

## **Are Pollsters Missing the Point**

Nigel Jacklin 20 April 2026

As the May local elections approach many people feel we are seeing a fundamental shift in the UK political landscape. Labour are expected to lose many of the local Council seats they won back in 2022 in the same way the Conservatives lost many parliamentary seats at the July 2024 general election. In May the Greens and Reform expected to be the main winners. No doubt we will see even more polls and projections about the likely outcome of an imaginary general election to be held tomorrow. As the Gorton and Denton parliamentary by-election and most recent elections have shown, the outcome of any election will probably not be what the pollsters are projecting.

This article considers the reliability of election polls and what's wrong with them. It proposes a different approach which will provide more valid and interesting answers.

### **The Polls Are All Over the Place**

In a typical week we might see at least five different companies publish voting intention polls. The last time I looked (7 April @ElectionMapsUK on X) five showed Reform in first place with between 23% and 30% projected vote share. The results for the Green's also varied quite significantly with projected vote shares of between 12% and 20% putting them variously in 2nd, 3rd or 4<sup>th</sup> place. These differences are not mere random statistical variations.

At the same time Lord Ashcroft published a poll putting the Greens in first place, 0.5% ahead of Reform with both on 21%. Ashcroft uses a different approach which does not force people to choose a single party.

### **Does Anyone Actually Believe These Polls?**

A glance through the polling history books makes uncomfortable reading for anyone wanting to present their results with confidence:

- In 2017 Teresa May called a snap election when the Conservatives had a 21% lead in the polls. She had taken over as leader of the Conservatives from David Cameron. During the course of the election campaign the Conservatives poll majority declined steadily with seven out of eight eve of election polls predicting much smaller majorities (24 to 86) and one predicting a hung parliament. On polling day their 21% lead fell to just 2% in the actual election with a single digit majority below most pollsters expectations.
- In June 2019 YouGov put the Conservatives in fourth place with the Brexit Party out ahead on 26%. Following a deal between Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson in December 2019 the latter went on to win an 80 seat majority with the Brexit Party winning no seats.

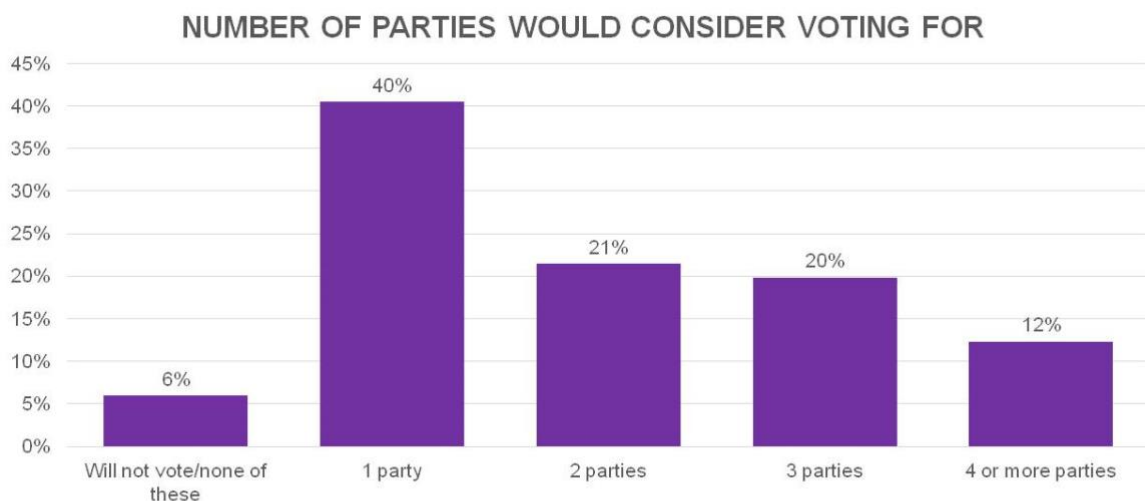
Clearly time and events can and did overtake the pollsters' projections. The only thing that seems certain at this point in the general election cycle is that we don't know what will happen in between now and the actual election. This makes all projections meaningless or at best harmless entertainment. This becomes even more evident when you take into account some fundamental aspects of the approach taken by pollsters.

### What Else is Wrong With the Polls.

Asking people about an election tomorrow breaks a fundamental rule of good market research practice. This is a question many people have not fully considered and are therefore not really able to answer. With an increase in the number of realistically electable parties many people are seriously undecided. Given that only half of voting age people voted in 2024, it may well be that most people are happy to remain undecided about who they would vote for.

Why do pollsters continue to ask (and in some cases force) people to choose a single party?

Over the past two months we have tested a new approach asking which parties people are considering voting for. If they are considering more than one party we then ask which they would be most likely to vote for. So far (based on a small sample of 252) there are more people considering voting for two or more parties than there are considering only one. For any given party, half of so any party's called 'voters' may be considering at least one other party. This level of uncertainty is surely newsworthy and, as such, further renders polling predictions meaningless.



2a. If a general election were to be held in four weeks time how likely would you be to vote?

3a. Which of the following parties or candidates would you consider voting for if an election were to be held in four weeks time?

The chart shows a count of the number of parties each person would consider voting for.

Source: National and Local Democracy Survey 2026

Base: 252 Replies (1st April 2026)

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### How Are Poll Estimates Made?

If we then turn to how pollsters convert the raw data into voting projections, there are two steps in the process. The first is the standard market research procedure of weighting the data by age, sex and other characteristics. This should partly sort out any differences in the quality of the sample. This is an important issue in the era of online samples which I won't go into in-depth here, suffice to say that sample quality can be variable. Our main finding has been that people who are less likely to vote are also less likely to take part in opinion polls. This is very difficult to correct for in weighting and will matter if the impact of differential turnout is taken into consideration.

The second step takes into account the likelihood of voting. This varies significantly from election to election. There is a rather fundamental and obvious lesson I've learnt from running for election:

- The results depend both on who votes and how they vote.

Anecdotally I would say that whether some people vote depends on whether they feel their vote will make a difference. This in turn depends on the choice of candidates available to them which will vary between elections and the margin of victory in the previous election. The situation is often very different in local elections. Here in Bexhill and Battle I was one of 10 candidates who stood in the 2024 general election, up from four in 2019. These are factors pollsters find difficult to take into account. This is even more important given the current situation with the wax and wane of new choices such as Your Party or Advance UK.

### **Our Constituency Simulation**

In order to test the importance of turnout and candidate repertoire we took our mini-poll and used it to model an imaginary seat under three different scenarios. Due to the way we sourced our sample the seat is very right leaning with a significant support for Independents. Under the standard polling questions Reform had a very safe 26% lead over the second placed party. Under a second (low turnout) scenario this fell to 21%. This scenario assumed people who were considering two or more parties did not vote. Under a third scenario we assumed Advance UK and Restore (new competitors to Reform) did not stand. This increased Reform's majority significantly.

We then weighted the data to model a different constituency which produced similar, albeit less pronounced results. The differences further confirm the meaninglessness of single vote share poll estimates.

### **Seat Projections: Precision Meaninglessness?**

The most recent development in presenting poll results has been to project the number of seats by party. These look impressively accurate and are often accompanied with maps so you can check your own constituency. If we accept the vote shares are meaningless, we must also view the seat projections as even more meaningless. In our

seat the incumbent MP stepped down and was replaced by a candidate parachuted in from some 250 miles away. The Tory majority was slashed from 26,000 to just over 2,600. It's difficult to predict at this level of detail.

### **A Disservice to Democracy?**

By publishing polls that make the outcome of a far distant general election look predictable pollsters are doing a disservice to democracy in two ways:

- They are failing to represent the true views of the people by ignoring the uncertainty
- As a result of which they undervalue the impact we as individuals might have on an election result.

Newspapers and other media should ask pollsters to provide data on which parties people are considering voting for substantiated with 'solid support' numbers (people who are only consider voting for teach party). This would be more real and interesting. The number of people who don't know or won't vote should also be reported. In this way we'd know how open the next election really is.

Nigel Jacklin is a statistician and market researcher. The survey data referred to above was collected by MediaSurveys.co.UK. He posts on x as @PeoplesPortal.UK.

## **NATIONAL ELECTION QUESTIONS**

**1a.** There have been two general elections in the last seven years. How many of these elections did you vote in?

Both

One

Neither

Can't remember/prefer not to say

**1b.** Which of the following comes closest to your opinion of the current crop of MPs?

[NOT USED IN OUR ESTIMATES]

Most of them are trustworthy

About half are trustworthy

Most of them are not trustworthy

Don't know/prefer not to say

**1c.** Please write in any comments you have about the quality of our elected parliamentary representatives (MPs).

**2a.** If a general election were to be held in four weeks time how likely would you be to vote?

Definitely would

Very likely

Fairly likely

Fairly unlikely

Very unlikely

Definitely would not

Not sure

**2b.** Are you currently registered to vote?

Yes

No

Don't know

**2c.** What, if anything would encourage you to register to vote?

**2d.** Are you likely to vote:

In person

By post

Not sure

**3a.** Which of the following parties or candidates would you consider voting for if an election were to be held in four weeks time?

*Please select all that apply*

Conservative

Green Party

Labour

Liberal Democrats

Reform

Advance UK

Restore Britain

Your Party

Scottish National Party

Plaid Cymru

Local Party Candidate

Independent Candidate

Other

None of these

**3b.** Which of these other parties would you consider voting for?

*Please select all that apply*

Heritage Party

SDP

Workers Party of Britain

Other

None of these

*Please write in*

**3c.** Which one would you be most likely to vote for?

Conservative

Green Party

Labour

Liberal Democrats

Reform

Advance UK

Restore Britain

Your Party

Scottish National Party

Plaid Cymru

Local Party Candidate

Independent Candidate

Heritage Party

SDP

Workers Party of Britain

Not sure

**4.** What factors will you take into account when deciding who to vote for in a general election?

**5a.** If the party or candidate you supported was unlikely to win how likely would you be to vote tactically (to stop a party you dislike getting in)?

Very likely

Fairly likely

Unlikely

**5b.** Which of the larger parties would you vote tactically against?

*Please select all that apply*

Conservative

Green Party

Labour

Liberal Democrats

Reform

Advance UK

Restore Britain

Your Party

Scottish National Party

Plaid Cymru

None of these

**6.** We are testing these questions out. If you have any comments on them or the subjects they covered please write them in here.

## APPENDIX: 2019 RESULTS

<https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/23713-voting-intention-brex-26-lab-20-lib-dem-20-con-18->