

Reliability of Sample Surveys by Themselves

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Sample surveys in the political context today are far more misleading than they were a couple of decades ago. This is largely due to three interrelated shifts. **First**, public opinion is in a state of constant flux, with a much shorter lifespan than before. **Second**, electoral undercurrents—driven by fears, uncertainties, and governance concerns—have become more pronounced, altering how people respond. **Third**, the proliferation of social media, with its capacity to instantly plant and amplify rumours, has distorted top-of-the-mind responses. Together, these factors significantly weaken the reliability of sample surveys when taken at face value.

To begin with, the volatility of public opinion makes it difficult for any one-time survey to capture a stable or representative mood. Unlike earlier decades, when voter preferences evolved more gradually, opinions today are shaped and reshaped rapidly by unfolding events, campaign messaging, and media narratives. As a result, what a survey captures is often only a fleeting moment, not a durable trend. This also means that the timing of a survey becomes critical—findings can quickly become outdated even before they are disseminated.

Second, the nature of voter response itself has changed due to deeper and more complex electoral undercurrents. Campaigns today are influenced by latent fears, uncertainties about governance, and shifting perceptions of leadership. In such a context, respondents are less likely to express clear or direct preferences. Negative responses are often replaced by neutral or guarded ones, making it harder to interpret voter intent accurately. These subtleties are difficult to capture through conventional survey instruments, which tend to rely on straightforward questioning and quantifiable responses.

Third, the growing influence of social media has introduced a new layer of distortion. The rapid spread of rumours and targeted messaging affects how individuals perceive issues and respond to surveys. Top-of-the-mind answers are increasingly shaped by recent exposure to information—whether verified or not—rather than considered opinion. This creates a volatile response environment, where survey data may reflect momentary impressions rather than genuine electoral preferences.

In spite of these limitations, news media continue to rely heavily on sample surveys to guide election coverage. There is an implicit assumption that larger sample sizes and advanced analytical tools enhance reliability. However, neither higher sample size nor technological sophistication necessarily addresses the core issue of unstable and

context-sensitive responses. In many cases, survey findings are further processed, reinterpreted, or even recalibrated by media houses to align with their editorial perspectives or emerging electoral narratives. Consequently, survey results often become inputs into a broader media construct rather than definitive conclusions in themselves.

This process is further complicated by the competitive dynamics of social media and the evolving nature of campaign communication. As the electoral scene unfolds, both traditional and digital media adapt their coverage strategies, influencing how survey results are framed and received. Increased use of technology in survey research—including telephone and internet-based methods—raises additional concerns about respondent authenticity and contextual sensitivity. Such methods are often ill-equipped to capture the nuances of political uncertainty or local dynamics.

Moreover, the interpretation of survey findings depends heavily on the electoral stage and timing. Field surveys need to be analysed with reference to when they are conducted within the campaign cycle. Tracking surveys, conducted over multiple rounds, are more useful in capturing trends than one-off exercises. Similarly, past election results are no longer reliable benchmarks, given the speed and scale of contemporary political change. Even voter lists, traditionally used for sample selection, are now in constant flux, further complicating the reliability of sampling frameworks.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) introduces new possibilities for survey research, but it does not automatically resolve these challenges. Being data-driven, AI systems depend critically on the quality and relevance of input data. If the underlying data is unstable or flawed, the outputs—however sophisticated—will lack credibility. This is especially true at the macro level, where extrapolations can amplify small inaccuracies.

In today's context, therefore, sample surveys cannot be taken at face value. Their findings require careful reassessment and contextual interpretation, particularly in relation to how soon they are released after data collection. The issue is no longer just about methodology, but about the changing nature of public opinion, voter behaviour, and information ecosystems. Without accounting for these shifts, the reliability of sample surveys by themselves remains inherently limited.

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