



Liaison Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Political Polling Committee: follow-up

Wednesday 28 October 2020

10.50 am

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Members present: Lord McFall of Alcluith (The Chair); Lord Bradley; Lord Davies of Oldham; Lord Judge; Lord Lang of Monkton; Earl Howe; Lord Low of Dalston; Lord Smith of Hindhead; Lord Tyler; Baroness Walmsley; together with Lord Lipsey; Lord Hayward; Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve and Lord Rennard.

Evidence Session No. 2

Heard in Public

Questions 9 – 15

Witnesses

I: Professor Sir John Curtice, President, British Polling Council; Jane Frost CBE, CEO, Market Research Society.

Examination of witnesses

Professor Sir John Curtice and Jane Frost CBE.

Q9 **The Chair:** Welcome, Professor Sir John Curtice, president of the British Polling Council, and Jane Frost, the CEO of the Market Research Society. I hand over to Lord Lipsey, the former chair of the Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, to handle the questions.

Lord Lipsey: Welcome, Sir John, and Jane. Thank you very much for coming here today. We will have many detailed questions to ask you. As chair, I feel very grateful that the two associations at least took the report seriously, if they did not always go along with it, and useful progress has been made, which is somewhat different from the experience of very many Select Committees that make recommendations to government. These were not recommendations to government, and they were taken on their merits. We are grateful to you for that.

Let me start with a question about what led to this inquiry and what has happened since. The 2015 general election was not at all good for the polling industry, and the EU referendum was not so great. There was an excellent report by Patrick Sturgis, which sadly led to the 2017 election being an even worse year for polls. They have been redeemed by their excellent performance in 2019.

Could you tell us what methodological developments there were before the 2019 election? How influential was the Sturgis review? I believe you are doing a review of the 2019 election, having asked the individual companies to look at it earlier. Could you tell us how that is going?

Professor Sir John Curtice: I am probably going to say quite a lot of what Professors Sturgis and Fisher said earlier, but let me try to encapsulate it for the Committee in a few figures.

The crucial observation in the Sturgis report on the 2015 election was that, when you looked at the unweighted data the pollsters were collecting, before they attempted to weight and correct for errors in their samples, they were getting exactly the same even balance between Conservative and Labour. They were saying it was 34:34 in their published polls, and it was 34:34 in the unweighted data. In light of that, the crucial observation of the Sturgis committee was that, in 2015, there was a sampling problem.

Why might there be a sampling problem? It began to become evident in 2015, and it became even more evident in 2017 and continued in 2019, that we now have a remarkable relationship between age and party preference. The Labour Party is very popular among younger voters; the Conservative Party is very popular among older voters. That is a change. What, however, has not changed but has become more difficult is the relationship between age and propensity to turn out and vote. Younger people are less likely to do so.

In light of the Sturgis report, the principal conclusion to which people came for why the pollsters were getting too pro-Labour a sample was that, while

the young people they interviewed may well have turned out to vote and voted Labour, those younger people were not typical of younger people in general, who, although they might have Labour sympathies, were not turning out to vote in the same numbers as those who were older. Therefore, something needed to be done about that.

As Patrick and Stephen explained in their evidence, the pollsters then tried to deal with this by engaging in various forms of weighting and modelling. They used evidence from, for example, the British Social Attitudes survey and the British Election Study, two high-quality academic studies done by face-to-face random probability sampling, to work out what they should be saying about the proportion of younger people turning out to vote.

They did this, but the problem was that, in combining it with what they were doing already, they overegged the pudding. Many of the final polls in 2017 said that only about 4% or 5% of those who were going to make it to the polls would be 18 to 25 year-olds. If you look at the evidence from the British Election Study and British Social Attitudes in 2015, the figure you should be aiming for is 11% or 12%. Those studies are our best estimate of the age gap in turnout. They said that about 11% or 12% of the vote would come from younger folk, but the polls were weighted in such a way that they vastly underestimated the proportion of younger voters who were going to turn out and vote.

In fact, here is the irony. If, in 2017, the opinion polls had reported their unweighted data—I am not saying they should have, because they are not saying that will be right—they would have had a one-point Conservative lead on average. The correct figure was two and a half. Basically, their samples were like we usually expect opinion samples to be in the UK: they were a little light on the Tories and a little too heavy on Labour. In practice, they vastly underestimated the Labour position.

I will make clear that this is not the fault of the Sturgis committee's report, which was extremely helpful. It was the way people decided to deal with it. In part, this was by trying to improve the quality of the samples, which in a sense was what the committee was saying, but it was also to address what they thought were the limitations of their samples by statistical modelling. Basically, that led them down the wrong path. The principal change in 2019 was to reverse all that modelling. Every single company that engaged in heavy modelling of its data of that kind in 2017 reversed it in 2019.

We have started some internal work on 2019. To be frank, we have focused in the last six months on some of the other things that the committee wants us to talk about. Like everybody else, Covid has forced both personal and professional switches of priorities. From the data we have collected so far, it looks as though most of the final polls expected around 11% or 12% of the people who turned out to vote to be young voters. That is probably right, but here is one of the difficulties with 2019: holding an election just before Christmas. You cannot start interviewing people face to face at Christmas. Covid then meant the end of all face-to-face interviewing in the middle of March.

The British Social Attitudes survey, in any case, takes place in the second half of the year. That will not be face to face this year. It will use a different random probability methodology. It will ask people whether they voted and how they voted, but it will be as much to work out how good that sample is as to provide a benchmark. The British Election Study face-to-face sample has been caught in the middle of its fieldwork by Covid, so bear in mind, therefore, that some of the things that we would normally have available to us, such as high-quality poll surveys using regular methods, will not be available as a benchmark.

Looking internally at the evidence of the polls we have collected so far, the turnout proportions certainly look better than they did in 2017. Yes, some polls got a bit closer as a result of their weighting procedures. I can spot one that got it slightly worse. For others it did not make much difference. We are not in the world in 2019 where the weighting that the pollsters did systematically pushed them in one direction or the other.

The optimistic version of 2019 would be that the other things the pollsters have tried to do since 2015 are part of the answer as to why they were more successful: improving the quality of their samples in particular; trying to be more successful at getting hold of people who are not terribly interested in politics, and getting them to participate in the polls, because you will get closer to a reasonable estimate of turnout if you can get more of them.

That said, I think we have to be up front here. Although the polls were pretty close in 2019, and indeed one pollster got it absolutely bang on, on average the polls slightly underestimate the Conservative position and slightly overestimate the Labour position. To that extent at least, it is of a piece, although not a particularly bad example, of the kind of error that we know the polls have tended to make most often, 2017 being the exception.

To that extent at least, I do not think anybody in the polling industry will say that 2019 means we can lie back on our laurels. It is also true that Covid is forcing survey and polling methodology to think about how it adapts to the post-Covid future, just like everybody else.

Lord Lipsey: May I just press you a bit on the question of a review, which you said you would carry out in your letter to the Chair? You have explained that there have been lots of distractions and difficulties. However, just because you got it right does not mean that you should not have a review.

Professor Sir John Curtice: No, absolutely.

Lord Lipsey: In 2010, the polls were pretty well in the right place, but it turned out on close examination that this was largely because errors of one kind or another had cancelled each other out. Will you produce a document or review, not necessarily of the size and scale of Sturgis's, and will we all be able to comment on it?

Professor Sir John Curtice: Yes.

Jane Frost: John and I were obviously co-commissioners of Professor Sturgis's inquiry, but we were part of a lot of debates with our members over exactly what they should do about it. They almost contorted themselves to try to address the issues that were dealt with. They were very clear. This may now be a mistake the other way, as John has indicated, and the best thing would have been for them to trust their own data and actually leave it to do most of the intervention for them.

Our anecdotal evidence this year is that participation rates are significantly up all over the board. This is either boredom or an unintentional effect of the fact that participation in all the Covid work being done by the research companies that also poll is viewed as very important by the British public. It would be great if the elections were seen as quite that important.

Q10 **Lord Hayward:** A number of witnesses suggested to the Committee that there has been a decline in class-based voting in recent years and an increase in voter volatility. Do you agree? If so, is it becoming more difficult for pollsters to predict voting intentions? Is there a case for relying more on other metrics such as higher education?

Can I roll into that the question I asked the two previous witnesses, which you may have heard? It was in relation to the consistency of issues and leaders, or one leader in 2017 to 2019, which may have helped the accuracy. Professor Fisher gave some other reasons why 2019 may have been accurate and implied that a time lag from 2019 through to, say, 2023 makes it more difficult. Therefore, there is a greater probability that the polls will be inaccurate over that time period. Would you agree with those observations?

Professor Sir John Curtice: Let me deal with your principal question first. The short answers are yes, yes, no and yes. If you just take a table of what class you are in, however you measure it, and how you voted, indeed, there is virtually no relationship. If you control for one or two things such as age and educational background, you can still see some of the traditional class relationships whereby the Conservative Party does somewhat better among middle-class voters.

The electorate is more volatile, but that is not what the polls are trying to estimate. The polls are trying to estimate what people are going to do at a particular time.

Why does this not make things more difficult? It may be true that social class no longer anchors our politics, but something else does, and that something else did so very strongly in 2019. It is also the "something else" that is quite heavily responsible for the further breakdown of the traditional relationship between class and vote in 2019. That is Brexit. At the end of the day, 70% to 75% of those people who voted leave in 2016 voted for the Conservative Party. Only around 20% of them voted for one of the parties that were in favour of holding another referendum, at least in some circumstances.

On the other side of the fence, the remain vote was more split. Again, only about 20% of people who voted remain voted for the Conservative Party.

If you knew how people voted in the 2016 EU referendum, which of course is correlated with education and age, you had a pretty high chance of forecasting accurately what people were going to vote for. In fact, our politics at the moment is more heavily structured by a couple of demographics, age and education, and by one political issue, Brexit, than it has been for much of the last 20 or 25 years. To that extent at least, if you get those things right, you will be fine.

Specifically on education, because of the discovery of the relationship between education and how people were going to vote in the 2016 referendum, most of the polling industry started to introduce education as one of the quotas and/or weighting variables during the 2016 EU referendum. That then carried forward to 2017. It is not entirely straightforward. As you will be aware, there are myriad possible educational qualifications that somebody might have. If you go back to people of your age or my age, the names of the qualifications were completely different then from what they are now.

It is not that easy to come up with accurate estimates of exactly where people stand in the educational league table without asking a lot of questions. Inevitably to some degree, if all you can do is ask people, "Do you have a degree? Do you have an O-level, GCSE or higher whatever?" it will be somewhat rough and ready, but rough and ready is better than nothing. That is now pretty much standard practice within the polling industry, but it was in 2017, so it is not a magic bullet. It just carried forward to 2019.

Jane Frost: This indicates the need for encouraging investment and continued experimentation in polling between the major events. We need to test what effect factors influencing society and decision-making are having on the polls. The interesting thing for me is reflected in what a lot of the pundits are saying about the American elections. If in doubt, a good proxy is leader performance. Just by concentrating on voting intention, we may not get the richness of what we ought to be looking at. A lot of the polls do look at leader performance.

The other issue, and again the American polls are subject to this, is the fracturing between the popular vote and constituencies, in our case, or the Electoral College in America. We also have to look at things like the way people vote and if any changes are made to that. Particularly in America, the vast increase in the postal vote will obviously be an element of how anything predictive evolves.

I am sure there will be things that we need to note between now and the next election. It behoves us as a professional body to ensure that those discussions are as broad and deep as possible, so that they do not happen just before any event but as part of a process. We should also continue to encourage the education of people in the statistical bases that they need for this. We are seeing fracturing data between pre Covid and post Covid. We will need to discuss with the ONS, for example, how it handles identifications and classifications. All our data has frankly been completely mucked up by the loss of face to face, with random probability as a result.

Professor Sir John Curtice: Can I reply to the second half of Lord Hayward's question, which I have now remembered? It was about Professor Fisher's comments that it will be more difficult in 2023 or 2024. In a sense, one thing that has made polling easier more recently is that we have had lots of elections and referendums. The two between them give us some pretty firm baselines. We will leave aside what might happen north of the Anglo-Scottish border. South of the border at least, I imagine there is little prospect of any referendum between now and 2023 or 2024 to provide the kind of anchor that Brexit did. However, Brexit itself may still provide an anchor. Who knows? People's views about Brexit are proving to be remarkably stable.

The longer the distance between events, the more people you have entering the electorate who could not vote in the last election. Therefore, you cannot correct for them by past vote weighting. Yes, there is also a greater probability that people will forget how they voted. Bear in mind that Professor Fisher also told you that organisations such as YouGov and Opinium are basically running panels. The point is that they do not wait until 2023 to ask you how you voted in 2019. The moment you sign on, they ask, "How did you vote?" Therefore, they are trying to weight their data not to people's recall of how they voted four years ago, but to something that might have been collected quite proximate in time to 2019. That means the polls are not without the ability to deal with this problem to some degree. The greater the gap between events, the greater the difficulty of using recall as an accurate form of weighting.

Q11 **Lord Rennard:** There was very considerable admiration among most members of the Committee for the work of the Market Research Society and the British Polling Council, first, on trying to improve polling methodology and, secondly, on trying to improve the coverage of the polls as and when they are published. They are two different things, so I will ask a two-part question.

First, on the methodology, this is prompted by what Professor Curtice was just saying about the difficulty in assessing how many young people should be in the sample. This is particularly difficult. Is there a problem with methodology in identifying how many young people should be in the sample because of problems with the electoral register? We know from the Electoral Commission data in 2019 that 94% of people over 65 are on the electoral register, but only 66% of young people are on the electoral register. It is part of the methodological problem that you are surveying the population as it is who ought to be entitled to vote because they are 18, but a lot of the people who are 18, 19, et cetera, are not actually registered to vote and cannot vote.

Professor Sir John Curtice: To be honest, if you do an opinion poll when an election is not in the immediate offing, you often will not check with the respondent whether they are on the electoral register. However, it is pretty common practice when we get to final polls, towards polling day, for the pollsters to ask people whether they are on the register. Of course, there is still the question of whether they are.

It just so happened that I looked at this data in advance of this session. In its final poll, Ipsos MORI asked people whether they were on the register. It picked up a very substantial gradient between reporting being on the register and age. It also found that younger people were less likely to say they were going to turn out and vote. As a result, by multiplying those two things together and taking them both into account, Ipsos MORI ended up with an anticipated age gap in turnout that was very substantial. That is only one way of doing it. The point is that, once you get towards polling day, the polling companies are aware of this. They will be much more likely to at least nudge people and say, "Hang on. Are you on the electoral register?"

Of course, people do not necessarily know they are on the electoral register. One thing that bedevils the process of online registration during an election campaign is that people do not have online access to the register, but they read adverts that say, "Register. Make sure you can vote." However, lots of people apply to go on the electoral register who are already there. People are concerned that they are not on when in fact they are. Knowledge is not perfect in this area.

Lord Lipsey: Like many Peers, I am on the electoral register twice, one in each place I live in, but I still cannot vote. It is a sore point.

Jane Frost: Most of the money of companies such as Ipsos MORI and Kantar comes from other research. All that research and all the methodologies they are developing are used in the way they do polling. This is an iterative process. It helps that vast amounts of money in this country are spent on wider research of both public and commercial kinds. All those feed into the knowledge of the big pollsters that are also doing research. That is important. We should remember that the UK is the biggest country in the world per capita for research, so we know a lot of what we are talking about.

We took your Committee's commentary to heart. It is not that we have not tried to give guidance before. We have worked very hard with the PR profession and the Royal Statistical Society to get guidance out. This time round, we did two new things. First, we produced a hub on the website with a lot of resource about polling on it. It was one of the most viewed things on our website over the period of the election with 1,600 unique views. That was brilliant.

Secondly, we worked hard with the regulator IMPRESS to produce a usable and friendly guide to how to report polls. Thank you very much for chairing our media launch of that. We did two things with it. Obviously it went online. We had an interview that went online with Professor Curtice as well. We also had a webinar to support it. We had 400 views of Professor Curtice's interview. We had 570 complete downloads of the guidance from the site. IMPRESS itself had 178 downloads from the site. It also proactively sent the guidance out to all its members, so that was a further 160. We had 106 registrations to the webinar.

We think this has actually been quite a successful and proactive push. Just three days ago, we got a call from a big data journalism website in Washington saying that it had come across this guidance and would like to push it out in America and the countries that are signed up to datajournalism.com. I do not yet have the stats on that, but it was noticeable that they said it was one of the best pieces of clear and simple guidance things they had seen.

Q12 Lord Smith of Hindhead: The Select Committee recommended that the BPC co-ordinate training for journalists on how to read, interpret and report on polling data. Sir John, I understand that you were awaiting replies to letters you had written to the Broadcast Journalism Training Council and the National Council for the Training of Journalists, which I assume are the Oxford and Cambridge of hacks. First, Sir John, have you received replies to these letters? Secondly, do you anticipate any improvement to the training of journalists?

Professor Sir John Curtice: I will answer your question directly in a moment, Lord Smith. Here is just a bit of backdrop. When we were thinking about how to respond to the Select Committee's recommendation, I initially went down the path of trying to establish which institutions were providing training. I was aware that, once upon a time, virtually all journalists went to Cardiff University. If you managed to get something into the syllabus at Cardiff University, you probably trained most of the people who would end up working on national newspapers.

We rapidly discovered that many an institution is offering journalistic training these days. Therefore, I eventually came to the conclusion that, if something systematic is to be achieved, it will need to be done through an organisation that has systematic leverage in the training of journalists. That is not the BPC, so you are right. Having had that lightbulb moment, I then wrote to the two organisations you referred to. We are now in contact with the NCTJ. Inevitably, that was something else that got delayed by Covid, but it is now progressing. I had a discussion with them during the summer. We agreed in the light of that that the BPC would come up with a suggested module.

The direction in which we are going is that, as part of the suite of accredited courses that the NCTJ evaluates, there should be something on the reporting of opinion polls. We have now agreed that this should also be done in collaboration with the MRS. We have submitted to NCTJ what we thought such a module should cover. They have promised to come back to me next week with an indication of their proposal for what it should cover. They have also launched an e-learning site, I think last week. Yes, this is in progress. We are working with them in the hope that they will become the organisation that will effectively say, "We should provide training".

It is undoubtedly true that journalism has historically been a profession in which the skill that is valued is the ability to weave words. That is still true, but data journalism is now also a strain within the journalism industry. Some value is now being placed by a number of news organisations on having at least somebody on the staff whose principal ability is to

understand statistics, take a narrative out of them, and work with the journalists whose skill is to weave words to come up with something that is both statistically literate and literate in expression. The impression I have, therefore, is that the profession has moved on to that degree.

Basically, that is what we are trying to do. I do not think this will be something that every journalist has to do, to become accredited through the NCTJ, but it will certainly be an option available for journalists, not simply as young journalists, but as part of their ongoing professional training. That is the entrée into which we are trying to get and on which we are trying to progress.

Jane Frost: There is more work to be done with the PR agencies because they commission some of these. Sometimes we get third-hand reporting. A PR company commissions something and writes a press release that may not be very appropriate. That then just gets picked up and reused. We think that is still an issue that needs to be addressed. We are working on it with the PR people.

Lord Lipsey: I would like to make one ex cathedra statement. Last night, I enjoyed reading the shorter guidance to journalists that you came out with two or three weeks ago. It is really excellent. It will be very valuable to those who read it and, more importantly, to those who read the words they write. They should be able to get it right now. There is no excuse left.

Q13 **Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve:** Sir John, you have more or less answered parts of my question, so I will condense it and add on a bit. The Select Committee made quite a number of optimistic recommendations of tasks that the BPC might take on. On the whole, it has answered, "No, not us". Who should do it? How should it be done?

Professor Sir John Curtice: As I understand it, a lot of the Committee's concern was to do with the reporting of opinion polls. There are a couple of reasons why the BPC is not equipped to deal with getting involved in challenging the reporting of polls that heavily. First, at the end of the day, we are not professional journalists. Although I have personally dabbled in journalism, none of us in the polling industry has training in journalism. We do not necessarily have particular expertise in that area. There is an obvious question of the extent to which we therefore have standing.

Secondly, and this is true more broadly, the BPC is a small organisation that punches well above its weight in terms of its influence. We basically do that by providing moral leadership to the industry. We are in a slightly different position from the MRS here. We do not have professional indemnity insurance. If we were to say that we thought the *Daily Mail*, or the *Financial Times*, had been utterly unprofessional in its reporting of opinion polls, and the newspaper decided to take us to court, that would frankly be the end of the BPC. We do not have the resources to deal with that.

In the light of the Committee's report, et cetera, we try on our website to make it clear to people what sections of British civil society are responsible

for various aspects of the reporting of opinion polls. If you think a company has not been honest or transparent about what it has done, and has not published what it should have about what it has done, you come to us. If you think the company has been unethical and unprofessional as a polling organisation in conducting a poll, you go to the MRS. The MRS has ethics procedures. If you think the BBC has misreported an opinion poll, the first port of call is to go to the BBC, which then goes to Ofcom. If it is any other broadcaster, you go to Ofcom. If it is a newspaper, you go to IMPRESS or IPSO.

There are organisations out there that are responsible for the regulation of the media. They are the professional bodies that are responsible for that. Frankly, I do not think the BPC can do it. To put it slightly differently, you would not necessarily expect Ofwat to regulate what Ofcom did. That is the danger of the model that we were getting into. We can argue about whether what we now have is the way things should be, but civil society is sometimes relatively untidy. I will simply say that the history of attempts by the state to intervene in press regulation is not necessarily terribly happy. Therefore, there is no guarantee that the Government would necessarily be successful in achieving its objectives, even if it were trying to become more heavily involved in this area.

Lord Lipsey: Jane, you are one of the organisations John mentioned as taking a certain kind of complaint. Indeed, I remember making one to you, which we will not go into in this meeting.

Jane Frost: John is absolutely right that the reporting of polls is not something we can determine. We do as much as we can to influence the way things are reported. Indeed, there is a requirement within our code of conduct that people conducting polls do their best to ensure that it is properly reported. In the end, they can say yes only to what they are shown. If they are not shown something in advance, they cannot comment on it.

John is equally right that it is an expensive and complex procedure to have an ethical code of 60 rules such as ours. We need to make sure that we have at least 20 or 25 different types of experts standing by for the management of complaints. We have experts in children, black and ethnic minorities, online and face to face, because these things are very complex to determine.

We get a number of complaints, which we handle at the highest level, on things such as leading questions. Again, John is completely right. We would say that the design of polls is covered by the MRS code of conduct. There is a section in that, for example, about leading questions, and ensuring that participants can make their views known without being led to certain answers. That is covered off. It is a complex code, although we have simplified it twice recently, and we update it every couple of years to make sure that it is completely in line with regulation. We are quite clear that it is Ipsos and IMPRESS, and IMPRESS has stepped up to the plate with us, that have the responsibility for guarding the reporting.

Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve: I thought those were two very informative answers, but I have a very small follow-up: if not you, who?

Professor Sir John Curtice: The Committee was looking to somebody to say, "We think that this poll has been misreported". The organisation that gets closest to that is Full Fact. We have been in correspondence with them recently and we are probably going to do one or two things in light of what they said. Full Fact tries to call out what it thinks is misrepresentation, but that is not just misrepresentation by a newspaper reporter. It might be by a politician. It might even be by the Government. Dare I say it, it might even be by members of the House of Lords. It might also be the organisation that I am now representing. We are all potentially subject to Full Fact's rigours.

Again, that is an initiative of civil society that has happened. If you think that IPSO and IMPRESS, rather than simply responding to complaints, should be proactive in this area, and should try to call out the way in which journalists are practicing their trade, best of luck to you. They are the organisations that are responsible for trying to regulate the press. If you want somebody to try to call out misreporting, they are probably the direction in which to go.

As result of the correspondence with Full Fact, and we are yet to discuss this as an organisation with the broader membership, we have thought of one or two ways to tighten up our rules that might strengthen the contractual relationship between our members and at least the primary commissioning organisation. What we have in mind would at least try to ensure that the numbers in any release are factually correct. However, nobody can control the spin or interpretation that a journalist decides to put on any set of numbers.

Q14 **Lord Tyler:** These have been two fascinating sessions, but I have one small disappointment. The witnesses and the questions have concentrated overly on the intention to vote and the vital last days of a general election campaign. If I might illustrate that, equally important from our point of view as amateur observers of this fascinating art—or is it a science?—are attitudes to Scottish independence in Scotland, approval of the Government's attitude, particularly in relation to Covid, and approval of leaders.

In that respect, I would like to just pursue for a moment the issue of the inadequacy and unreliability of the register. Would either or both organisations like to refer to that? In normal times, in "peacetime" as it were, the register is even more inaccurate than it is when everybody is hyped up to vote in a general election. At the moment, the register may be up to 9 million people adrift. Both Jane and John will be aware that there are movements in the political world to try to get the Government to step up their efforts to improve registration. Do either or both organisations agree with the need to do so? Are they doing something about it in making recommendations?

Jane Frost: I am afraid that we are not doing anything to lobby to improve registration. That is not within our remit. Outwith the major election events, we are working with our members to look at the way they are ensuring that underrepresented samples get represented within research. There is a piece of work under way at the moment looking at the way that black and minority ethnic samples are taken. That is a major effort. Of course, that is a major underrepresentation on the register. Are we putting political pressure on? The answer is no. Are we working with our members on the way they sample underrepresented people? Yes, very definitely. It is a major concern of ours.

Professor Sir John Curtice: To be honest, I was not entirely sure of the connection between the two halves of Lord Tyler's question. The answer to this second half is no, but the state of the register is a long-standing issue of concern.

Let me go back to his first point. He is absolutely right. Arguably, opinion polls can often be much more influential outside of election times than during them. In the case of Scottish independence, it is clear that recent opinion polling has had a substantial impact on people's perceptions of what is going on in Scotland and will probably also have an impact on how those on both sides of the argument deploy themselves.

It is important to note the vast amount of information being collected in myriad ways—some of it funded, some of it unfunded—by the polling industry at present about people's reactions to Covid. So far as Covid is concerned, frankly it is irrelevant whether people are on the register. What is crucial about Covid is how all of us who are currently resident in the UK, irrespective of whether we are on the register or whether indeed we have the right to be on the register, are likely to behave and react. It is crucial to managing the public health aspect of the pandemic.

At the moment, polls of attitudes towards Scottish independence are simply telling you where the balance of opinion among people currently resident in Scotland is. There are debates about whether that should even be the franchise in the first place. This is an important aspect of what polling does: it can influence how people react. All one can say is that, in Scotland, there are nine opinion polls from five or six polling companies, all of which show the same trend and the same underlying structure to that trend. We can still argue about whether it is 54:46 or whether it might be narrower, but it is very difficult to deny that something has changed. To be honest, nobody on either side of the debate seems to be questioning the evidence in this instance. The UK Government evidently have access to private polling and they have in no way attempted to challenge what the opinion polls say.

Q15 **Lord Lipsey:** Finally, can I turn our eyes across the Atlantic? We are seeing a veritable tsunami of polls coming from the United States, in the face of the fact that most people think that the polls at the last presidential election got it wrong by calling for Clinton when it was won by Trump. In fact, the polls were quite close in the 2016 election; there was a 4% average Clinton lead and it was actually just under 2% on the day. Because that was

perceived as a failure, the polls have had to examine their belly buttons and think about how they could do better this time round. Their results have been pretty consistent. Have you noted any technical developments there in the way polling is conducted that might be of application in this country?

Professor Sir John Curtice: No. I do not follow US polling closely, though at about this stage in the US electoral cycle, I cast my eyes over what is going on. I have two observations. As Patrick and Stephen reported to you in the first session, the polls in the US are now factoring education into their weighting and filtering. That is for much the same reason we have already been doing so here, as I explained earlier. That is because education was an important correlate with how people voted in 2016 in exactly the same way as it is now an important correlate here. They have learned that lesson and factored it in.

It is crucial to remember that the polls were not wrong in 2016. The average lead for Clinton in the final national polls was 3% and it ended up being 2%. That is as good as you can get. The difficulty was that the state polling, particularly in Midwest states such as Michigan and Wisconsin, was light and patchy in quality, not least because these states were not thought to be up for grabs.

Even bearing that in mind, given the history of the polls in the US, somebody needs to be at least six points ahead in the final state polls before you can be 95% sure that they are going to win that state. Looking at the final state polls in 2016, you could see that the numbers were not there for Clinton. You could see how Trump could just do it if the cookie crumbled in North Carolina, Florida, Pennsylvania and the Midwest states. That is exactly what happened.

You can still now see a pathway for Trump. It certainly means winning Pennsylvania. It probably means winning Wisconsin and Minnesota, but it also means winning Florida, Texas, Georgia, Arizona and a whole load of other states, many of which at least have Biden narrowly ahead. In other words, yes, you can see how Trump could still win, but before the pathway works many more cookies have to crumble in the right direction for him than had to do so in 2016. It only needs one or two of those states not to fall in that direction and Biden should be home and dry.

There will be high levels of mail-in balloting, something like one-third of the vote. I attended a lecture last night by somebody who knows far more about this, Chris Carman at Glasgow University, and his advice was not to bother to stay up because we will not know at 7 am on Wednesday next week who has won. There will be too many states where the count is not finished because of the high level of mail-in and early voting that has not been counted. Therefore, the result may well be in doubt for quite some considerable time. That is because of much higher levels of mail-in voting and the fact that it is disproportionately Democrats who are engaged in this.

Lord Lipsey: One important feature of America is the extraordinary quality

of the sites reporting on opinion polls. FiveThirtyEight and RealClearPolitics are examples. That has led to some really superb poll reporting. For example, the *New York Times* reporting of the contest is really sophisticated and brilliant. I have not seen a single decent piece in a British newspaper about the American polls, what might be their flaws and what might be their strengths. Is there anything we can learn from that?

Professor Sir John Curtice: The honest truth is that the journalists who follow US politics are not data journalists. Somebody like John Burn-Murdoch at the *Financial Times* probably thinks that coronavirus is more important and has been doing brilliant work in that area. A lot of data journalism capacity on this side of the water that might otherwise have been expended on the US election is preoccupied with dealing with Covid, so perhaps we have rather less than would otherwise be the case.

I should declare an interest here. I attempt to write about the polls during the election for a number of media organisations, so I have to leave you to judge whether any of that contributed to the sum of human knowledge. One tries through that to give people some guidance as to where we are, where we might be going, et cetera. It is for others to judge whether enough of that is done.

In the earlier session, you asked, "Where do we find the polls?" If you want to know why a poll says what it does, all the BPC's members are required to post on their website the detailed tables and the questions that have been asked. If there are questions that have not been published, but which are thought to be relevant to questions that have been published, at least the wording of those questions has to be published. I can point you to recent examples of that. Only some questions have been released, but other questions are thought to have been pertinent because of the question order, and that has been made public.

Anthony Wells at ukpollingreport.co.uk has been compiling voting intention polls for years. There are a number of others like Britain Elects. I personally run a site that aggregates pretty much all the polling on Scotland and devolution throughout the UK. I also have one on Brexit. If you want to know what the polls are currently saying about voting intention, just put "polls next election" into Google and the Wikipedia page will come up. It is a very good wiki page that provides you with links to all the individual polls.

Yes, you have to be an anorak to find the technical detail, but this is one area where we are ahead of the States despite its transparency initiatives. Australia is now imitating us. We have a very high transparency of polling information in the UK. If at the end of the day you look at a poll and say, "I really don't understand what you get", you write to the polling organisation and it is under an obligation to give you a reply. Whatever you think about the merits of questions that are asked and the methods, et cetera, at least the sins of the polling industry are there for everybody to behold, if that is what you think they are.

Jane Frost: We learn a lot from the States, but John is right that, where we go, the States and Australia frequently follow because of the depth and

quality of the whole research sector in the UK. We have a formal tripartite with what we would regard as our equivalents in the US and Australia, but none of them has regulatory responsibilities. There is nobody there overseeing ethical and professional standards as we are doing. They are much more fractured in their professional representation and training. We listen and watch, but we also send a lot of stuff over there. We are a net exporter of quality and training.

I hope you will not find this facetious. During the last election, I followed some of the commercial research being done into Trump and Clinton. The commercial research called for Trump, particularly one British researcher who had looked at brand identity and found that Trump's hair was so famous that he was going to lead certain people to identify with him and, therefore, possibly vote for him. The commercial application of research techniques can be quite edifying in how these perceptions of political intention are viewed.

Lord Lipsey: Thank you very much. We have got to a natural conclusion. I have to say that, if Trump wins, I will give up opinion polling. It will be a lot harder than for anyone else to give up 40 cigarettes a day, I can tell you.

I would like to thank both our witnesses in this session, and indeed witnesses throughout, for their clear, concise and very wise responses. As I said earlier, John and Jane, I hope you will put up a transcript of this session on your websites. It updates a lot of stuff that was in our report and gives the latest on the technology, all in one short source.

I hope it would also be played to every journalist in the course of their training. I thank the staff for getting it together. I thank all noble Lords who have come along, especially those who have sat patiently for nearly two hours without opening their mouths, but have contributed by their presence. John and Jane, thank you both very much for coming.

Professor Sir John Curtice: Thank you very much for chairing the session and to Lord McFall for making sure that it happened. Thank you very much indeed.

Jane Frost: We will certainly put it on our website.