Expert Predictions of the 2015 General Election

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Introduction

The 2015 general election promises to be perhaps the most interesting – and potentially most complicated – in a generation. In a data-rich world, an increasing volume of media coverage of the election horse race focuses on the reporting and interpretation of political data – the polls, constituency polling by Lord Ashcroft and others, geodata on constituency demographics, survey data on attitudes towards policies and politics (such as being collected by the British Election Study), and an increasing number of forecasts that are being updated weekly by psephologists. Many other citizen social scientists are playing along at home as each new set of polls arrives.

On behalf of the Political Studies Association, we carried out an expert survey of journalists, academics and pollsters concerning their predictions of the outcome of the May 2015 general election. The idea of the "wisdom of crowds" was popularized by James Surowiecki's book of the same name published just over a decade ago, but can be traced at least as far back as Francis Galton's famous experiment at a county fair in Plymouth, as detailed in Nature in 1907, in which competitors paid *6d* each to enter a competition to guess the weight of an ox – with the average "voter" guessing the weight of the ox almost perfectly (to the nearest kilogram), as the errors of individual guesses cancelled out.

Inspired by this idea, and by a more general interest in comparing the predictions of different groups of expert opinion during such an unpredictable election run-in, we asked journalists, academics and pollsters to offer their predictions of the vote share and the seats in parliament that would be won by political parties in Great Britain at the forthcoming general election.[1]

The fieldwork for this survey was carried out online between 4th and 21st February, and was by invitation only, distributed to a large mailing list of members of the Political Studies Association, journalists from the print and broadcast media, and pollsters from the major polling companies in the UK. Responses were anonymous, and our intention was not to provide a documentary record of the individual who got closest to the final result (though no doubt there will be a few who wish to claim bragging rights after May 7th), but rather to discover what the election prediction of these crowds of experts were and whether they differed in meaningful or surprising ways.

In the report that follows, we describe some of the technical details of the survey and then review the headline results – for both predicted vote shares and predicted seats.

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[1] Because Northern Ireland is typically not included in "national" opinion polls, or in the vote shares that are typically discussed – rightly or wrongly – in the London-based national media, our survey excluded the 18 constituencies of Northern Ireland and the level of support for parties there.

Response rate

We were delighted that the survey received an enthusiastic response from most of those who completed it. One respondent caveated "This is pure guesswork!". Another noted that "Figures not adding up may be due to rounding errors or insufficient caffeination." Another (one might guess belonging to the psephology-focused *Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* specialist group of the PSA) said "I hope the Anarchists don't beat *us*" (our italics).

In total, invitations to complete the survey were distributed to 2,338 people. The total number of responses for each of our expert groups is shown in Table 1. This indicates a response rate of around 23% - a rate that most pollsters would envy! The table also reports the survey completion rate, defined as the proportion of responses of each group which included *at least one* prediction of a party's vote share or seat tally. The table shows that academics are by far the most numerous group, but also have the lowest completion rate.

In total we asked respondents to make sixteen predictions: eight predictions concerning vote share, and eight predictions concerning seat tallies.[2] Of those respondents who offered *any* predictions, most (78.6%) completed all sixteen predictions.

Table 1. Number of respondents by type

Role	Respondents	Completed
Academic	465	58.7
Journalist	45	64.4
Pollster	27	74.1

[2] These predictions related to the vote share and seats for: (1) the Conservative Party, (2) the Labour Party, (3) the Liberal Democrats, (4) the UK Independence Party, (5) the Scottish National Party, (6) Plaid Cymru, (7) the Green Party, and (8) other parties.

Predictions of vote share

Our first question about expert predictions asked "Please tell me what percentage share of the national vote you think the …… party will win in the forthcoming general election?" and then listed the names of the major parties in Great Britain. In Table 2 below, we report the average predicted vote share for each party, both across all respondents, and for each particular group of experts – academics, pollsters and journalists. We also report the inter-quartile range (IQR). It indicates the range of values which covers a majority of responses. Finally, we report the result of a test of whether differences between the three types of respondent are *statistically significant*. In some cases, these differences between groups can be quite large (for example pollsters predict a 1.2% higher vote share for Labour than journalists), but are not statistically significant due to the size of our sample of respondents.

Table 2. Predicted vote shares

	Mean	*IQR*	*Academics*	*Pollsters*	*Journalists*	*Group differences?*
Conservative	32.6	31-34	32.4	33.5	33.4	No
Labour	32.3	31-33	32.3	32.9	31.7	No
Liberal Democrats	9.8	8-12	9.7	9.9	10.5	No
UKIP	11.2	9-14	11.1	11.8	11.5	No
SNP	4.6	3-5	4.7	3.8	4	No
Plaid Cymru	1.6	1-2	1.6	1.4	1.1	No
Greens	5.1	3-6	5.1	4.4	4.7	No
Others	3.2	1-4	3.3	2.3	3.1	No

The headline finding on vote shares from our survey is that the collective wisdom of our crowd of political experts is that this will be a very close election, with little to separate Labour and the Conservatives. The mean prediction for the Conservatives is 32.6% and the mean for Labour is 32.3%, with UKIP on 11.2% just ahead of the Liberal Democrats on 9.8%. The SNP vote of 4.6% is substantial considering this is a prediction for Great Britain, indicating the extent to which the rise of the SNP is being taken seriously. The prediction of 5.1% for the Greens would represent a sizeable gain on their performance at the 2010 election. Interestingly, the expert predictions are not far off from the sorts of figures that we have been seeing in recent polls for the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats – although the predictions for UKIP and the Greens are both a little below where they are currently polling, suggesting our experts expect them to fall back a little as Election Day approaches.

Crucially, these predictions of the vote share in May's election reflect a broad consensus across the expert groups, with no significant between-group differences. Despite having left possible responses open (i.e. not restricting to defined values for votes/seats in the response options), the predicted vote shares thankfully add up to close to one-hundred percent, once allowance is made for differences due to rounding.

Predictions of seats in Parliament

Our second question asked "… Now could you please tell me the number of seats in Parliament that you think the …… party will win in the forthcoming general election?" In Table 3 we report the average predicted seat tally for each party, both across all respondents, and for each particular group of experts. As before, we also report the inter-quartile range and tests for significant differences between groups.

Table 3. Predicted seats

	Mean	IQR	Academics	Pollsters	Journalists	Group differences?
Conservative	278.4	271.8-290	277.3	283.7	285.7	No
Labour	282.3	275.0-297	282.3	284.6	281.5	No
Liberal Democrats	24.8	20-30	24.2	27.8	28.6	Yes
UKIP	6.6	3-6	7	4.5	4.2	No
SNP	28.7	20-38	28.6	29.6	28.6	No
Plaid Cymru	3.3	2-4	3.4	3.4	3	No
Greens	1.9	1-2	1.9	1.3	2	No
Others	13.4	5-19	13.6	10.8	14.2	No

Just as with vote shares, the headline figures for our expert predictions concerning seats in parliament also suggest a tight election, with Labour on 282 slightly ahead of the Conservatives on 278. This reverses the ordering of the parties on the expected vote share. Clearly our experts are mindful of the current bias in the electoral system towards Labour, which means the party is likely to require fewer votes to win more seats. In contrast to the vote shares, the Liberal Democrats on 25 seats are safely ahead of UKIP on just 7.

There is one statistically significant differece between the three groups, and it concerns the Liberal Democrats. Here, both pollsters and journalists are more optimistic than academics about the party's prospects.

Derived quantities

The previous two tables provided summaries of predictions made by our experts. It is also possible to examine some "derived quantities" from the survey data. That is, we can ask questions like "what proportion of the respondents put the Conservatives ahead of Labour in vote share", or "what proportion of respondents put Labour ahead of the Conservatives on seats." We report proportions for five derived quantities in Table 4.

Table 4. Derived quantities

	Mean	Academics	Pollsters	Journalists	Group differences?
Con votes > Lab votes	49.4	46.7	55	71.4	Yes
Con seats > Lab seats	35.9	33.6	50	48.3	No
UKIP votes > LibDem votes	59.3	58.7	60	64.3	No
UKIP seats > LibDem seats	4.4	5.2	0	0	No
One-party majority	5.8	6	0	9.1	No

These derived quantities are illuminating on the complicated electoral maths of the May 2015 election. It is important to note that whilst almost half of respondents (49.4%) believe that the Conservatives will receive a greater share of the *vote* than Labour, only 36% believe that they will win more *seats* than Labour. Few respondents from any of our expert groups are of the view that UKIP will win more seats than the Liberal Democrats. There is one statistically significant difference between our groups of expert – academics are less likely to believe that the Conservatives will outpoll Labour. Note that this difference is *only significant* when we compare the Labour and Conservative vote share predictions for each respondent together as derived quantities: there is no significant difference when looking at the Conservative vote share alone.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, but importantly, only a small fraction of our experts, and none of the pollsters, believe that there will be a single party majority after election. The clear message from our assembled crowd of experts is that Britain is headed for another hung parliament.

Conclusion

The idea of the "wisdom of crowds" tells us that random errors will tend, on average, to cancel out through the process of aggregation – so long as those errors are not systematic. Our expert survey confirms this, as differences that might have been expected across fields – due to variation in the sorts of information sources and professional networks accessible to different categories of expert (i.e. pollsters are more likely to have access to extensive data sources on voters, whereas journalists might be expected to have more of the "inside track" on the campaign strategies of the parties) – have not materialised. Our inaugural expert survey points towards a tight election, in which Labour is marginal favourite to come out ahead in terms of seats – but where the gap between the parties in terms of both predicted votes and seats is so small as to make it pretty much neck-and-neck. In the coming weeks, we will watch with interest to see if the predictions of our experts hold true – or if there are late shocks or surprises to the campaign, such as the period of Cleggmania last time.