

Dorling, D. (2008)

Discussion on the paper by Curtice and Girth:

Proposing a vote of thanks on The BBC/ITV experience in Britain in 2005

Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series A, 171, 3, 533-535

Author's version as submitted.

Just how much of an achievement was this result? The climate of a British general election may be cold in general (as the authors detail), but the weather in 2005 was decidedly warm. It was a dull election, the third with the same Labour leader, with the same boundaries (other than in Scotland), and they had access to more data than at any previous attempt. They didn't come closer to predicting vote share, or second and minor party votes as had ever been achieved before. True: "Never before in the history of exit polling in Britain has the overall majority been predicted with such accuracy". But only four new polling stations were surveyed (in London on which more later). Things were not being well set up for the future, and the next general election will be fought on new boundaries, with a new government leader, new opposition leader and new third and possibly fifth party leaders. In contrast to 2005, 2008/9 or 10 will be new, new and new. Was the greatest achievement to have been studying the right election, with the right sample size and no opposition in terms of alternative exit polls?

Such criticism would be unfair but well worth bearing in mind by those considering undertaking the job next time. What would have happened had it all gone wrong? Imagine an alternative scenario. Something much larger than the special South East swing away from Labour is not picked up. One claim is that the probabilistic nature of the prediction allowed for that failure. The other possibility is that there was another, unidentified swing in the other direction scattered over other places that cancelled out the first bias and helped the achievement of the perfect 66. In that most exciting half hour in the history of statistics: at mission control data rolled down screens, the boffins are said to have huddled, the middle model was chosen, Big Ben chimed – but what if they had not had an agreed answer? What if the best three models predicted

three entirely different outcomes (Lab/Con/Hung). There is little in this paper to suggest an appropriate game plan for such a future scenario. And the paper does present some a suggestion that we may soon be living in more interesting times.

The suggestion is a bias in a combination of those who refuse and those who lie about how they have just voted, to be slightly more likely to vote Liberal but say Labour. To me it is less important whether they lied or refused, or simply could not remember what they had done a few seconds after doing it (Gilbert, 2006). In all cases the implication of the direction of bias is clear – in 2005 a small set of people may have voted Liberal but have been ashamed for not voting Labour. Here is the first aspect I think we need more work on. My best guess is that these are traditional Labour voters who for one reason or another - the war / the grin / the cuff-links all come to mind - could not bring themselves to tick that Labour box at the last minute, but neither could they spoil their ballot paper. They did the nearest thing without giving up their vote, or voting for a very minor party which is much the same thing, and ticked Liberal (which is almost the same thing!).

The pro-liberal reporting bias was minor. Potentially much more significant is the bias in the four new London polling stations chosen to supposedly be representative of the seats they fell in. If they had been, then in all four, between 4 and 10 voters out of every 100 who voted at all voted Conservative but did not admit to doing so just seconds later. Where it mattered most, in the more marginal two seats, the bias was highest at 8.1 and 10.2%. Part of this will be that these polling stations are not typical of their seats, but I find it hard to believe that in all four seats a poor choice of polling station was made which had the same direction of bias, and that the poorest choices were made in the most marginal of seats. Here again I can see folk lying, possibly even to themselves, about voting in a way that they know (net) to be selfish and shameful but which they believe is in their personal self-interest.

It would be this kind of behaviour resurfacing from 1992 (Johnston et al. 1997) that would mean that "Yet in the exit poll the average swing in polling districts in London and the South East was indistinguishable from that found in the poll as a whole". (original paper page 20). If this is happening now what do you do if the Conservatives chose to go for peoples' more base instincts – play the race/religion card again; offer

more tax cuts and even more selective state schooling to the rich; midnight feasts without telling nanny; having your cake, eating it and not sharing it policies... It is possible to read this paper and see how the polls could well be very deceiving in the run-up to a future election *if* what *may* be already happening in London by 2005, spreads.

References---

Gilbert, D., *Stumbling on Happiness*. 2006, London: Harper Collins.

Johnston, R.J., Pattie, C.J., Macallister, I., Rossiter, D.J., Dorling, D.F.L., Tunstall, H., 1997, Spatial variations in voter choice: modelling tactical voting at the 1997 general election in Great Britain , *Geographical and Environmental Modelling* 1 (2), pp. 153-177

