

(30 August 2017)

**WAPOR submission to the House of Lords  
Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media**

1. This paper is submitted by the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR)<sup>1</sup>. WAPOR is a leading international professional association whose members recognise the central importance of public opinion in shaping and serving society. Our organisation promotes the right to conduct and publish scientific research in across the globe and we work with academics, practitioners, journalists and other stakeholders to seek to constantly improve research understanding, knowledge, methods and their reporting. WAPOR has more than 500 members across more than five dozen countries.

***The importance of political opinion polls in a democracy***

2. Independent political polls are crucial to free and fair elections. These polls are an assessment of public opinion, which are independent of the State and of partisan interests, and which attempt to be objective and politically neutral. Opinion polls are essentially the only source of information about public opinion based upon systematic measurement. In Britain, as elsewhere, political opinion polls are normally conducted by market research agencies, with political polling forming a small fraction of their business. Yet the reputational issues associated with political polling (especially voting intention polling during election campaigns) means that the political polls they publish have a potentially high impact on their company's credibility. These companies have no incentive to falsify results, distort their findings or compromise on standards. They have every incentive to carry out polls honestly, professionally and, to the best of their ability, accurately gauge current popular support for each party, the state of support for different parties at various points in time, and try to predict final vote shares as accurately as possible.

3. Political opinion polls, especially during election campaigns, are important precisely because people are interested in what other people think and some people may be influenced by this. WAPOR opposes the banning of opinion polls during election campaigns, as this would mean that the only source of information about the state of public opinion would involve non-scientific means. All legislatures need to take account of public opinion so that when they debate and decide on laws they can be responsive to the public's views. Opinion polls are the best available scientific approach of giving the public a voice in an objective way.<sup>2</sup> If the House of Lords committee is considering the regulation of how opinion polls are reported, it would directly interfere in the freedom of the media and would run counter to the UK's long established leadership in promoting democracy and freedom across the globe.<sup>3</sup>

**Question 1. What are the most significant challenges for conducting political opinion polling and achieving accurate results?**

4. No researcher or polling company can guarantee that polls are perfect and the media, commentators and the public should not expect them to be. Given the questions raised in the Call for Evidence, it is important that members of the House of Lords committee fully appreciate both the strengths and limitations of political opinion polls, and are clear on how "accuracy" should be measured.

5. All polls and surveys that rely on randomly sampling a population are subject to a margin of error. Very approximately, on a standard survey of c.1,000 adults, the "95% confidence interval" (also often referred to as the "margin of error") on a reported share is  $\pm 3$  percentage points. Polls, statistically, cannot measure more precisely than this and no serious researcher would claim otherwise. So, if a poll projected that 46% of the public would vote Conservative and the actual result had them at 44%, this should not be regarded as being inaccurate.

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<sup>1</sup> This submission was drafted by a special committee comprising: (1) Claire Durand, WAPOR President; (2) Mark Gill, WAPOR Secretary-Treasurer; (3) Timothy Johnson, Chair of WAPOR's Professional Standards committee; (4) Nick Moon, WAPOR national representative for the UK; and (5) Jane Green (member from the University of Manchester). It was approved by WAPOR's Council (<http://wapor.org/executive-council/>) on August 30, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> We recommend that the Committee also receive into evidence a study published in 2001 titled *Who's Afraid of Election Polls?*, which was published by the Foundation of Information and authored by a past WAPOR President (1995-96), Professor Wolfgang Donsbach. This report provides compelling normative and empirical arguments for the freedom of pre-election surveys (<https://wapor.org/pdf/who-is-afraid-of-opinion-polls.pdf>).

<sup>3</sup> See Article 19 of the UDHR or Article 10 of the ECHR

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6. In practice however, the margin of error for any survey is greater than this, as there will always be other non-random errors that can impact on accuracy,<sup>4</sup> like the fact that some groups of the population with specific characteristics are more difficult to reach and/or will not be as willing to cooperate or reveal their voting intention. For example, it may be more difficult to reach younger people or to gain the cooperation of those who are less politically engaged. This may introduce bias in estimates that can never be entirely eliminated. Pollsters use their professional judgement, both in the design of their survey and the statistical modelling of raw data, to try to correct for these types of bias.

7. Experience in the UK and elsewhere illustrates that this can be problematic if the behaviour of voters changes from election to election. The evidence from the 2015 and 2017 general elections highlights this point – many of the polling firms adjusted their methodologies in 2017 to correct for the problem of over-estimating Labour’s vote share in the 2015 general election, but this new adjustment did not work in 2017 and some pollsters ended up under-estimating Labour’s vote share as a result.

8. Two other important factors need to be taken into account when evaluating the “accuracy” of voting intention polls. One of these involves the timing of polls, which, apart from the final poll before an election, cannot in any sense be regarded as a prediction. If public opinion changes after a poll has been taken, of course it will no longer match the findings of the poll. For example, between September and December 2015, the vast majority of the polls on the EU referendum showed a lead for Remain, but this cannot reasonably have any bearing on the accuracy of polling as a whole in the 2016 June referendum.<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that of the 72 referendum polls conducted during the official campaign, 35 polls showed a Remain lead and 33 polls showed a Leave lead, with 4 showing dead heats. The 2017 general election also clearly demonstrates that campaigns matter and they can and do change people’s attitudes and intentions to vote. At the start of the 2017 campaign, the Conservatives enjoyed a considerable lead of around 19 points over Labour. The fact that, 8 weeks later, the election ended in a small Conservative lead tells us nothing about the accuracy of these early polls.<sup>6</sup> In fact there is plenty of evidence that the Conservatives were significantly ahead during April and early May. For example, the May local elections showed that the Conservatives did very well and Labour fared poorly. It was the subsequent campaign that shifted opinions (and therefore voting behaviour) -- not that the “polls were wrong” from the beginning.

9. British opinion polls measure vote shares and not seats in the House of Commons, although it is the latter that determines who will form a government. There is no simple or constant relationship between the share of vote that a party receives and the number of seats it will win. Much of the criticism of British polling in recent years has been based on the mistaken belief that polls can do this. In 2015, the Conservatives won 37.7% of the GB vote share, yet this equated to winning just over half of the seats in the House of Commons. If commentators use models that rely on incorrect assumptions (e.g., uniform swing or that the electoral system is biased to one party), this is not a sign that the polls were wrong. This is a problem in other countries too where first-past-the-post systems are used, as witnessed in the 2016 US presidential election. The national polls accurately forecast Clinton would win the popular vote by a narrow margin (the average of the polls suggested a lead of 3.2 points and the final outcome was a lead of 2.1 points), but this translated into Clinton winning only 227 electoral college votes – far short of the majority required.

## **(2). How does the accuracy of political opinion polling compare to other forms of opinion surveys such as polling on behalf of advocacy groups or official surveys?**

10. Electoral opinion polls are one of the few forms of survey research in which there is a straightforward and readily available measure (the election results) against which they can be independently and publicly tested. We note, though, that the science of sampling, the art of asking non-biased questions, and the limitations of margin of error apply to all forms of survey research, whether conducted by independent companies, academics or official statisticians.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Mellon and Prosser, in-press, Missing nonvoters and misweighted samples: Explaining the 2015 great British polling miss. *Public Opinion Quarterly*: <https://academic.oup.com/poq/article/doi/10.1093/poq/nfx015/3852137/Missing-Nonvoters-and-Misweighted>

<sup>5</sup> Both *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* (24 June 2016) used referendum polls dating back to September 2015 as justifications for their headlines “How the pollsters got it wrong on the EU referendum” (*Guardian*) and “Britain leaves the EU: how the pollsters got it wrong... again” (*Telegraph*).

<sup>6</sup> The average vote share of the 20 polls where fieldwork was conducted from 18<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> of April gave the Conservatives a vote share of 46% - not far from the party’s actual 44% GB vote share in the election on 8<sup>th</sup> June. The main change was that over this time period Labour’s vote share went from 27% during the second half of April to 41% on election day. This movement was clearly tracked in the opinion polls, even if the final polls significantly underestimated Labour’s performance (with an average prediction of 36%). We note that at the local elections in May 2017, Labour received the equivalent of 27% of the national vote, according to analysis by Professor John Curtice for the BBC.

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11. Further, surveys conducted for official statistical purposes may have some advantages over opinion polls if people believe they are compulsory and if the methodology allows for longer fieldwork periods. It is worth noting that the frequent revisions required of, for example, official economic forecasts (which are often wholly or partly based on survey evidence) suggests that such difficulties are by no means confined to forecasting election results. However, it is generally more difficult (although not impossible) to validate the results of other kinds of surveys with an external criteria. This is one of the reasons why much of the research aimed at improving survey research is based on electoral polls. They allow for a better understanding of bias around sampling, weighting and other factors; and the not-so-perfect relationship between attitudes and intended behaviour, on the one hand; and current behaviour, on the other hand.

**(3). What new methods have had the most impact on political opinion polling? Can technological innovation help to improve the accuracy of polling? What is your assessment of polls that produce constituency level estimates of voting intention?**

12. The ability to conduct research, including political opinion polls, using the internet has made surveying much cheaper and quicker to conduct. There is no consistent evidence that political opinion polls conducted online are more or less accurate than traditional methods. It is possible, however, that the emergence of internet polls have allowed for more polls to be conducted and published, particularly in smaller markets – Scotland, for example – where sponsors cannot afford to pay for many polls conducted using traditional methods. This is a positive development since the more published polls there are, the less likely any one specific poll that might give inaccurate estimates and have a meaningful impact on the campaign.

**(4). Does the public have confidence in the accuracy of political opinion polls? How, if at all, has public confidence changed?**

13. Ipsos MORI has tracked trust in polling professionals since the mid-1980s, including a question about opinion pollsters since 1993.<sup>7</sup> The most recent study, in October 2016, found that 49% of the public said they trusted pollsters to tell the truth, compared with 42% who did not and 9% who did not have an opinion. The average trust rating between 1993 and 2016 for pollsters is 48%, which has ranged from 39% (in 2011) to 55% (in 1997). More people trust pollsters than say the same about journalists (24%), government ministers (20%) or politicians generally (15%); although television news readers are more likely to be trusted (67%)

**(5). Can polls be influenced by those who commission them and, if so, in what ways? What controls are there on the output of results, for example, to prevent “cherry-picking” of results?**

14. Poll results can be influenced in a number of ways. Among these are the wording of voting intention questions, the sequence of questions preceding voting intention questions and the hypotheses used to model likely voters. These topics have been the focus of considerable research. There is general agreement for example that the voting intention question should be placed at the beginning of the poll so as not to be influenced by preceding questions. Modelling the likely voter is a more difficult task, as evidenced in the 2015 and 2017 general elections. In the US 2016 presidential election, different likely voter models applied to the same data set gave estimates that ranged from Trump +1 over Clinton to Clinton +4 over Trump.<sup>8</sup>

15. In the current environment of high levels of transparency and a competitive marketplace, we do not see that it would be easy for voting intention polls in Britain to be influenced by those who commission them. British polling companies that are members of the British Polling Council (BPC) are required to have well-publicised and transparent methodologies. Given that so many polls are published, it would normally become obvious if one is out of line. In addition, there are well-established transparency rules for those pollsters who belong to the BPC. Pollsters do sometimes change their models during a campaign for reasons that have nothing to do with who commissions a poll, as an attempt at improving estimates, but these changes are made transparently.

16. It is, of course, possible that a client chooses to commission a poll when they think the results will favour them or their point of view. There is nothing that polling companies can do about that this. In practice this is more of an issue with the less common non-voting intention polls conducted for advocacy groups. Simply put, “cherry

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<sup>7</sup> Full details are available here: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/trust-professions>

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/09/20/upshot/the-error-the-polling-world-rarely-talks-about.html?action=click&contentCollection=The%20Upshot&module=RelatedCoverage&region=EndOfArticle&pgtype=article>

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picking” is discouraged through transparency and best practices in media reporting. BPC Rules address this issue explicitly: If the results from a question on any topic are published, then the results from all other questions on the same topic must also be made public.

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

17. Considerable academic research has examined the role of both public opinion and opinion polls on voters and their behaviour. The evidence is not clear as to what, if any, systematic effect opinion polls have on voters and there are a number of competing theories.<sup>9,10,11</sup> We can never be definitively sure about the full impact of the reporting of opinion polls on voters as it is almost impossible to precisely measure it. We can be sure, however, that the impact almost certainly varies by circumstances. In any election, some voters will be affected, but the number affected will vary and it will not always be in the same direction. Further, it may be the case that different voters are influenced in different ways and therefore the net effect is null.

18. However, this debate largely misses the point. It is the right of potential voters to rely on whatever information they wish in order to come to a decision as to whether to vote or not, and for which party or candidate. This has been a core feature of free and fair elections in electoral democracies for many decades.<sup>12</sup> If the concern is that opinion polls can have a subliminal effect on voters and that voters are somehow unconsciously affected by polls, then, as far as we are aware, there is no solid evidence that proves this. Researchers have found evidence that voters can be affected by what they believe other members of the public think, but this is not necessarily dependent on opinion poll evidence. Voters may judge public opinion through a variety of means (e.g., talking with friends, reading a newspaper, watching television etc.) and are influenced by what they consider public opinion to be, regardless of opinion polls. Election polls, even with their limitations, are a more scientific means of collecting opinion data than other more subjective means.

19. Clearly, politicians and political parties pay careful attention to opinion polls and often commission them. No organisation should rely solely on opinion polls to make their decisions. Opinion polls (and market research, more generally) are part of the decision-making process, not its master; and it is necessary to bear in mind that polls are not infallible, or that the opinions that they measure can change subsequently.

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

20. Researchers, academics and polling companies are constantly trying to learn from one other. This is one of the key reasons why WAPOR was established in 1948 and why we continue to exist and support one another today. Research suggests that the accuracy of UK opinion polls (measured as the closeness of the average of final polls to actual election results) is neither higher or lower in comparison to other countries<sup>13</sup>, nor higher or lower within the UK over time<sup>14, 15, 16</sup>. Hence, there appears to be no unique ‘problem’ to UK polling or recent UK polling.

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<sup>9</sup> Moy and Rinke, 2012, Attitudinal and behavioral consequences of published opinion polls. In Strömbäck and Holtz-Bacha (Eds.), *Opinion Polls and the Media: Reflecting and Shaping Public Opinion*. Palgrave-Macmillan.

<sup>10</sup> Gallup and Rae, 1940, Is There a Bandwagon Effect? *Public Opinion Quarterly* 4, no. 2, 244-249.

<sup>11</sup> McAllister and Studlar, 1991, Bandwagon, underdog, or projection? Opinion polls and electoral choice in Britain, 1979-1987. *Journal of Politics* 53, no. 3, 720-741.

<sup>12</sup> And a principle that the UK has long promoted and subscribed to, as per Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”)

<sup>13</sup> Bélanger and Soroka, 2012, Campaigns and the prediction of election outcomes: Can historical and campaign-period prediction models be combined? *Electoral Studies* 31, 702-714.

<sup>14</sup> Wlezien et al., 2013, Polls and the vote in Britain, *Political Studies* 61, Issue 1 Supplement, 66-91;

<sup>15</sup> Jennings and Wlezien, 2016, The timeline of elections: A comparative perspective. *American Journal of Political Science* 60, 219-233.

<sup>16</sup> Sanders, 2003, Pre-election polling in Britain, 1950-1997, *Electoral Studies* 22, no. 1, 1-20.

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**(8). Is the polling industry's current model fit for purpose? Is there a case for changing the way political opinion polling is regulated? What regulatory changes, if any, would you recommend and what challenges are there to greater regulation?**

21. WAPOR opposes state bans on opinion polls for the following reasons:
- A ban on the publication of polls would be undemocratic, as it goes against freedom of the press that is the basis of democratic societies.
  - A ban on the publication of polls would be unfair since polls will be conducted but their results would be available only to sponsors and well-connected citizens.
  - A ban would be impractical: Parliament has the theoretical ability to ban or restrict political polling by British companies. However, given that the vast majority of polling is now conducted over the internet, it would be impossible to stop foreign companies from polling, as Parliament has no jurisdiction in stopping the spread of the reporting of polls on the internet or in media based in foreign countries.
  - A ban would lead to "black-market" polling: The effect of banning or restricting the publication of polls would be to create a "black market" for this type of information. Such information would likely be selectively leaked to the public in a far less transparent, and more manipulative, manner.
  - A ban would result in reduced transparency: If political polling were conducted by companies outside the UK, there would be no self-regulation or oversight and therefore no guarantee of the polling companies' competence or even the provenance of the polls.
  - A ban would decrease polling quality: If well-established and respected organisations are restricted from polling, others will fill the void or some people would simply make up poll results to suit their own needs. These "polls" would be more easily believed, as there would be no objective polls against which to compare them. As always in a black market, it is much easier to sell duff goods.

22. The UK has a well-established and robust system of self-regulation both for the transparency of political opinion polls through the BPC,<sup>17</sup> and more widely for issues of professional conduct, integrity and methodological best practice, through the Market Research Society (MRS).

23. Finally, WAPOR is in fact surprised to see the *ad hoc* Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media asking questions regarding how the government might improve the accuracy of political opinion polling<sup>18</sup>. To our knowledge, no government has ever regulated the way that polls are conducted. We do not believe that government regulations can improve the accuracy of polling. On the contrary, since methods are changing on a regular basis in part to adjust for changes in modes of communication and other aspects of the social environment, pollsters must continually adjust to these changing situations. Prescribing how polls should be conducted would reduce the healthy diversity of existing methods and prevent the development of new methods needed to correct problems that arise. It would prevent the development of improved polling methods.

**(9) Are there lessons to be learned for the regulation of UK political polling from other countries and political contexts? For example, should the publication of political opinion polls be restricted in the run up to elections and referendums?**

24. WAPOR has been conducting international surveys since 1984 to monitor the freedom to conduct and publish opinion polls<sup>19</sup> around the world. As a professional association, WAPOR opposes state regulation of opinion polls and believes that self-regulation by the industry is most effective. Two types of regulation are present in some other countries: one that prescribes the information that should be present in the media when a poll is published, and another that regulates the prohibition of polls during certain time periods.

25. Regarding the information that has to be disclosed when reporting poll results, one relevant case is Canada where a law was promulgated in 2000. The information required is quite similar to the current norms adopted by the polling industry in most countries. However, research has shown that the media in that country have never

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<sup>17</sup> The disclosure requirements for pollsters that are members of the BPC are in line with international best practice and WAPOR's Code of Conduct: <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/statement-of-disclosure/>

<sup>18</sup> [https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201617/ldselect/ldliaison/144/14406.htm#\\_idTextAnchor008](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201617/ldselect/ldliaison/144/14406.htm#_idTextAnchor008)

<sup>19</sup> <http://wapor.org/freedom>

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been informed of their duty and the law has never been enforced by Elections Canada.<sup>20</sup> It is the self-regulation of the industry, the education of journalists and the ease of providing the information on the internet that brought pollsters to make the information publicly available.

26. Another case, “extreme” in a way, is France where pollsters are required to submit their methodology and data to the Commission des Sondages before publication. This is required from a date decided by the Commission (January 1<sup>st</sup> for the presidential elections) until the end of the election cycle. Experts appointed by the Commission analyse all the polls and may issue statements regarding the reliability of methods used by some pollsters. While it could be seen as a very stringent state regulation, it is important to recognize that, even here, the process requires input from pollsters and active negotiations between regulators and pollsters.

27. In regards to outright bans on the publication of public opinion polls, three cases help illustrate the unexpected consequences. First, in the French presidential campaign of 2007, a Tunisian pollster published a poll on voting intention in France without respecting any aspect of the French law. Since the pollster was not based in France, the French law was easily circumvented. Second, in the French presidential election of 2017, two media outlets, Belgian (La Libre Belgique) and Swiss (La Tribune de Genève), published poll results on Saturday, April 22, the day before the election, despite the French ban on the publication of polls on that day. In the case of La Libre Belgique, the poll results were quite different from all other poll results that had been previously published. The poll had been conducted for an unnamed candidate, according to the media. Since this information was published outside of France, there were no sanctions despite the complete absence of information regarding the pollster and the methodology used. The third example comes from Tunisia, where the new Constitution bans the conduct of polls during the entire electoral campaign. With this ban in place, in the Tunisian parliamentary elections of 2014, instead of having access to poll results that could be vetted, voters were forced to rely on rumours circulating regarding the supposed results of unverified polls. It was never known whether these polls had actually been conducted or not.

**(11). Does the media report on opinion polls appropriately? What steps could be taken to improve how the media reports the results of political opinion polls? For example, should standards be set in relation to the reporting of political opinion polls, or should a code of conduct be introduced?**

28. WAPOR encourages and provides resources to educate journalists.<sup>21</sup> Together with the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) and the Poynter News University, it has set up an international online course for journalists that covers best practices for reporting and interpreting polls. Research in many countries has consistently shown that media reporting of polls, including election polls, is frequently misleading, and often draws conclusions that the data cannot statistically support.<sup>22</sup> We believe that everything should be done to help journalists make better use of and interpret polls since these are the best way to inform the public. If Parliament prevents journalists from reporting public opinion as they understand it based on opinion polls, then they will be left with no objective data on which to rely. Independent opinion polls provide the media with evidence on which to report public opinion on a more objective basis. Polls can also be used as a way to countering those commentators, campaigners, or advocates who try to mislead the public.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Durand, 2002, The 2000 Canadian election and poll reporting under the New Elections Act. *Canadian Public Policy/Analyse de politiques* 28, no. 4, 539-545.

<sup>21</sup> <http://wapor.org/resources-for-journalists/>

<sup>22</sup> As an example, see Petry and Bastien, 2013, Follow the Pollsters: Inaccuracies in Media Coverage of the Horse-race during the 2008 Canadian Election, *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 1, 1-26.

<sup>23</sup> We can see this with the Oldham West and Royton by-election in December 2015. Many commentators had expected a close race between Labour and UKIP, with some predicting a UKIP win. There were no opinion polls during the campaign to back-up these assertions and the result was described as a “shock” when Labour both increased its share of the vote and defeated UKIP by almost 11,000 votes. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-35003373>