

Predicting the vote

Will voters use their heads or their hearts in the coming EU referendum?

by **Paul Baines**, Professor of Political Marketing

The apparent failure of political pollsters to predict the result of the 2015 general election caused an upset, more apparent than real. Normally, according to the rules of statistics, polls may be out when predicting vote shares for the two main parties by a margin of around 3 per cent for each party share prediction, but, in 2015, the eleven final pre-election polls were out by, on average, 3.2 per cent. So, not a massive error, but sufficiently out to predict the wrong result.

The question is, why were the polls out by so much when they have got it spot on in all elections since 1992? The most plausible explanation to date, based on Ipsos MORI's data, at least, is that fewer Labour supporters came out to vote than had declared their intention.

So what of the coming EU referendum called for 23 June? How will the way the 'Remain' or 'Leave' campaigns are managed influence voting? And who will turn out to vote?

A YouGov poll on 2-3 March showed that 37 per cent say they would like to leave the EU while 40 per cent say they would vote to remain, with 23% saying they don't know or wouldn't vote. Support for leaving the EU was higher than the support for staying throughout most of the period from 2011 to mid-2013. But there are a significant number of undecided voters, so both Leave and Remain campaigns have everything to play for.

A key question for both campaigns is how likely is it that campaigning tactics will influence the final result? And can pollsters quantify this effect?

Interestingly, most political scientists assume that campaigns make little, if any, difference to the final result. But if this were true, no-one would bother campaigning, and the marketing industry in general would collapse because the same lack of influence would also be true for commercial brands. There is increasing experimental evidence that, in advertising, emotional appeals are more effective than rational appeals. Remember how negative the campaigns got towards the

end of the Scottish Referendum? We can expect that sort of negativity again.

In predicting the likely outcome of the EU Referendum vote, pollsters need to consider three things:

- How likely are people to turn up and vote?
- Who will they be voting for?
- How knowledgeable do they feel about the issues on which the campaigns stand?

The turnout for the EU Parliamentary election in 2014 was 42.5 per cent, down progressively almost every election from around 62 per cent since 1979, but in such an historic referendum, I would expect the turnout to be considerably higher. Just look at the 84.6 per cent of people who turned out to the Scottish Referendum in 2015. The accuracy of opinion polls taken before the Referendum date has to be viewed with caution. People tend to give an answer off the top of their head but when in the Referendum voting booth, many think more carefully. Voting intentions are really not fully fixed until the last minute. In general elections, for example, 7-8 per cent of floating voters make up their minds in the last 24 hours.



Based on the evidence of past referendums, where there were apparent poll majorities just before the vote, a small percentage of voters amend their vote for change to a vote against, reverting to the status quo. We call this swing an 'elite retreat'. In the ten polls conducted between 9 and 17 September, the average lead for the 'No' vote in the Scottish Referendum campaign was 4.1 per cent when the actual 'No' lead on 17 September was 10.6 per cent, giving an 'elite retreat' vote change of up to 6.5%. I say up to, because some of this difference could have been measurement error. So, in the Scottish independence referendum, a sufficient number of people fell into line with the UK government's position at the last minute for Scotland to vote to remain part of the United Kingdom.

In the EU Referendum, debate is becoming polarised between the 'Remain' campaigners who claim the UK's future prosperity and continued stability and security depend on the country being part of a larger entity, and those calling for Brexit who want to reclaim our sovereignty and regain control of our borders.

There is considerable cross-party consensus for remaining part of the EU. Business and industry in the form of the CBI and the Institute of Directors are also Europhile with a few notable exceptions (e.g. the former British Chambers of

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Commerce Director-General, John Longworth). But 132 Tories and a clutch of Labour MPs are in favour of Brexit and there is support from many small businesses for an end to EU red tape.

The key perceptions of the British public towards the EU are polarised and largely negative. This is partly because the UK press is heavily Eurosceptic with the largest selling newspapers, the Sun, the Daily Mail and the Mirror, being anti. We can expect emotional appeals to Leave from this quarter. Any pro-European campaign will find it hard to cut through that negativity. The only way really is to speak directly to people using the sort of digital marketing campaign used to great effect by the Conservatives in the 2015 general election campaign.

That message should be partly rational, appealing on the facts of the case for, and partly emotional, by appealing to the ironically patriotic case for staying in (and retaining Britain's greatness). This latter appeal has the benefit of countering any patriotic appeal by the Leave campaigns. My advice for the Remain campaign would be to keep making the rational argument that the EU is our biggest trading partner and by leaving we risk losing a large slice of our GDP. It would be difficult and time-consuming to have to renegotiate separate trade agreements with each EU state, which is precisely what we would have to do. The Leave campaign should also focus on the rational case for leaving, specifically that a large proportion of government time is spent simply on processing and applying EU law.

The emotional appeal would be that Europe holds Britain back and that the British are a proud island people who will never be wholeheartedly European. The Leave campaign will also need to articulate a vision for an independent UK, not just outline a bunch of (negative) reasons to leave, if it is to be successful.

Ultimately, this referendum will boil down to whether we let emotional or rational arguments win the day. So will it be heads or hearts that decide the outcome? Pollsters need to keep a watchful eye. **MF**