

Panelbase comments on recent polls and media coverage

While we entirely understand that the Scottish referendum is an emotive issue, and that robust criticism of political polls is par for the course, we felt it worth responding to some of the issues raised around our recent SNP poll.

There has been some discussion on Twitter of an organised sign-up of Yes campaigners, hoping to influence Panelbase polls. Not all of the quoted posts actually relate to political polls, but the point is still one to consider. In fact new joiners have had no significant effect on our results but we do recognise the potential for abuse of the system if people on either side were able to coordinate a mass sign up of new members. As a precaution, between now and the referendum we will not be including results from panel members who joined more recently than June 2013. This only applies to political polls. We may still invite people to take part for our own internal analysis, but their data will not be used in the published results. We are also considering other measures to ensure that sample sources have no undue effect on results.

The second point relates to the question order. We accept that it is not inconceivable that this may have had some limited effect – although we cannot really know for sure. It is entirely valid for a client to want to try out different approaches – and if the raising of those two concepts really did have an effect, that’s a potentially interesting finding in itself.

We believe that most of the difference between the results of our usual Sunday Times polls and those of other polling companies lies with the varying approaches we each have to the analysis of the data – rather than in the raw data itself. We are using the same methodology that we used before the 2011 election, where we were in line with other contemporary polls. (As we state in the technical introduction to all our published tables, we weight on a range of demographics and on Holyrood voting history for political balance, then filter the results to report only people who say they are very likely to vote.)

We chose to continue with that methodology for the referendum polling but the bottom line is that all pollsters are in pretty uncharted territory – whereas Holyrood and Westminster elections come around regularly and can be used to hone techniques, an independence referendum is a rare event. The one thing we polling agencies all have in common is the desire to produce accurate results – no company’s reputation would be enhanced by bending results to favour one side or the other. If you’ve read this far, thanks for your interest. We look forward to a healthy and robust debate over the next 12 months.

Panelbase

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