



## **Submission on behalf of the Market Research Society (MRS)**

### **Submission to House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media: Call for Evidence**

**31<sup>st</sup> August 2017**

#### **Background: About the Market Research Society (MRS) and the research market**

1. The Market Research Society (MRS) is the world's oldest and largest research association for those with professional equity in market, social and opinion research and in business intelligence, market analysis, customer insight and consultancy. MRS has 5,000 members in over 50 countries and has a diverse membership of individual researchers within agencies, independent consultancies, client-side organisations, the public sector and the academic community. MRS also represents over 500 research service suppliers including large businesses and SMEs plus a range of research teams within large brands such as Tesco, BT, ITV, Telefonica and Unilever which are accredited as MRS Company Partners.
2. MRS promotes, develops, supports and regulates standards and innovation across market, opinion and social research and data analytics. MRS regulates research ethics and standards via its Code of Conduct. All individual members and Company Partners agree to regulatory compliance via the MRS Code of Conduct and its associated disciplinary and complaint mechanisms<sup>1</sup>.
3. The UK is the second largest research market in the world, second to the US, and in terms of research spend per head of population is the largest sector with £61 per capita in 2015 (with the US at £39, Germany £24 and France £23)<sup>2</sup>. The UK research supply industry is a £4bn market and has grown steadily over the previous five years by an average of 6% per year<sup>3</sup>.
4. In 2016, MRS with PWC undertook an updated assessment of the size and impact of the UK research and evidence market, *The Business of Evidence 2016*<sup>4</sup>. One of the main findings from this report is the size of the UK 'business of evidence' market, which employs up to 73,000 people and generates £4.8 billion in annual gross value added (GVA). Data analytics exhibits the highest growth rate at over 350% growth since 2012. 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.
5. The UK research sector is recognised as leading the way in the development of creative and innovative research approaches including maximising the opportunities afforded by the development of new digital technologies. The methodological issues are explored and debated in the MRS' academic journal, the International Journal of Market Research. Excellence in research is recognised via the MRS awards.

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<sup>1</sup> See MRS Disciplinary Regulations and MRS Company Partner Complaint Procedure at [https://www.mrs.org.uk/standards/how\\_to\\_complain](https://www.mrs.org.uk/standards/how_to_complain)

<sup>2</sup> See the Research-Live Industry Report 2017: [http://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/MRS\\_RESEARCH%20LIVE%20REPORT%202017%20.pdf](http://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/MRS_RESEARCH%20LIVE%20REPORT%202017%20.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See ONS Annual Business Survey: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/business/businessservices/bulletins/uknonfinancialbusinessconomy/2015revisedresults>

<sup>4</sup> See Summary of Business of Evidence report 2016 at [https://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/boe\\_info.pdf](https://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/boe_info.pdf).

## **Overview of Submission**

6. MRS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Call for Evidence by the Select Committee looking at the effects of political polling and digital media on politics in the United Kingdom. We particularly welcome the consideration by the inquiry of the impact of the use of digital media in political polling as this is an underexplored area which warrants further detailed expert analysis.
7. Our response focuses on the efficacy of the current regulatory framework for the sector highlighting the benefits and robustness of the current framework for accredited professional researchers and research organisations. We also stress that pre-election polls, properly conducted and imbued with legitimacy, serve an important democratic accountability function and highlight the additional challenges (outside of methodological issues) that impact on the accuracy of polls and media coverage of polling. In particular this does not only hinge on the design of political opinion polls but also in ensuring that those interpreting the findings of polls, and reporting on them, sufficiently understand the research design and any key limitations.

## **Polling methods and accuracy/Influence of Polls/International**

8. Market research, which includes social and opinion research (including political polling), is the systematic gathering and interpretation of information about individuals or organisations using the statistical and analytical methods and techniques of the applied social sciences to gain insight or support decision making. Research itself does not seek to change or influence opinions or behaviour however it is acknowledged as an important vehicle that gives people a voice.<sup>5</sup> Social and opinion research is widely used by central and local government and public bodies, apart from opinion polling, to understand citizens' preferences and behaviours, gauge responses to proposals, measure impact and assist in developing appropriate policies used, for example, in improving educational, healthcare and police services. Political opinion polling i.e. surveys of political public opinion may be conducted for public media publication or for private use.
9. The accuracy of political opinion polling, has been under the spotlight, in the last two UK general elections of 2015 and 2017. It is clear that the methodology employed is one of the critical factors to ensuring accuracy in polling. Moreover determining turnout has become increasingly challenging. Examination of the factors leading to disappointing accuracy in the 2015 General Election were examined in the Joint British Polling Council/Market Research Society inquiry.<sup>6</sup> Several organisations directly involved in political polling also undertook their own studies and enquiries in this area leading to changes in methodological approaches and processes (partially implemented during the 2017 elections).<sup>7</sup>
10. Against this background of self-examination, reflection and introduction of new approaches by the sector, it is also critical to recognise that additional challenges

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<sup>5</sup> 69% participants – sector agreed See Business of evidence report 2016.

<sup>6</sup> See 2015 British General Election Report at [http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/3789/1/Report\\_final\\_revised.pdf](http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/3789/1/Report_final_revised.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> See Ipsos Mori Social Research Institute May 2016 Understanding Society <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/2016-07/Understanding-society-death-of-polling-may2016.pdf> ;Polling Error In The 2015 UK General Election: An Analysis Of YouGov's Pre And Post-Election Polls Douglas Rivers And Anthony Well [https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/x4ae830iac/YouGov%20%E2%80%93%20GE2015%20Post%20Mortem.pdf](https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/x4ae830iac/YouGov%20%E2%80%93%20GE2015%20Post%20Mortem.pdf)

(outside of methodological issues) will also impact on the accuracy of polls. These include:-

- i. Limited financial resources. 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 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.
- ii. Increasing complexity of the UK political landscape and fragmentation of UK politics impacts on modelling of results. It means that the approach to polling is more difficult and require that the results are reported with significant and suitable caveats.

11. Political polling is a feature of British elections. Pre-election polls, properly conducted and imbued with legitimacy, serve an important democratic accountability function. Within this context political polling gives people a voice and provides the opportunity for voters’ concerns to be heard. Recent evidence also indicates there is no evidence that political polls influenced voting<sup>8</sup>.

12. Investigation of political polling must also acknowledge that polling is conducted by a range of stakeholders and differences exist between private and public polling. Although political parties and financial institutions often commission private polls which impact on the decision-making process these are generally not made publically available. Consideration of any alternative mechanisms for control of political polling whilst unlikely to stop the use of private polls will conversely lead to tiered knowledge to the detriment of voters and UK citizens. These type of restrictions may also have an impact on markets and represent a clear danger of a possible democratic deficit from what would effectively be an uneven and unequal regulatory system.

13. International experience range from time embargoes prior to elections to restrictions for conducting and publishing exit polls. However it is debatable whether an embargo or ban on the publication of opinion polls can be successful particularly in light of the difficulty of enforcing borders in global media reporting and the use of online environment for political discourse. Maintenance of the freedom to conduct and publish opinion surveys should continue to remain as the core consideration.

## **Regulation**

14. The benefits of a well-functioning self-regulatory framework include greater efficiencies and costs benefits reducing the need for overly burdensome legal and regulatory restrictions. Compliance costs of the self-regulation framework are likely to be lower than the implementation costs of domestic legislation for a statutory regulatory framework. Self -regulation also provides a more flexible and nimble approach that keeps pace with innovation and technological developments. These anticipated benefits are reflected in the current self-regulatory framework that effectively regulates the wider research sector (and includes regulation of accredited organisations and researchers involved in political opinion polling). Demonstrated benefits include maintenance of quality and standards of research studies and accessibility of individuals to avenues for redress.

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<sup>8</sup> British Election Study 2017 Analysis [http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-findings/what-was-it-all-about-the-2017-election-campaign-in-voters-own-words/#.WZ1\\_NyiGPct](http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-findings/what-was-it-all-about-the-2017-election-campaign-in-voters-own-words/#.WZ1_NyiGPct)

15. Indeed the system has generally been accepted as robust and fit for purpose as reflected in recent parliamentary debate.<sup>9</sup> Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Lord Bridges of Headley) in stressing that Parliament did not intend to regulate the polling industry highlighted:

*"...Government have indeed no plans to regulate opinion polls...Many of your Lordships would agree that statutory regulation is not the answer to the issue that we are concerned about: accurate opinion polling. There is widespread agreement that opinion polls lubricate political debate. They help to get that debate moving and to air views, and regulation of any form of opinion polling would put us on a slippery slope towards an unwanted intervention in free debate, benefiting only those with deep pockets who could afford their own polls, as my noble friend Lord McColl so rightly said...A statutory regulator would be too slow and unwieldy to respond to the innovation and change brought about by big data, cognitive psychology and the digital revolution. Indeed, it would be an analogue solution in a digital age. Crucially, such regulation could—and in my view definitely would—stifle the very debate that opinion polls seek to inform. That is why government regulation is the wrong answer to the right question—a question about conduct and methodology..."*

16. This effectiveness is based on the long history of MRS regulation of the research sector. The MRS Code of Conduct was adopted in 1954 with the latest fully revised version of the MRS Code of Conduct coming into effect on 1 September 2014.<sup>10</sup> The 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. Regulation extends to both accredited individual members and organisations who must comply with the MRS Code. The MRS Code applies, whether they are engaged in consumer, business to business, social, opinion or any other type of research project. Accredited organisations are also required to have internal complaint systems and we encourage internal ethics reviews and oversight of projects. The commitment to uphold the MRS Code of Conduct is supported by the MRS Codeline service and a range of specialist guidelines.

17. The MRS Code of Conduct and associated binding regulations are at the centre of a network of regulatory instruments within the self-regulation framework. Accredited members must also comply with legal rules under the Data Protection Act 1998 (and from May 2018 the EU General Data Protection Regulation) together with, for those appropriately certified, ISO quality management standards on market, opinion and social research and/or data security, panels as well as quality trust marks such as Fair Data which MRS has developed and successfully exported to a number of overseas markets.<sup>11</sup>

18. Resolution of complaints is influenced by the complexity of the case and the timeliness of responses from complainants and accredited members.<sup>12</sup> Most complaints are resolved within 3 to 6 months and cases mediated by the Standards Department are resolved within a shorter time frame. The process and time frames are set out in Figure 1<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> See HL Debate on Regulation of Opinion Polling Bill 18 June 2015

<sup>10</sup> See MRS Code of Conduct 2014 at <https://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/mrs%20code%20of%20conduct%202014.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Fair Data is an MRS sponsored accreditation that shows individuals which companies handle their customers' personal data fairly. More information available at <http://www.fairdata.org.uk/>

<sup>12</sup> See summary of disciplinary process here: [https://www.mrs.org.uk/standards/how\\_to\\_complain](https://www.mrs.org.uk/standards/how_to_complain)

<sup>13</sup> Time frames for Standards Department and MRSB cases based on average time periods for 138 cases resolved between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2017; Time frame for Disciplinary Authority cases based on 4 cases resolved between 1 April 2006 and 31 March 2017

Figure 1: MRS Disciplinary Process and Time Frames



19. Disciplinary complaints to MRS have reduced over the past three years, largely reflecting improved internal complaint practices by organisations, addressing concerns at early stages resulting in fewer complaints. This is set out in Table 1 below. Complaint topics over the past three years include data protection, research design, panels and incentives.

Table 1: Accredited Member and Company Partner Disciplinary Cases 2014 - 2017

Year	Cases Upheld by MRSB	Cases Not Upheld by MRSB	Complaints resolved by Standards Department	Total Number Cases
<b>2016-2017</b>	1	0	20	21
<b>2015-2016</b>	2	0	51	53
<b>2014-2015</b>	2	2	60	64

20. Disciplinary processes are subject to ongoing review and monitoring. We have recently streamlined MRS’ processes to ensure that our disciplinary responsibilities continue to be carried out cost effectively and in line with regulatory best practice. [Revised Disciplinary Regulations 2017](#) have been issued together with [Indicative Guidance on Sanctions](#). The current Code is also being revised to ensure best practice ethical approach to data protection and recognition of evolving research techniques.

21. The British Polling Council also regulates polling organisations that publish polls to ensure standards of disclosure that provide consumers of opinion polling results that enter the public domain with an adequate basis for judging the reliability and validity of the results. This approach is complementary to the broader market regulation undertaken by MRS.

**Media Coverage of Polling**

22. Accuracy in media coverage of polling does not only hinge on the design of political opinion polls but also in ensuring that those interpreting the findings of polls, and reporting on them, sufficiently understand the research design and any key limitations. In this environment MRS continues to play a role in educating all stakeholders by



providing guidance: [Advice for non-researchers on how to interpret opinion polls; Guidelines for Questionnaire Design; CIPR MRS RSS Guidelines for using statistics in communications](#). Accessible training courses are also available.

23. Against this background, reporting on opinion polls by media institutions also appears to have improved. Greater emphasis is placed on balanced and contextual reporting of polls. Organisations such as the BBC have published clear guidance on reporting which include advice/requirements to ensure that stories are not led by polls; that data should be interpreted as 'suggesting' rather than 'proving' something.<sup>14</sup>

### **Digital and social media**

24. The MRS Business of Evidence report revealed the accelerated growth of the digital market. 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. Activities of accredited researchers are regulated by MRS, regardless of the platform or methodology used. The broader social media landscape is outside the purview of MRS regulation and the usage of these platforms for political activity raises broader pertinent issues for determination. Additionally the absence of any restrictions on the use of terms such as "survey" or "poll" means that "rogue" operators are able to utilise tools without the underlying requisite ethical framework or professional expertise.

25. MRS would be pleased to contribute to a wider discussion on approaches to regulation and digital media channels.

26. This submission is made on behalf of The Market Research Society, 15 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0JR. The Market Research Society is a company limited by guarantee, registered in England No. 518685. For further information or clarification on this submission please contact:-

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<sup>14</sup> See BBC Guidance here <http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidance/surveys/guidance-full>