Predicting the UK General Election

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Outline

Predicting the UK General Election

1. Sampling and its importance
2. Electoral Systems
3. Election in the UK
4. Problems faced in the prediction
5. Results
We can now be pretty certain that the general election will take place on 6th May 2010. (If in fact it has been called earlier, and you already know the result, you can compare my predictions here with what has actually happened: this is called putting my neck on the line.) But what seems a little less certain than the date of the election is who will emerge on the steps of 10 Downing Street on the morning after election day. In October and November 2009 Labour seemed to be in disarray, with the magnetic attraction for calamity that seems to afflict all long-term governments (remember the Cones Hotline that marked the end of the last Conservative period of office?). David Cameron was reassuring people, apparently successfully, that voting Conservative was not a shameful activity. It seemed then that a Tory government was a foregone conclusion.

But ...

Well in fact there are several buts, some to do with the electoral system and some to do with the way people (mis)interpret the opinion polls, which will almost certainly continue to offer plenty of opportunity for speculation.

Starting with the polls, and getting the most obvious question out of the way first, how can a poll of a mere 1000 people represent the views of an electorate of 50 million voters? I am sure that readers will already know about the bowl of soup analogy – you only need a spoonful to know what flavour it is – but I would like to share with you a wonderful new analogy I heard recently. Next time someone tells you they don’t believe a small sample poll can possibly tell you anything, just say to them ‘OK, then. Next time you have to have a blood test, why don’t you ask them to take the whole lot?’

So if we can start by agreeing that it is perfectly possible for a sample of only 1000 or so to represent the universe, we can then move on to looking at what the opinion polls can reasonably tell us and what they cannot.
Sampling
WHAT IS SAMPLING?
WHY SAMPLING?

Saves costs
Saves time
Smaller size to deal with
SAMPLING

Predicting the General Election in the UK
The UK Electoral System

Is it always fair?
Points to take note about the UK Election

- Two main parties - Conservatives and Labour
- Electoral geography is biased against the conservatives (at the moment at least).
- Vote proportion doesn’t equate to seat proportion
Prediction

What were the problems faced?
Conclusion
Polls might not be as accurate, but they still play an important role today.