

**GENERAL ELECTION**  
   2010

# General Election Q+A

22 March 2010

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# Ipsos MORI Election Q&A

## How long has Ipsos MORI been conducting political polls?

Ipsos MORI has the longest pedigree of any of the companies who are regularly publishing - political polls in Britain. Ipsos MORI was formed in 2005 by the merger of Ipsos UK and MORI, and MORI has been regularly publishing polls since the mid 1970s, with election polls at every general election since 1979.

## Why do the various voting intention polls from the different companies polling in Britain sometimes find different results?

There can be several reasons. Unless the polls were conducted over exactly the same period, it may be simply that public opinion has changed — the public is volatile, especially during election campaigns, and remember we are NOT predicting what will happen at the election in the future, we are only measuring what the public thinks and says AT THE MOMENT, a "snapshot" measurement of a point in time.

Then, even if the polls really are measuring that same point in time, we cannot avoid the possibility of sampling error. Although it is a simplification of the true position, we normally state this in terms of a "margin of error"; for a poll with a sample size of 1,000, the margin of error is plus-or-minus three percentage points on the measurement of each party's share, so that a poll that records the Conservatives as having 40% of the vote is really only stating that the Conservative share is between 37% and 43%. In fact many polls published these days have an effective sample size of less than 1,000, because they are only concerned with the views of that part of the sample who are likely to vote or because they are very heavily weighted, and so the margin of error is correspondingly larger. And even beyond that, we cannot prevent the occasional "rogue poll" — sampling theory dictates that we must expect one poll in every twenty to be outside the margins of error.

But another possibility is differences in methodology between the various polling companies. The companies often take a slightly different view of the best way to achieve an accurate result, and produce their figures in different ways; and, indeed, the published figures are not always measuring the same thing. To understand what a poll means, it is essential to understand what it is measuring.

## How much of Ipsos MORI's methodology is secret?

None of it. Ipsos MORI's chief principle in the way we publish our political polling data is transparency. As far as possible we aim to report directly the questions that we put to the public and the proportions of our sample that have given us each possible answer in reply, and to make clear all details of the methodology, both in conducting the interviews and in interpreting the data that results. Where it is necessary to explain the implications of the data or to further manipulate it so that its meaning is clear, we try to explain at every step what we have done and why, but also to ensure that the raw data remains available so that anybody who doubts our analysis can see for themselves and know what the answer would have been if different assumptions were made. We use no "black box" methods or trade secrets in our opinion polling.

Exact question wording and “topline results” are normally published in full for all our published surveys on our website ([www.ipsos-mori.com](http://www.ipsos-mori.com)), together with the detailed computer tables, which show weighted and unweighted case counts. Various aspects of our methodology are set out below.

## How do you conduct your polls?

Our political and voting intention polls are currently conducted by telephone (although often in the past they have been conducted face-to-face, as are many of our non-political surveys today, and we certainly don't rule out doing so again in the future). For each poll we interview a fresh sample of between 1,000 and 2,000 respondents, and they are asked each of the questions in the poll (read out verbatim by our trained interviewers) – for any of our published polls you can find the full wording of the questionnaire and the order in which the questions were asked on this website; they will also be asked a series of demographic questions so that we can ensure that the sample is representative, and can see how answers vary between different types of voter. In political surveys, the voting intention questions are always the first in the questionnaire (to avoid any risk that answers might be affected by any of the other questions in the survey). The interviewers use CATI (computer-assisted telephone interviewing) technology, which brings up the questions on a screen in front of them and allows them to key in the response directly. These responses form our “unweighted” or “raw” data.

## Who do you interview in your polls?

Our surveys usually aim at drawing a representative quota sample of the adult population in Great Britain, in other words not including Northern Ireland; this is always true of our voting intention polls. (The technical details of each poll, as given on this website, will always make clear whether or not Northern Ireland is included, and any other unusual features in the sample definition, for example if it is a poll only of women, or if particular age groups are excluded).

We select telephone numbers using “random digit dialling” (which ensures that we don't leave out people who are not in the phone book); when somebody answers the phone, we select a member of the household to take part in the survey with the help of quotas. These are chosen to ensure that the sample broadly matches the adult population in the distribution of the sexes, of age, of social class, and of working status (that is whether the respondent works full-time, part time or not at all), as well as geographical spread: interviewers may interview anybody within the household who falls within their quota and is willing to be interviewed at that time or within the fieldwork period.

## How do you adjust your “raw” figures (and why)?

Because the quotas will never achieve a quite perfect distribution of our sample between the different demographic groups, and because we prefer to ensure that the sample is representative in more different respects than it is practical to include in the quota system, we weight the data. In fact the effect of demographic weighting is normally very small, since our sampling method ensures that each sample rarely diverges much from the ideal, and it is really more a fine-tuning process than anything. Unweighted figures from any published Ipsos MORI poll are always included in the computer tables available on our website.

The standard weighting variables that we use are for region, sex, age, social class (occupation), housing tenure, number of cars in the household and working status (including whether respondents work in the public or private sector and whether they are self-employed). However, the design might sometimes be altered if it seems advisable for a particular survey: in particular, an extra weight may be added if it seems that the existing weighting design has failed to correct a sample imbalance. Weights are set at national or regional level, and combined by rim-weighting. Data for both weights and quotas are derived from the Census, from the Registrar-General's population estimates (the official annual updates of the census figures), the Labour Force Survey and the National Readership Survey, as well as from other Ipsos MORI surveys where appropriate.

This weighting process gives us the final figures for almost all of the questions in our survey. However, the final voting intention figures are subject to one further process, since our "headline" or "topline" percentages do not include the whole sample. First we exclude those who are undecided how they would vote, those who say they would not vote at all and those (usually only a small number) who won't say. This leaves us with those who have named one of the parties, and voting intention percentages are always presented on this basis, since it is directly comparable with the way in which election results are normally published. (The numbers undecided, saying they would not vote and refusing to answer are always given in the full report of the results of a poll on our website, and normally also in the technical note that accompanies the reports of Ipsos MORI's polls in our client newspapers.)

In recent years we have adopted a second filter, to cope with the problem of low election turnouts. In the past, when the vast majority of British adults could be relied upon to vote, at least in general elections, we could be reasonably confident that a poll that accurately measured the voting intentions of the electorate would also accurately predict how an election held at that moment would pan out. (As recently as 1992, remember, 78% of the electorate voted.) These days, however, many of the public are less sure that they will vote, and supporters of the Labour Party are considerably less likely to say they are certain they will vote than are Conservatives; consequently, there is generally a substantial difference between the party vote shares if you consider the responses of everyone who names a party for which they would vote and if you consider only the people who say they are certain to vote. Our "headline" voting intention figure has since 2002 been calculated by excluding all those who are not "absolutely certain to vote". We measure this by asking our respondents to rate their certainty to vote on a scale from 1 to 10, where "1" means absolutely certain not to vote and "10" means absolutely certain to vote, and only those rating their likelihood of voting at "10" are included.

We believe that the relative proportion of each party's supporters who are "absolutely certain to vote" is the best indicator of differential turnout, and therefore produces the best indications from a representative sample of how the country will or would vote. (It should be understood that we are not literally suggesting that the "10 out of 10 certain to vote" criterion necessarily identifies exactly the respondents who will vote, that no 10s will fail to vote and that no 8s or 9s will get to the polls, but that this is likely to give us the best approximation of the political profile of those who do vote.) This methodology draws on our past experience, notably in the 2001 election, when we over-estimated Labour share and under-estimated abstention; this convinced us that we should use the most stringent turnout filter available.

For our final "prediction" poll we may add further refinements if they seem necessary to turn our static Tuesday-to-Wednesday snapshot into a prediction of how people will behave on Thursday. Many of these possible refinements, such as adjusting for possible late swing on the basis of re-interviews with respondents we have already talked to once, are only possible or only make sense in the context of the final poll and are therefore necessary differences from the polls we conduct between elections. The methodology used to reach the figures in our final poll will, of course, be laid out in full at the time it is published.

## What is the ideal sample size when polling?

There is no "ideal" sample size. All polls are subject to a margin of error, because they are based on interviewing a sample of the public rather than the whole public. All other things being equal, the bigger the size of the sample, the narrower the margin of error (which is technically called the "confidence interval"). So the choice of sample size is a trade-off between the greater precision possible with a bigger sample size and the higher cost of conducting extra interviews (and, unfortunately, doubling the sample size and hence the cost only reduces the margin of error by around a third). Traditionally, most opinion polls take a sample size of 1,000 as being a satisfactory compromise, but bigger samples are sometimes useful, especially when it is useful to compare subgroups within the sample (e.g. men against women).

But in any case it is far more important whether the sample is representative than how big it is: a huge but unrepresentative sample is useless. Famously, in the 1936 US Presidential election the magazine *Literary Digest* conducted a poll with a sample size in millions (!), yet predicted a landslide victory for Alf Landon over FD Roosevelt because its methodology produced a badly biased sample; at the same time, with far smaller but scientifically-drawn samples the opinion pollsters – George Gallup, Elmo Roper and Archibald Crossley – were able to call the election correctly. In just the same way today, worthless phone-in polls organised by newspapers or TV stations may get hundreds of thousands of responses but are unable to control the composition of their samples (or, quite often, to prevent people voting more than once); only properly conducted opinion polls, which are designed to ensure their samples are as representative as possible, can be relied on to make reasonably accurate measurements.

Strictly speaking, it is only possible to calculate the confidence intervals for a survey that uses "random" or "probability" sampling, which is not used by any modern opinion polls in Britain. However, practical experience over many years has shown that well-conducted quota sampling (the method that we and most other pollsters use) produces weighted samples with a variance broadly similar to a pure probability (random) sample of the same size, and it is therefore customary to quote confidence limits as if a random sample had been used. The "margin of error" due to sampling variance is therefore considered to be  $\pm 3\%$  on a sample of 1,000 respondents.

## But how can a sample of only 1,000 or 2,000 possibly reflect the opinions of 44 million Britons?

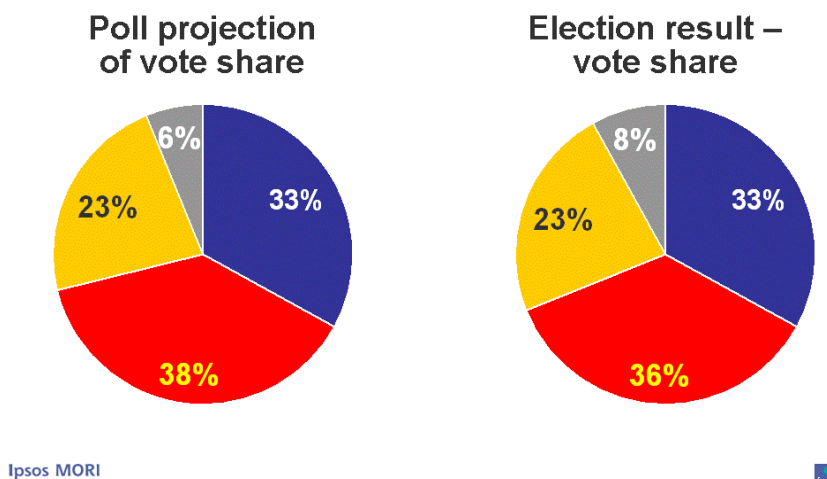
There is time-honoured answer to this question that goes back to George Gallup's early days: if you have a large bowl of soup, you don't have to drink the whole bowl to decide if it has too much salt in it – just stir it well, and one spoonful will suffice.

Of course, finding a representative sample is not really as easy as stirring soup – but the principle is the same. The theory of representative samples is derived from the mathematical science called statistics, which dictates how to judge the probability of different events. The study of probability was originally developed to understand the gambling odds involved in various permutations of dice throws or playing cards, and we can use exactly the same calculations to work out how accurately a random selection of a given number of people will represent the whole adult population.

## How accurate is your polling in practice?

MORI's final poll of the 2005 election campaign, published in the London *Evening Standard* on election day, predicted the Conservative and Liberal Democrat shares of the vote spot-on, and missed Labour by two percentage points - an average error of 0.67 points on the three major parties, well within the normally accepted margins of error.

### MORI/Evening Standard final election prediction poll (3-4 May 2005)

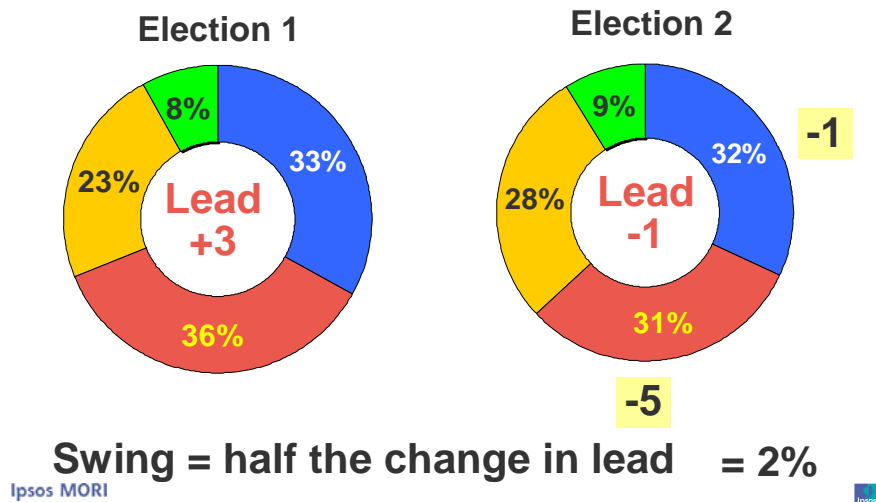


## What is swing?

Swing is a simple summary measure of the way in which votes or party have changed since the last election (or over any other period). There are several different ways of measuring it, but the simplest and most widely used is that which is sometimes called "Butler swing" (after the academic Dr David Butler), which simply measures the net movement from one party to another as a percentage of the total vote. For example, if the Conservatives have 33% of the vote at one election and 38% at the next, while Labour's share falls from 36% to 31%, the former have gained 5 points and the latter have lost 5 – exactly as if 5% of the voters have simply switched from one to the other (although it is probably much more complicated than that under the surface, with voters moving in both directions and to and from other parties and non-voting as well). This would be a swing of 5% from Labour to Conservative.

In the same way we can calculate a swing even if one party's gain is not the same as the other's loss, or even if both their votes move in the same direction. Suppose there is a Liberal Democrat surge, so that the Conservative share falls by 1 point but Labour share falls by 5. Even though the Conservatives are weaker overall, they have gained in relation to Labour – their lead over Labour is now 4 points more than it was before, exactly as it would have been if 2% of the voters had moved from Labour to Conservative and everybody else had stayed where they were, so this is a swing of 2%. In fact this is an easy way to calculate swing: it is the change in the percentage point lead divided by two – so if the Conservative lead over Labour falls by 4 points, that is a 2% swing to Labour, and if Labour holds a constituency by a 6 point margin, then it will take a 3% swing in that constituency to beat them.

## Calculating Swing?



## What is uniform national swing?

"Uniform national swing" is the assumption that the swing in every constituency across the country will be the same. In fact these days the term is generally used to apply not just to the swing between any two parties, but to the movements in vote shares of all the major parties (which therefore guarantees that the swing will be uniform whichever two parties you consider. For example, if the Conservatives have gained 5% of the vote nationally since 2005, Labour has lost 3% and the Liberal Democrats have lost 2%, a uniform national swing would mean that these changes also apply in each individual constituency: The Conservatives will be up 5, Labour down 3 and the Liberal Democrats down 2 in Kensington & Chelsea and in Leeds North West and in Rhondda and in Cornwall North, and in more than 600 other seats. It is a helpful assumption in terms of understanding how to interpret a given share of the national vote (and therefore the findings of an opinion poll measuring this). If we know for instance that the Conservatives were 4% behind the Liberal Democrats in a given constituency in 2005, they would need at least a 2% swing there from the Liberal Democrats to capture the seat; if the national shares of the vote show the Conservatives up 5 and the LibDems down 2, that is a 2.5% swing so the Conservatives are doing well enough nationally to win the seat, provided they can reproduce the national trend at the local level.

However, we are NOT predicting a uniform swing. There may be a uniform national swing at the general election, but there probably won't be. Marginal seats may behave differently from safe seats; there may be different regional swings; and individual constituencies may behave individually, especially those where one of the candidates has been tainted by the expenses scandal. At the election of 1992 and again in 1997, Labour did much better in the marginal constituencies than it did in the rest of the country. In other words, the swing was not uniform, and Labour gained many more seats than it might have expected under uniform swing. In 2005, by contrast, it was the Conservatives who achieved a higher swing on average in the marginal constituencies than nationally, and therefore won more seats than a uniform swing projection based on the national shares of the vote would have given them. At the moment (March 2010), what little polling evidence there is suggests that the Conservatives are once more performing rather better in the marginal constituencies than they are nationally, although of course this might change by polling day; if it doesn't, then a projection based on uniform swing will underestimate the number of seats the Conservatives will win.

So why consider uniform swing at all if we don't expect it to be an accurate predictor of the fall of seats in practice? Mainly because it is an essential analytical tool for understanding what is going on in an election. British general elections are essentially national affairs, in fact if not in theory: despite their constituency basis, all the electorate experience broadly the same campaign, and are faced with broadly the same choice between the parties when they vote. So, all other things being equal, we would expect all of them to be affected in the same way and to behave in the same way – in other words, there would be a uniform swing. So for every respect in which that isn't true – if men swing more than women, if Wales swings more than London, if marginal seats swing more than safe seats – we know that something has happened which needs explaining, over and above the total national swing from one election to the next. So we are not assuming that there will be a national uniform swing, but we are assuming that there will be good and identifiable reasons for it not happening.

### **Why do all the commentators say that the Conservatives need a huge lead in votes to get an overall majority of seats, and Labour could be the largest party in Parliament even if they lose by as much as 5%?**

For the most part, when they say this they are relying on uniform swing, and it may not work out that way. But the underlying reason is that the British electoral system is currently biased in the sense that Labour wins more seats for a given percentage of the vote than the Conservatives would win if the situation were reversed. That was true in 2001 and 2005, and will be true again in 2010 unless there is a wholesale shift in the pattern of voting, though any non-uniform swing may change the size of the bias.

There are a number of reasons for the bias. Firstly, not all constituencies are the same size: those in Wales have systematically lower populations than those in England (as did those in Scotland before the 2005 election); and even though this election is being fought on new boundaries, these are based on electorate figures that are already several years, so some constituencies will have grown and some shrunk in population since then. As Labour is much strongest party in Scotland, Wales, and those parts of the country losing population (inner cities and the North), it tends to pick up its seats “cheaper”.

Secondly, the LibDems are generally stronger in the Tories' strong areas than in Labour's, so the Tories use up many votes winning seats against the LibDems while more of Labour's votes are being used directly to fight for seats against the Tories. Thirdly, most of the seats the LibDems win would be Tory if the LibDems did not exist; again, many Tory votes are “wasted” fighting but not winning these seats, while far fewer Labour votes go the same way.

Finally, Labour's votes are distributed more effectively: they “waste” fewer of their votes piling up big majorities or losing in safe seats and have a higher proportion concentrated where they will do most good, in the marginals.

There is an argument, incidentally, that the bias towards Labour is not really as big as it looks. Labour's safe seats are the constituencies with the lowest turnouts and where the turnout has fallen fastest at recent elections. It is probable that the majority of these non-voters would vote Labour if they voted at all, and it seems likely that many of them fail to vote only because they know that their vote is not needed, since Labour is sure to win their constituency. Similarly, probably more Labour supporters are voting tactically than Conservative supporters, simply because there are more seats marginal between Conservative and Liberal Democrat than between Labour and Liberal Democrat. If so, then it can be argued that the “real” Labour support is higher than the share they secure at the polls and that some of the “extra” seats they win for a given share of the vote merely reflects this.

The system is not always biased to Labour – in the 1950s and 1960s the tilt was very much the other way. (In 1951, for example, Labour won most votes and yet the Tories got an overall majority in the House of Commons.)

Whenever the Tories do better in marginal seats than in the rest of the country, Labour's disadvantage will diminish. In 2005, they did do a little better, easing the bias a little, though not nearly enough to reverse the advantage Labour built up by over-performing in the marginals in 1997 and 2001. Indeed, this was always predictable. In both 1997 and 2001 Labour benefited from two advantages – low Tory morale contrasting with effective Labour organisation ensured that the latter campaigned far more effectively on the ground (a difference which bites most in the marginals, where both parties' efforts are most concentrated), and most LibDems preferred Labour to the Conservatives, allowing a squeeze and switch of tactical votes. Consequently, at both elections Labour won more seats than uniform swing would have predicted given its vote share. Neither was the case in 2005, although the apocalyptic "tactical unwind" feared by some Labour supporters did not fully materialise.

### **So, how confident are you that your current polls are an accurate prediction of what is going to happen in the election?**

Despite our best endeavours, journalists and other commentators - and particularly our critics - persist in assuming that the purpose of opinion polls is to predict the future; it isn't, and they can't. As MORI's founder, Bob Worcester, frequently says and writes, polls don't predict (though some pollsters do). Our polls are only snapshots of public opinion at the moment when the poll is taken. We don't, ahead of the election, ask our respondents how they think they *will* vote, only how they *would* vote if the election were tomorrow. Things may change ("events, dear boy, events"; "a week is a long time in politics") – our function is to make an accurate measurement of what is happening now, not to try to guess what will happen in the future. On the other hand, if you *do* want to guess then an accurate understanding of what has happened already is a good starting point. Think of polls as being like a barometer – barometers don't predict the weather; they measure something that is helpful to know if you want to predict the weather.

Our final poll, probably taken the day before the election itself, is the only one that should be viewed in any way as a prediction of the result – and, as noted above, we may need to add extra refinements, and take into account factors that we don't normally include, to turn that final snapshot poll into a prediction.

### **Will you be conducting any polling around the council elections?**

Probably not.