

A So Gina? What did you think of the Lib Dem candidate winning the Richmond Park by-election with a stunning twenty-one point swing in her favour? It wasn't what the opinion polls were predicting, was it? It was a bit like the polls before the Brexit vote or the American presidential election. Opinion polls aren't very reliable, but they're probably useful all the same.

B I think opinion polls should be banned. They damage good government and democracy. Politicians are so obsessed by tiny shifts in public opinion that instead of finding long-term solutions, they focus on short-term measures in the hope they'll keep people happy. The policy agenda is driven by the media.

A But opinion polls are a form of expression that publicizes the opinions of a large number of citizens. They should be protected under the right to freedom of speech - if you ban the publication of what people think it's much more damaging to democracy.

B People can be greatly influenced by the polls, though. If an opinion poll shows a huge majority for a certain subject, its opponents might be less vocal since they feel outnumbered, and so democratic debate is damaged. Or undecided voters might rally to the party that's the most popular one. Or even worse, people might not bother to vote since they consider the result a foregone conclusion. That might have happened with the Brexit vote last year.

A I think you're overstating the case. Have you noticed that regimes around the world which ban or severely restrict opinion polling are those which are undemocratic, or those where elections are very corrupt? They know that if they allowed opinion polling it would reveal their lack of legitimacy.

B That kind of thing can happen in democracies too, even if not on the same scale. Results can be manipulated by the organisation which performs or commissions the poll in question. Pollsters can create a bias by selecting a certain target group, asking certain questions, or phrasing them in a certain way. This can generate inaccurate information and untrue and exaggerated claims.

A Manipulation is possible, of course, but shouldn't we trust our citizens and politicians to be critical in using opinion polls as a basis for decision making? That's actually a reason for publicising them as much as possible - the more opinion polls you have on a topic, the more possibility for dissent there is. Trustworthy polls will gradually gain more attention. It's well known in the US that the Fox News polls are commissioned by a group with a partisan right wing agenda, so they're not taken as seriously as those done by Pew Research, which is well known for its independence.

B Even if the research is done with an independent mind-set, the research technique or reporting methods can affect the results. Opinion polls often don't report the degree of uncertainty of the conclusions, for example the margin of error. That means there's a lot of misinformation. In 2004 the Democrat Kerry stood against George Bush, and many exit polls, taken just after people voted, said he would win. The polling was wrong because, as it was later discovered, Republicans were less likely to respond to exit polls. More recently, with Trump and Clinton, lots of polls assumed that voters still undecided a couple of days before the vote would split evenly fifty-fifty between the two candidates, but in fact they voted massively for Trump.

A Everybody knows you can't be totally sure about opinion polls, but some of them can be very accurate. It's reckoned that a sample of one thousand people can accurately reflect the views of more than two hundred million US adults to within a few percentage points. Polling is a statistical science with a good academic record, and it's constantly being improved by research. In Britain in the 1990s lots of polls consistently underestimated Conservative support, so the polling companies adjusted their methods.

B But what use are opinion polls? They only tell you what other people think. I think we should make up our own minds about the big issues.

A Opinion polls may influence how people vote, but there are lots of other influences too. Citizens mustn't be deprived of information which can help them reach their own conclusions.

Outline

The discussion concerns the validity of opinion polls. The first speaker acknowledges that opinion polls may not always be very reliable, but banning polls would be damaging to democracy - they publicize the opinions of a large number of citizens, their methods are constantly being improved, and they are one factor among many which help people to decide how to vote. The second speaker believes that opinion polls have negative consequences: they encourage a short-term mentality in politicians, they can be biased, they can influence voters unduly, the policy agenda is driven by the media, and essential information such as the margin of error is often not provided. Some examples are cited, such as Brexit, the Trump/Clinton duel, and the result of a by-election in Britain.

Questions

1. Would political leaders concentrate on the long term if opinion polls did not exist?
2. Would you be in favour of banning opinion polls?
3. Are you influenced by opinion polls?
4. Do people tell the truth when answering pollsters?