaviour. As identified in this report, digital technologies pose some very serious challenges and risks for democracy, which require urgent attention and decisive action. The Government should, without further delay, outline the specific actions it will take to address the Charter's priorities, including around the legal liability of online platforms and on limiting the spread and impact of disinformation, and publish the likely timescales for its programme of work.*
323. *The Government should also ensure that the Digital Charter's work programme includes:*
- *Assessing the scale and impact of algorithmic filtering of news on social media sites on political engagement.*
 - *Exploring issues relating to the transparency of funding for online political advertising, to address concerns raised by the Electoral Commission.*
 - *Examining the progress made to improve digital literacy and assessing whether additional action is required.*

- *Tackling the spread by bots of political misinformation.*
- *Drawing together existing studies on the impact of digital and social media on politics.*
- *Collecting information about the actions taken to address these issues in other countries and governments.*

This work will clearly need to be conducted in close collaboration with, or even commissioned from, independent organisations including research bodies, businesses, civil society and other stakeholders. The challenges associated with digital media are fast-moving and the work outlined above should be pursued urgently.

324. *We also recommend that the Government should initiate talks within the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Commonwealth, the Group of Eight (G8) and other international bodies, to discuss international approaches to tackling the problems posed to the democratic process by the rise of digital and social media.*

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Below is a summary of our conclusions and recommendations contained in this report. Conclusions are shown below in roman type; recommendations are shown in *italic* type.

Background

1. We expect that polling organisations will continue to seek to innovate, in order to improve the methodologies used in polling and to improve their suitability for estimating voter preferences. It is therefore important that every opportunity is taken to learn the lessons from recent elections. It is also crucial that polling companies and others conduct critical inquiries in public so that the causes of inaccuracy can be better understood, as was done after the 2015 General Election. (Paragraph 93)
2. Analysis of political polls conducted since the 1940s does not show that polling has become more inaccurate over time. However, the three high-profile failures of polling in the UK in the last three years—covering two General Elections and the referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU—raises the possibility that things might have taken a turn for the worse. The internet has certainly made polling easier and cheaper to conduct. However, a combination of difficulties in persuading a representative range of members of the public to take part in polls, shifting demographic predictors of the vote, and an increasingly volatile electorate, have by common consent made it more difficult to estimate political opinion accurately. It is entirely possible that polling failures will become more common in the future. (Paragraph 94)
3. Amongst the methodological issues faced by polling companies, the changing utility of demographic variables for the weighting of samples, particularly the declining validity of weighting based on socio-economic class, is a significant challenge. Polling companies can no longer rely on traditional weighting variables, and so will need to continue to develop new ways to adapt their methodological approaches. Further work is needed to better understand the impact of newer variables such as voters’ educational level, age and attitudes to policy issues such as the NHS and (currently) views on austerity and the UK’s relationship with the European Union. (Paragraph 95)

Media reporting of voting intention polls

4. Recent high profile polling failures can be attributed to a range of methodological challenges, but this is not the whole picture. There are disturbing problems with the way in which voting intention polls are represented by the media. While British Polling Council members are now required to report whether a poll shows a statistically significant change since the previous poll, this information is not always included in media reports. The way in which voting intention polls are represented by the media is often misleading, with a particular tendency to over-emphasise small changes in party fortunes that are indistinguishable from sampling variability. This practice remains largely unchecked. (Paragraph 137)
5. Although the British Polling Council rules require that details of methodological approaches are published, this is insufficient to combat poor reporting practice. This is particularly true of election coverage, where dramatic headlines may not represent the full results of the poll, or may

only represent the narrative preferred by a particular editor, which may be misleading. (Paragraph 138)

6. *We welcome the efforts which the British Polling Council currently makes to inform journalists and others about polls, including its ‘Journalist’s Guide to Opinion Polls’ published on its website. We recommend that the Guide should be developed to include an authoritative definition of what constitutes a properly conducted poll (as opposed to a small unrepresentative survey), and a list of criteria which must be met for a survey to be recognised as a poll. We recognise that arriving at such a definition will be difficult, but believe that it is essential in order to deliver clarity to members of the public, journalists and others. Once developed, we hope that journalists will be able to use the definition when reporting on polls, and include in their reports a statement as to whether the particular survey met the BPC’s definition of a poll. (Paragraph 139)*
7. *We also recommend that the British Polling Council should develop its ‘Journalist’s Guide to Opinion Polls’ to include guidance on the types of information that should be included within articles that report on polls. This might include guidance on how to frame headlines to reflect accurately poll results, how to explain the margin of error, and possibly a health warning to remind readers that polls simply represent a snapshot in time, rather than necessarily being predictions of the future. When reporting on particular polls, journalists should be expected to note in their reports whether the organisation which conducted the poll is a member of the British Polling Council or not. To support transparency, journalists should also include in their articles a reference to the published poll. (Paragraph 140)*
8. *Where relevant, the British Polling Council should make public any examples they find of particularly poor practices of media reporting on polls. The polling companies themselves should also be encouraged to state publicly where they think their polls have been misused or misreported. (Paragraph 141)*
9. *The British Polling Council should also develop a programme of training opportunities for journalists on how to read, interpret and report on polling data. It would be helpful if this guidance could be produced as part of a collaborative approach in conjunction with the Market Research Society, IPSO, IMPRESS, the Society of Editors, Ofcom, the Royal Statistical Society and academics. (Paragraph 142)*

The use of policy issues polls

10. Numerous polls are conducted every week which affect political discourse in the UK. In some cases, there is a failure by those who publicise such polls to communicate all of the relevant details about the selection and framing of questions to obtain a desired answer. We believe that most of these examples are deliberate attempts to manipulate polling findings, in order to distort evidence around public policy issues. We conclude that there is a case for the British Polling Council to play a greater role in proactively overseeing the conduct and reporting of polls. (Paragraph 181)

Oversight of polling

11. The different bodies involved in the oversight of polling need to respond to the challenges involved in the polling of the modern electorate, and to the misreporting and misrepresentation of polls. There are limitations in the current system of self-regulation for polling, and clear areas where the system could be strengthened. (Paragraph 233)

12. *We recommend that the remit of the British Polling Council should be expanded to take on a more substantial oversight function. The British Polling Council should adopt a collaborative approach, involving both industry and independent representation. In taking on this expanded role, it will clearly need to work closely with other regulatory stakeholders in this area, including the MRS, IPSO, IMPRESS, the Society of Editors and Ofcom. Some of the functions of the newly-expanded British Polling Council should include:*
- *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.*
 - *Ensuring that its members declare not just the client commissioning the poll, but the full details of all sources of funding for polling (excluding actual costs).*
 - *Conducting a post-election review of the conduct of the polling industry after every General Election and referendum, and publishing its findings.*
 - *Co-ordinating a programme of training opportunities for journalists on how to read, interpret and report on polling data.*
 - *Developing its guidance for journalists on best practice for the reporting of political polls.*
 - *Providing specific advice to the media on how to report on particular polls. This advice could be made public in certain cases.*
 - *Proactively reviewing selected samples of media coverage of polls on an annual basis, in order to monitor standards of media reporting. This should include analysis of print media, broadcaster coverage and digital media, and analysis of polls in general, not just those conducted by its members.*
 - *Continuing to run an effective complaints procedure, with speedy investigations of complaints. (Paragraph 234)*
13. *It is often difficult for members of the public to recognise when polling results have been taken out of context or misreported, so it is not enough to simply wait for complaints to be made. We therefore recommend that the BPC and MRS should identify and report instances of bad reporting of polling (whether or not the polls have been conducted by their members) and draw them to the attention of IPSO, IMPRESS or Ofcom as appropriate. Such cases should then be investigated and dealt with quickly through the existing regulatory systems for the media. (Paragraph 235)*
14. *In order to ensure transparency around voting intention polling in the run-up to elections, we also recommend that the Electoral Commission should take on an enhanced role in monitoring voting intention polling conducted and published during the regulated periods which precede UK elections. In particular, there should be a requirement for the details of all published voting intention polls to be declared to the Electoral Commission, regardless of who the poll was commissioned by, what its purpose was, or how much it cost. The details of all the sources of funding for such polls should then be published by the Electoral Commission, although we recognise that, in order to protect commercial confidentiality, the actual sums of money involved need not be made public. We acknowledge that this will require an*

extension of the Electoral Commission's existing remit and recommend that action is taken to achieve this. (Paragraph 236)

15. We are not convinced of the case for introducing a ban on the undertaking and publication of voting intention polls in the run-up to elections. In the future, if polls continue to be a poor predictor of the eventual outcomes of elections, and if the media reporting of such polls continues to influence public and political discourse in a misleading way, then arguments by supporters of a ban would be strengthened. (Paragraph 248)

Digital media

16. *The evidence received by the Committee on the use of social media to influence political debate adversely was deeply concerning. We appreciate the complexities of considering a regulatory solution to these issues. We are, however, acutely aware of the urgency of the situation, as many witnesses highlighted that governments, regulators and the platforms themselves are on the 'back foot' on many of these issues and have been too slow to address the spread of misinformation and the manipulation of political information on social media platforms. We believe that these issues warrant serious and concerted investigation, and recommend that the Government urgently conducts further research into this issue. (Paragraph 318)*
17. *One way to combat the spread of misinformation online and to limit its potential impact on democratic debate is to ensure that people have the critical literacy skills to match digital skills to enable them to assess and analyse the information they read online. The Department for Education must ensure that such skills are taught to people of all ages, including children and young people at schools and colleges, as well as adults in further education. (Paragraph 319)*
18. *We were concerned to hear the issues raised by the Electoral Commission and support its calls for more transparency in online campaign material. The Electoral Commission has called for the Government to introduce secondary legislation to ensure that online campaign material must, like its printed equivalents, include an imprint stating who has published it. This will be crucial in helping to ensure that public confidence is maintained in the electoral system and we endorse this recommendation. However, we recognise that this will do little to address the challenges posed by international actors who try to operate below the radar. (Paragraph 320)*
19. We have already recommended that the Electoral Commission should play a greater role in overseeing voting intention polling during election campaigns. In the light of the current challenges posed by digital media, and its ongoing work to ensure transparency relating to online campaign material, it is likely that the Electoral Commission will need to play an increasingly important role in helping to ensure that the democratic process in the UK is not subverted. (Paragraph 321)
20. *We welcome the Government's announcement of the Digital Charter, which will agree new standards for online behaviour. As identified in this report, digital technologies pose some very serious challenges and risks for democracy, which require urgent attention and decisive action. The Government should, without further delay, outline the specific actions it will take to address the Charter's priorities, including around the legal liability of online platforms and on limiting the spread and impact of disinformation, and publish the likely timescales for its programme of work. (Paragraph 322)*

21. *The Government should also ensure that the Digital Charter's work programme includes:*

- *Assessing the scale and impact of algorithmic filtering of news on social media sites on political engagement.*
- *Exploring issues relating to the transparency of funding for online political advertising, to address concerns raised by the Electoral Commission.*
- *Examining the progress made to improve digital literacy and assessing whether additional action is required.*
- *Tackling the spread by bots of political misinformation.*
- *Drawing together existing studies on the impact of digital and social media on politics.*
- *Collecting information about the actions taken to address these issues in other countries and governments.*

This work will clearly need to be conducted in close collaboration with, or even commissioned from, independent organisations including research bodies, businesses, civil society and other stakeholders. The challenges associated with digital media are fast-moving and the work outlined above should be pursued urgently. (Paragraph 323)

22. *We also recommend that the Government should initiate talks within the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Commonwealth, the Group of Eight (G8) and other international bodies, to discuss international approaches to tackling the problems posed to the democratic process by the rise of digital and social media. (Paragraph 324)*

APPENDIX 1: LIST OF MEMBERS AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members

Baroness Couttie
 Baroness Fall
 Baroness Ford (until 7 November 2017)
 Lord Foulkes of Cumnock
 Lord Hayward
 Lord Howarth of Newport
 Baroness Janke
 Baroness Jay of Paddington
 Lord Lipsey (Chairman)
 Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve
 Lord Rennard
 Lord Smith of Hindhead

Declarations of interest

Baroness Couttie
No relevant interests declared

Baroness Fall
Senior Advisor & Partner at the Brunswick Group LLP

Baroness Ford
Chairperson of STV Group plc, a public broadcaster and a commissioner of opinion polls

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock
No relevant interests declared

Lord Hayward
ComRes sponsors Lord Hayward's annual Lobby Election presentation

Lord Howarth of Newport
No relevant interests declared

Baroness Janke
No relevant interests declared

Baroness Jay of Paddington
No relevant interests declared

Lord Lipsey (Chairman)
Trustee of Full Fact at the beginning of the inquiry and during the course of the inquiry became Deputy Chair

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve
Baroness O'Neill has published and spoken widely on the ethics of communication and the quality of evidence provided by polling

Lord Rennard
Previous and possible future involvement in commissioning work from market research organisations and advertising in digital media

Lord Smith of Hindhead
No relevant interests declared

A full list of Members' interests can be found in the Register of Lords' Interests: <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/standards-and-interests/register-of-lords-interests/>

Professor Patrick Sturgis (Specialist Adviser)

In 2015 and 2016, chaired an independent inquiry sponsored by the Market Research Society and British Polling Council, the findings of which were published as the Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British general election opinion polls

APPENDIX 2: LIST OF WITNESSES

Evidence is published online at <https://www.parliament.uk/political-polling-digital-media> and available for inspection at the Parliamentary Archives (020 7219 3074).

Evidence received by the Committee is listed below in chronological order of oral evidence session and in alphabetical order. Those witnesses marked with ** gave both oral evidence and written evidence. Those marked with * gave oral evidence and did not submit any written evidence. All other witnesses submitted written evidence only.

Oral evidence in chronological order

- | | | |
|----|---|--------------------------|
| ** | Professor Will Jennings, Professor of Political Science and Public Policy, University of Southampton | QQ 1–13 |
| * | Nick Moon, Moonlight Research | |
| ** | Dr Benjamin Lauderdale, Associate Professor in Research Methodology, London School of Economics | QQ 14–22 |
| * | Dr Jouni Kuha, Associate Professor of Statistics and Research Methodology, London School of Economics | |
| * | Professor Susan Banducci, Professor and Director of the Exeter Q-Step Centre, University of Exeter | QQ 23–31 |
| * | Carl Miller, Research Director of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media, Demos. | |
| * | Professor Jane Green, University of Manchester | QQ 32–37 |
| ** | Professor Chris Hanretty, Royal Holloway, University of London | |
| * | Jean Pierre Kloppers, Chief Executive Officer, BrandsEye | QQ 38–46 |
| * | Deborah Mattinson, Co-Founder, BritainThinks | |
| * | Will Moy, Director, Full Fact | QQ 47–55 |
| * | Professor Helen Margetts, Director, Oxford Internet Institute | |
| * | Mike Smithson, Editor, Political Betting | QQ 56–63 |
| * | Matthew Shaddick, Head of Political Betting, Ladbrokes | |
| * | David Cowling, Former Editor of Political Research, BBC | QQ 64–70 |
| ** | Jim Waterson, Politics Editor, BuzzFeed | |
| ** | Professor Richard Tait CBE, Professor of Journalism, Cardiff University | QQ 71–76 |
| * | Sue English, Former Head of Political Programmes, Analysis and Research, BBC | |

- ** Matt Tee, Chief Executive, Independent Press Standards Organisation [QQ 77–82](#)
- ** Jonathan Levy, Director of News Gathering and Operations, Sky News [QQ 83–88](#)
- ** Professor Michael Thrasher, Co-Director of the Elections Centre and adviser to Sky
- ** David Jordan, Director of Editorial Policy and Standards, BBC [QQ 89–95](#)
- ** Ric Bailey, Chief Adviser, Politics, BBC
- * Ian Murray, Executive Director, Society of Editors [QQ 96–100](#)
- * Professor Nicolas Sauger, Professor of Political Science, Sciences Po [QQ 101–110](#)
- * Jonathan Heawood, Chief Executive Officer, IMPRESS [QQ 111–121](#)
- * Professor Farida Vis, Professor of Digital Media, Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University [QQ 122–126](#)
- * James Williams, Doctoral Candidate, Oxford Internet Institute [QQ 127–131](#)
- * Lord Kinnock, Former Leader of the Labour Party [QQ 132–138](#)
- ** Professor Sir John Curtice, President, British Polling Council [QQ 139–147](#)
- ** Simon Atkinson, Management Committee Member, British Polling Council
- ** Johnny Heald, Managing Director, ORB International [QQ 148–154](#)
- ** Ben Page, Chief Executive, Ipsos MORI
- ** Damian Lyons Lowe, Chief Executive, Survation
- ** Jane Frost CBE, Chief Executive Officer, Market Research Society [QQ 155–162](#)
- * Claire Bassett, Chief Executive, Electoral Commission [QQ 163–168](#)
- * Bob Posner, Director of Political Finance and Regulation and Legal Counsel, Electoral Commission
- ** The Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Cabinet Office [QQ 169–179](#)
- * Matt Hancock MP, the Minister for Digital, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport
- ** Peter Lee, Director of the Constitution Group, Cabinet Office

Alphabetical list of all witnesses

	Alan Turing Institute	<u>PPD0019</u>
	Dr Nick Anstead	<u>PPD0018</u>
*	Professor Susan Banducci (QQ 23–31)	
**	BBC (QQ 89–95)	<u>PPD0025</u>
		<u>PPD0026</u>
	BMG Research	<u>PPD0014</u>
*	BrandsEye (QQ 38–46)	
*	BritainThinks (QQ 38–46)	
**	British Polling Council (QQ 139–147)	<u>PPD0007</u>
**	Buzzfeed (QQ 64–70)	<u>PPD0023</u>
**	Cabinet Office (QQ 169–179)	<u>PPD0028</u>
	Commission des Sondages	<u>PPD0027</u>
	ComRes	<u>PPD0014</u>
*	David Cowling (QQ 64–70)	
*	Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (QQ 169–179)	
*	Electoral Commission (QQ 163–168)	
	Facebook	<u>PPD0030</u>
*	Full Fact (QQ 47–55)	
	Google	<u>PPD0029</u>
*	Professor Jane Green (QQ 32–37)	
**	Professor Chris Hanretty (QQ 32–37)	<u>PPD0011</u>
	Todd Hartman	<u>PPD0017</u>
	Oliver Heath	<u>PPD0011</u>
	Professor Ailsa Henderson	<u>PPD0012</u>
	Dr Narisong Huhe	<u>PPD0003</u>
*	Independent Monitor for the Press (QQ 111–121)	
**	Independent Press Standards Organisation (QQ 77–82)	<u>PPD0021</u>
*	Sue English (QQ 71–76)	
**	Ipsos MORI (QQ 148–154)	<u>PPD0014</u> <u>PPD0020</u>
**	Professor Will Jennings (QQ 1–13)	<u>PPD0009</u>
	Ron Johnston	<u>PPD0017</u>
	Kelvyn Jones	<u>PPD0017</u>
*	Lord Kinnock (QQ 132–138)	

*	Dr Jouni Kuha (QQ 14–22)	
*	Ladbrokes (QQ 56–63)	
**	Dr Benjamin Lauderdale (QQ 14–22)	<u>PPD0002</u>
	LucidTalk	<u>PPD0014</u>
	David Manley	<u>PPD0017</u>
*	Professor Helen Margetts (QQ 47–55)	
**	Market Research Society (QQ 155–162)	<u>PPD0010</u>
	Dr Jonathan Mellon	<u>PPD0008</u>
*	Carl Miller (QQ 23–31)	
*	Nick Moon (QQ 1–13)	
	Opinium	<u>PPD0014</u>
**	ORB International (QQ 148–154)	<u>PPD0014</u>
	Panelbase	<u>PPD0014</u>
	Charles Pattie	<u>PPD0017</u>
*	Political Betting (QQ 56–63)	
	Dr Christopher Prosser	<u>PPD0008</u>
	David Rossiter	<u>PPD0017</u>
	Royal Statistical Society	<u>PPD0022</u>
*	Professor Nicolas Sauger (QQ 101–110)	
	Dr Mark Shepard	<u>PPD0003</u> <u>PPD0004</u>
**	Sky News (QQ 83–88)	<u>PPD0005</u>
*	Society of Editors (QQ 96–100)	
	Michael Spagat	<u>PPD0011</u>
**	Survation (QQ 148–154)	<u>PPD0014</u>
**	Professor Richard Tait CBE (QQ 71–76)	<u>PPD0013</u>
	Twitter UK	<u>PPD0031</u>
*	Professor Farida Vis (QQ 122–126)	
	Anthony Wells	<u>PPD0015</u>
	Professor Leighton Vaughan Williams	<u>PPD0024</u>
*	James Williams (QQ 127–131)	
	World Association for Public Opinion Research	<u>PPD0006</u>
	YouGov plc	<u>PPD0016</u>

APPENDIX 3: INFORMAL BRIEFINGS

The following people gave informal oral briefings to the Committee:

- James Bell, Vice President of Global Strategy, Pew Research Centre.
- Professor Stephen Fisher, Associate Professor in Political Sociology; Fellow of Trinity College, University of Oxford.
- Alex Hern, technology reporter, The Guardian.
- Professor Will Jennings, Professor of Political Science and Public Policy, University of Southampton.
- Professor Ron Johnston OBE, Professor of Geography, University of Bristol.
- Peter Kellner, journalist, political commentator, and former President of YouGov.
- Professor Patrick Sturgis, Professor of Research Methodology and Director of the National Centre for Research Methods, University of Southampton.
- Professor Farida Vis, Professor of Digital Media, Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University.
- James Williams, DPhil student, Oxford Internet Institute.

APPENDIX 4: CALL FOR EVIDENCE

The House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media was appointed on 29 June 2017. The remit of the Committee is “to consider the effects of political polling and digital media on politics”.

The Committee membership is Baroness Coultie, Baroness Fall, Baroness Ford, Lord Foulkes of Cumnock, Lord Hayward, Lord Howarth of Newport, Baroness Janke, Baroness Jay of Paddington, Lord Lipsey (Chairman), Baroness O’Neill of Bengarve, Lord Rennard and Lord Smith of Hindhead.

The Committee will explore the following key issues and would welcome your views on the following questions. Please note that questions are not listed here in any order of importance.

The final report and recommendations of the Committee will focus on polling in the United Kingdom. However, the Committee is interested in receiving evidence setting out international comparisons where appropriate and relevant.

This is a public call for written evidence to be submitted to the Committee. The deadline is 1 September 2017.

Polling methods and accuracy

1. What are the most significant challenges for conducting political opinion polling and achieving accurate results? What measures could be taken which might improve the accuracy of political opinion polling?
2. How does the accuracy of political opinion polling compare to other forms of opinion surveys, such as polling on behalf of advocacy groups or official surveys?
3. What new methods have had the most impact on political opinion polling? Can technological innovation help to improve the accuracy of polling? What is your assessment of polls that produce constituency level estimates of voting intention?
4. Does the public have confidence in the accuracy of political opinion polls? How, if at all, has public confidence in the accuracy of opinion polls changed?
5. Can polls be influenced by those who commission them and, if so, in what ways? What controls are there on the output of results, for example to prevent ‘cherry picking’ of results?

Influence of polls

6. What impact do political opinion polls have on voters, politicians and political parties during election campaigns? To what extent does the publication of voting intention polls affect voters’ decisions, for example, in terms of turnout or party choice? What are the implications for election campaigns if polls are inaccurate?

International

7. How does the conduct and accuracy of political opinion polling in the UK compare internationally? Are there lessons to be learnt for polling in the UK from other political contexts?

Regulation

8. Is the polling industry's current model of self-regulation fit for purpose? Is there a case for changing the way political opinion polling is regulated? What regulatory changes, if any, would you recommend and what challenges are there to greater regulation?
9. Are there lessons to be learned for the regulation of UK political polling from other countries and political contexts? For example, should the publication of political opinion polls be restricted in the run-up to elections and referendums?
10. Should there be more transparency of the use of private polling by financial institutions? Does such polling require further regulation?

Media coverage of polling

11. Does the media report on opinion polls appropriately? What steps could be taken to improve how the media reports the results of political opinion polls? For example, should standards be set in relation to the reporting of political opinion polls, or should a code of conduct be introduced?
12. Has increased media demand for political opinion polls, or the speed of their reporting, had an impact on accuracy?

Digital and social media

13. What impact is the increased use of digital media channels having on the way in which the public engages with political opinion polling? How is political opinion polling shared across social media platforms and what impact does social media have on the accuracy and reliability of political opinion polling?
14. Can social media and other new forms of data successfully predict election outcomes? What are the challenges associated with using new forms of data to predict elections?

APPENDIX 5: THE POLLING INDUSTRY IN THE UK

What is the scale of the industry?

According to the Market Research Society, the UK is the second largest research market in the world, second only to the United States of America. In terms of research spend per head of population, the UK is the largest, with £61 per capita in 2015 (compared to £39 in the United States, £24 in Germany and £23 in France). The UK research industry is a £4bn market and has grown steadily over the last five years by an average of 6% per year. Based on its own assessment of the size and impact of the UK research and evidence market, the MRS stated that the UK ‘business of evidence’ market employs up to 73,000 people and generates £4.8 billion (in annual gross value added). It also told us that data analytics exhibits the highest growth rate at over 350% growth since 2012.²⁹⁶

Despite the size and scale of the UK research market, political opinion polling makes up only a fraction of the revenue taken by polling organisations. The Market Research Society told us that political opinion polling, although highly visible, represents only a small sub-set of the wider research sector, accounting for about 1% of work undertaken outside of a General Election.²⁹⁷ Election polling was described by many of the witnesses as a “shop front”²⁹⁸ for polling organisations—an activity aimed at increasing their public profiles and advertising their accuracy, but which brings in comparatively little money and is often done at a discount.²⁹⁹ Johnny Heald, Managing Director of ORB International, told us: “The notion that we are getting fat on political opinion polling is not true at all. The newspapers do not pay for opinion polling now.”³⁰⁰

How is polling conducted?

The key concern for polling organisations is to get a sample of people that is as representative as possible of the target population as a whole. The approach to acquiring the sample can have a significant impact on the poll’s accuracy. There are two main methods of sampling:

- **Random sampling:** where members of the target population are selected at random, such that all members of the target population have a known, non-zero probability of selection. Only randomly selected members of the target population can be included in the sample, substitution is not permitted.
- **Quota sampling:** This method involves ensuring that the sample matches the target population according to known characteristics of the population. For example, the census provides information on the general population distribution for age, sex, and region. Polling companies use this information to fill ‘quotas’ in the sample such that the sample matches the population on these characteristics. Quota sampling can be implemented in any interview mode, including online. YouGov, for instance, has a panel of volunteers who have agreed to complete surveys. The panel of volunteers complete detailed questionnaires about their demographic characteristics, which can be used to fill quotas of the desired characteristics to take part in particular polls.³⁰¹

296 Written evidence from the Market Research Society ([PPD0010](#))

297 *Ibid.*

298 [Q 25](#) (Carl Miller)

299 Written evidence from YouGov plc ([PPD0016](#))

300 [Q 151](#) (Johnny Heald)

301 House of Lords Library, Understanding and Sourcing Political Opinion Polls, Library Note, [LLN 2014/028](#), August 2014

Both random and quota sampling are susceptible to sampling bias—failing to achieve a sample of people that is representative of the target population on the characteristics of interest.

In order to address sampling bias, polling organisations employ a technique known as weighting. Weighting works in the same way as quota sampling—the sample is made to ‘match’ the target population according to known characteristics of the population. The data are adjusted such that groups which are under-represented in the sample are weighted up to match their prevalence in the population, while over-represented groups in the sample are similarly down-weighted. Weights will be derived using characteristics like gender, age, region, social class, level of education, housing tenure, and work status.³⁰²

Most opinion polls report a ‘margin of error’ for their estimates that arise due to sampling variability. The margin of error expresses the range of plausible values in the population for the characteristics estimated in the poll, given the sample size of the poll. For polls conducted using random sampling, the margin of error can be calculated using standard statistical formulae. However, since the vast majority of UK published polls use quota sampling, the margin of error is usually a ‘rule of thumb’ of + or–3% of the point estimate. This rule of thumb is based on the assumption of a simple random sample of approximately 1,000 respondents. It can be (approximately) interpreted as indicating that, over a very large number of replications of the same sample design, it is expected that only 5% of samples will produce an estimate outside the margin of error of the estimate.

302 UK Polling Report, Weighting: <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/faq-weighting> [accessed 20 March 2018]

APPENDIX 6: BRITISH POLLING COUNCIL: A JOURNALIST'S GUIDE TO OPINION POLLS

The Guide reproduced below is taken from the website of the British Polling Council.³⁰³

A Journalist's Guide to Opinion Polls

Prepared by Peter Kellner for ESOMAR (www.esomar.org)

1. What is an opinion poll?

An opinion poll is a scientific survey designed to measure the views of a specific group—for example a country's electors (for most political polls) or parents or trade union members.

2. What makes a survey “scientific”?

The two main characteristics of scientific surveys are a) that respondents are chosen by the research company, and b) that sufficient information is collected about respondent to ensure that the data in the published results match the profile of the group being surveyed. For example, if the population being sampled contains 52% who are women and 30% who are over 55, then a typical opinion poll will ensure that its published data contains these proportions of women and older respondents.

3. How does a poll choose a sample that is truly representative?

There two main methods. The first is “random” sampling, the second “quota sampling”. With random sampling, a polling company either uses a list of randomly-drawn telephone numbers or email addresses (for telephone or some Internet polls); or visits randomly-drawn addresses or names from a list such as an electoral register (for some face-to-face surveys). The polling company then contacts people on those telephone numbers or at those addresses, and asks them to take part in the survey.

“Quota” sampling involves setting quotas—for example, age and gender—and seeking out different people in each location who, together, match those characteristics. Quota polls are often used in face-to-face surveys. In addition, some Internet polls employ quota samples to select representative samples from a database of people who have already provided such information about themselves.

4. Do polling companies do anything else to achieve representative samples?

Usually they do. While well-conducted random and quota samples provide a broad approximation to the public, there are all kinds of reasons why they might contain slightly too many of some groups and slightly too few of others. What normally happens is that polling companies ask respondents not only about their views but about themselves. This information is then used to compare the sample with, for example, census statistics. The raw numbers from the poll are then adjusted slightly, up or down, to match the profile of the population being surveyed. If, for example, a poll finds that, when its survey-work is complete, that it has 100 members of a particular demographic group, but should have 110 of them (in a

303 British Polling Council, 'A Journalist's Guide to Opinion Polls': <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/a-journalists-guide-to-opinion-polls/> [accessed 20 March 2018]

poll of, say, 1,000 or 2,000), then it will “weight” the answers of that group so that each of those 100 respondents counts as 1.1 people. This way, the published percentages should reflect the population as a whole

5. Are other kinds of surveys bound to be wrong?

No. Just as a stopped clock tells the right time twice a day, unscientific surveys will occasionally produce right percentages. But they are far more likely to be badly wrong. The most common forms of unscientific surveys are phone-in polls conducted by television programmes and self-selecting surveys conducted over the Internet. These contain two defects. First, their samples are self-selecting. Such polls tend to attract people who feel passionately about the subject of the poll, rather than a representative sample. Second, such polls seldom collect the kind of extra information (such as gender and age) that would allow some judgement to be made about the nature of the sample.

6. But surely a phone-in or write-in poll in which, say, one million people take part is likely to be more accurate than an opinion poll sample of 1,000?

Not so. A biased sample is a biased sample, however large it is. One celebrated example of this was the US Presidential Election in 1936. A magazine, *Literary Digest*, sent out 10 million post cards asking people how they would vote, received almost 2.3 million back and said that Alfred Landon was leading Franklin Roosevelt by 57-43 per cent. The *Digest* did not gather information that would allow it to judge the quality of its sample and correct, or “weight”, groups that were under- or over-represented. A young pollster called George Gallup employed a much smaller sample (though, at 50,000, it was much larger than those normally used today), but because he ensured that it was representative, he correctly showed Roosevelt on course to win by a landslide. In the event, Roosevelt won 60% and Landon just 37%. The *Literary Digest* closed down soon afterwards.

7. How can you possibly tell what millions of people think by asking just 1,000 or 2,000 respondents?

In much the same way that a chef can judge a large vat of soup by tasting just one spoonful. Providing that the soup has been well stirred, so that the spoonful is properly “representative”, one spoonful is sufficient. Polls operate on the same principle: achieving representative samples is broadly akin to stirring the soup. A non-scientific survey is like an unstirred vat of soup. A chef could drink a large amount from the top of the vat, and still obtain a misleading view if some of the ingredients have sunk to the bottom. Just as the trick in checking soup is to stir well, rather than to drink lots, so the essence of a scientific poll is to secure a representative sample, rather than a vast one

8. But isn't there some risk of sampling error in a poll of 1,000 or 2,000 people?

Yes. Statistical theory allows us to estimate this. Imagine a country that divides exactly equally on some issue—50% hold one view while the other 50% think the opposite. Statistical theory tells us that, in a random poll of 1,000 people, with a 100% response rate, then 19 times out of 20, a poll will be accurate to within 3%. In other words, it will record at least 47%, and no more than 53%, for each view. But there is a one in 20 chance that the poll will fall outside this range.

With a sample of 2,000, the poll will be within 2% 19 times out of 20.

9. You say those calculations apply to “a random poll with a 100% response rate”. Surely that’s pie in the sky?

Fair point. Many polls are non-random, and response rates are often very much lower—well below 50% in many countries for polls conducted over just a few days.

10. So isn’t the real margin of error much larger?

Possibly—but possibly not. Here are two examples, at opposite extremes of this issue. Return to our example of an equally divided country. Suppose everyone who holds view A lives in the northern half of the country, while everyone who holds view B lives in the southern half. In that case, if pollsters ensures that half of each survey is conducted in the north, and half in the south, then their polls should be exactly accurate. Structuring polls in this kind of way is called “stratification”. Properly done, stratification can help to increase a poll’s accuracy.

Now make a different assumption about our mythical, equally divided country. Suppose people who hold view A are far more likely to express that view to strangers—such as survey researchers—than people who hold view B. Unless the polling company is aware of this bias, and knows how big it is, it could well produce results showing that view A is far more popular than view B. This is an example of a systematic error.

To measure the “true” margin of error, we would need to take account of random sampling error, and the effects of stratification, and possible systematic errors. The trouble is that it is hard, and arguably impossible, to be sure of the true impact of stratification and systematic errors. (If the impact of all systematic errors were known, a competent survey company would adjust its results to compensate for them.)

11. Doesn’t this mean that polls can’t really be trusted at all?

No. Polls may not be perfect, but they are the best, or least bad, way of measuring what the public thinks. In most countries where poll results can be compared with actual results (such as elections), well-designed polls are usually accurate to within 3%, even if they occasionally stray outside that margin of error. Moreover, much of the time, polls provide a good guide to the state of opinion, even allowing for a larger margin of error. If a well-designed, representative survey finds that the public divides 70-30% on an issue, then a margin of error of even 10% cannot alter the fact that one view is expressed far more widely than the other. However, it is true that in a closely-fought election, a polling lead (in a sample of 1-2,000) of less than 5% for one candidate or party over another cannot be regarded as a certain indicator of who is ahead at the time the survey was taken—let alone a guarantee of who will in the days, weeks or months ahead.

12. I have seen polls conducted by different, well-regarded, companies on the same issue produce very different results. How come?

There are a number of possible reasons, quite separate from issues to do with sampling error.

- (1) The polls might have been conducted at different times, even if they are published at the same time. If the views of many people are fluid, and liable to change in response to events, then it might be that both polls were broadly right, and that the public mood shifted between the earlier and the later survey

- (2) The polls might have asked different questions. Wording matters, especially on subjects where many people do not have strong views. It is always worth checking the exact wording when polls appear to differ.
- (3) There might be an “order effect”. One poll might ask a particular question “cold”, at the beginning of a survey; another poll might ask the same question “warm”, after a series of other questions on the same topic. Differences sometimes arise between the two sets of results, again when many people do not have strong views, and some people may give different answers depending on whether they are asked a question out of the blue or after being invited to consider some aspects of the issue first.
- (4) They might have been conducted using different methods. Results can be subject to “mode effects”: that is, some people might, consciously or sub-consciously, give different answers depending on whether they are asked questions in person by an interviewer, or impersonally in self-completion surveys sent by post or email/Internet. There is some evidence that anonymous self-completion surveys secure greater candour on some sensitive issues, than face-to-face or telephone surveys. So if two reputable companies, asking the same question at the same time, produce different figures, and one conducts its surveys by telephone and the other by the Internet, “mode effects” might be at work.

13. When someone sends me a poll, how can I tell whether to take it seriously or not?

Check the following:

- (1) Who conducted the poll?

Was it a reputable, independent polling company? If not, then regard its findings with caution. If you are not sure, then one test is its willingness to answer the questions below. Reputable polling firms will provide you with the information you need to evaluate the survey.

- (2) Who paid for the poll and why was it done?

If it was conducted for a respected media outlet, or for independent researchers, there is a good chance it was conducted impartially. If it was conducted for a partisan client, such as a company, pressure group or political party, it might still be a good survey (although readers/listeners/viewers should be told who the client was). The validity of the poll depends on whether it was conducted by a reputable company, whether it asked impartial questions, and whether full information about the questions asked and results obtained are provided. If such information is provided, then the quality of the survey stands or falls according to its intrinsic merits. If such information is not provided, then the poll should be treated with caution. In either event, watch out for loaded questions and selective findings, designed to bolster the view of the client, rather than report public opinion fully and objectively.

- (3) How many people were interviewed for the survey?

The more people, the better—although a small-sample scientific survey is ALWAYS better than a large-sample self-selecting survey. Note, however, that the total sample size is not always the only relevant number. For example, voting intention surveys often show figures excluding “don’t knows”, respondents considered unlikely to vote, and those who refuse to disclose their preference. By excluding these groups, the voting-intention sample size may be significantly lower than the total sample, and the risk of sampling error therefore greater.

Likewise, be careful when comparing sub-groups—for example men and women. The sampling error for each sub-group could be significantly higher than for the sample as a whole. If the total sample is 500, and made up of equal numbers of men and women, the margin of error for each gender (counting only random errors and disregarding any systematic errors) is around 6%.

(4) How were those people chosen?

If the poll purports to be of the public as a whole (or a significant group of the public), has the polling company employed one of the methods outlined in points 2, 3 and 4 above? If the poll was self-selecting—such as readers of a newspaper or magazine, or television viewers writing, telephoning, emailing or texting in—then it should NEVER be presented as a representative survey. If the poll was conducted in certain locations but not others, for example, cities but not rural areas, then this information should be made clear in any report.

(5) When was the poll done?

Events have a dramatic impact on poll results. Your interpretation of a poll should depend on when it was conducted relative to key events. Even the freshest poll results can be overtaken by events. Poll results that are several weeks or months old may be perfectly valid, for example if they concern underlying cultural attitudes or behaviour rather than topical events, but the date when the poll was conducted (as distinct from published) should always be disclosed.

(6) How were the interviews conducted?

There are four main methods: in person, by telephone, online or by mail. Each method has its strengths and weaknesses. Telephone surveys do not reach those who do not have telephones. Email surveys reach only those people with Internet access. All methods depend on the availability and voluntary co-operation of the respondents approached; response rates can vary widely. In all cases, reputable companies have developed statistical techniques to address these issues and convert their raw data into representative results (see points 3 and 4 above).

(7) Was it a “push poll?”

The best way to guard against “push polls” is to find out who conducted the survey. Reputable companies have nothing to do with “push polls”, a phenomenon that has grown in recent years in a number of countries.

The purpose of “push polls” is to spread rumours and even outright lies about opponents. These efforts are not polls, but political manipulation

trying to hide behind the smokescreen of a public opinion survey. In a “push poll,” a large number of people are called by telephone and asked to participate in a purported survey. The survey “questions” are really thinly-veiled accusations against an opponent or repetitions of rumours about a candidate’s personal or professional behaviour. The focus here is on making certain the respondent hears and understands the accusation in the question, not in gathering the respondent’s opinions. “Push polls” have no connection with genuine opinion surveys.

(8) Was it a valid exit poll?

This question applies only at elections. Exit polls, properly conducted, are an excellent source of information about voters in a given election. They are the only opportunity to survey actual voters and only voters. They are generally conducted immediately after people have voted, and are therefore able (in theory) to report actual behaviour. Pre-election surveys, even those conducted the day before the vote, cannot entirely avoid the danger that some people may change their mind, about whether to vote or which party/candidate to support, at the very last minute.

However exit polls are still prone to three distinct sources of error, apart from pure random error:

First, supporters of one candidate/party may be more willing to disclose their vote than supporters of another. This phenomenon, “differential non-response”, is especially hard to judge accurately in exit polls.

Second, some people may genuinely have thought they voted for a particular candidate/party, but may inadvertently have voted for someone else, or spoiled their ballot paper or (when using voting machines) not have completed the process properly. (This may explain the statistically slight but politically crucial difference between the exit poll in Florida in the US 2000 Presidential election, which indicated a narrow victory for Al Gore, and the declared result of a wafer-thin victory for George Bush.)

Third, exit polls may not have been conducted an absolutely representative group of polling stations. Even if the total sample is very large—say, 5,000 or more—it may suffer from an effect known as “clustering”. If, say, 50 polling stations are selected, and 100 voters questioned at each, the figures could be wrong if the overall political balance of those 50 polling districts is even slightly askew.

Reputable polling companies go to considerable lengths to avoid this problem. Other companies may conduct exit polls in a minimal number of voting locations using interviewers who do not have experience or specialist training in this method of polling.

APPENDIX 7: LETTER SENT TO LIAISON COMMITTEE

The Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media has, in the course of its inquiry, discovered that there is a growing concern regarding digital and social media. While we are considering some aspects of this as part of our inquiry, we are closely focussed on those issues which are related to political polling and impact on politics.

Beyond this, there are much wider issues bubbling away which relate to digital and social media. The Committee recognises that this is far too large a topic to be covered in the course of its current inquiry and has therefore asked me, in my role as Chair, to write to the Liaison Committee.

The Committee would like to propose the topic to the Liaison Committee as a prime candidate for selection amongst in next year's topics for *ad hoc* Committees.

Specifically the Committee feels that the following areas would benefit from further scrutiny:

- legal and regulatory structures in relation to digital and social media
- to what extent can media literacy and user knowledge address the issues
- the rise in the use of 'bots' and their potential misuse in the manipulation of social media
- how political advertising can be identified and the sources of funding traced.
- the influence of digital, social media and data analytics companies.

Lord Lipsey

21 November 2017

APPENDIX 8: ACRONYMS AND GLOSSARY

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BPC	British Polling Council
EU	European Union
IMPRESS	Independent Monitor for the Press
IPSO	Independent Press Standards Organisation
ITV	Independent Television service
MRS	Market Research Society
NHS	National Health Service
Ofcom	Office of Communications
UK	United Kingdom
WAPOR	World Association for Public Opinion Research