

## The On-line Opinion Poll that could cost £13.2 billion

In the run up to the Scottish Referendum an on line poll showed the 'Yes' vote to be ahead while other polls maintained a victory for the 'No' vote.

This provoked quite a reaction. Experience had shown that the on-line polls conducted ahead of other votes such as General Elections had proved to be reasonable accurate. The "No" campaign, therefore, beefed up their pledges as to what a post "no" vote Scotland would get, summarised below courtesy of The Guardian.

In the event, as we now know, the vote turned out to be a "No" so why was the on-line poll so wrong in this instance?

### Two Types of People

The answer lies in the difference between people who take part in on-line surveys and those who don't.

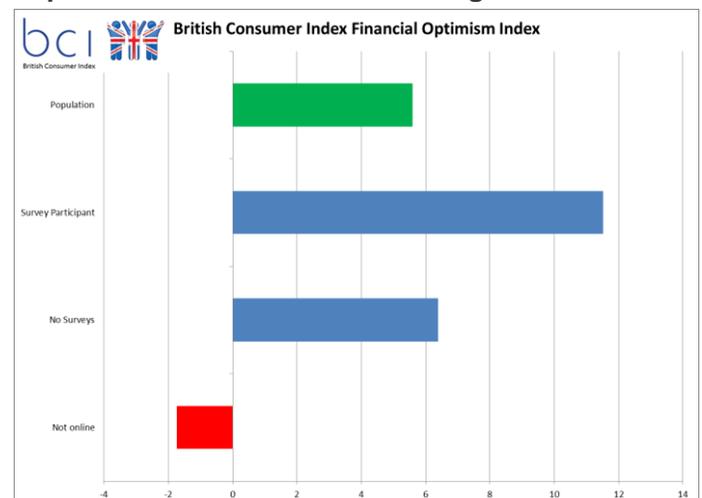
You Gov tell us that the reason on-line polls tend to be good at predicting elections is that people who respond to their surveys are more likely to actually go out and vote. They are generally more 'active' in the broad sense.

This works well when the turnout is low as is the case in most elections but this time the turnout was high, more representative of the population as a whole.

And that is the issue. On-line polls and surveys represent a subset of the population which is more 'active' than the population in general. It can, therefore, be misleading to extrapolate an on-line survey to the whole population. Simply put, the people who respond to on-line surveys are more likely to actually turn out to vote so when turnout is lower the poll will be more accurate than when it is higher.

Taking another example; The British Consumer Index (BCI) publishes figures each month on peoples' Financial Optimism, whether they think their personal financial situation will get better or worse in the next few months. They show the results for the population as a whole and for those individuals who respond to on-line surveys. These figures provide an illustration of the extent of the difference when it comes to 'attitude'.

As can be seen, those who respond to On-line surveys are the most optimistic with those who do not use the internet are, as may be expected, least optimistic. The Green bar shows the figure for the population as a whole. (Figures for 3 months to September 2014)



## What this Means

Any survey needs to be interpreted with care. They cannot be taken too literally. While it is easy to weight a survey for demographics to make it representative it is far harder to adjust for attitude. Proxies can be used such as which newspaper people read etc. but when asking about attitudes there is no 'benchmark' to weight against (such as the Census for demographics).

It is widely understood that on-line surveys tend to reflect more definite views than the population in general and a more 'active' profile but quantifying that difference is where the difficulty lies.

When it comes to using an on-line survey to establish things like the likely demand for a product or attitudes to things like advertising and marketing that quantification can make the difference between success and failure of a product or campaign.

One solution is to run on-line surveys in tandem with other methodologies. On-line can provide cost efficient volume with a smaller 'control' survey using say, face to face.

Conclusions can then be drawn from an amalgam of the two results.

The problem is that this can be both costly and time consuming as the 'off line' methodology will, inevitably, take longer to collect.

Another solution is to use 'reference' data which can be split into whether people respond to on-line surveys. The British Consumer Index uses this method for its Financial Optimism data detailed above. The data comes from The British Population Survey which has been collecting this data every month from July 2009. Its 'reference' data can be used to provide an indication of 'Attitudinal Skew' for any on-line survey to help with the extrapolation of the results to the population as a whole.

## Summary

All of this is not to say that on-line surveys are bad. In fact they provide many benefits. They are quick, cost effective and can provide large and robust samples sizes. However, as with any data the results need to be interpreted.

The one thing that the Scottish Referendum experience shows us is that while on-line polls can be very accurate in a 'low turnout' election they cannot be expected to perform as well when almost the whole electorate actually turns out to vote.

In a broader context, it illustrates the problem for other users in using these surveys to understand not just the population but also their particular target segment as a whole.

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## Referendum Pledges:

### The joint pledge on Scotland.

The three main UK parties are now offering to expand on those powers and strengthen local government; some parties' plans are more far-reaching than others.

They have now pledged to set up a fast-track parliamentary timetable at Westminster to draft a new Scotland bill by late January next year, ready for introduction to parliament by the next UK government after the May 2015 general election. They have also pledged to give Holyrood legal independence from Westminster; currently the law allows Westminster to override Scottish decisions.

#### Labour

- Holyrood to control and set Scottish income tax rates by up to 15p in the pound, worth £6.3bn but be barred from cutting rates below UK rates
- Holyrood to run housing benefit in Scotland and attendance allowance, worth £2.2bn
- Labour would give Holyrood secure legal status
- New powers and reformed tax-raising system for local councils

Total value: £8.5bn

#### Conservatives

- Holyrood to set and control all Scottish income tax, worth £10.8bn, but have complete flexibility on rates and bands
- Holyrood could control housing benefit and attendance allowance, as well as air passenger duty, worth £234m
- Create UK parliamentary assembly to consider future of devolution and Westminster

Total value: £13.2bn

#### Liberal Democrats

- Holyrood to set and control all Scottish income tax, worth £10.8bn, inheritance tax, air passenger duty, capital gains tax and the aggregates levy, worth a total of £814m
- Greater tax-raising powers for local councils
- Introduction of federal government for UK but hazy on process

Total value: £11.6bn.

Source; The Guardian 16 September 2014