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HOW TO MANIPULATE POLLS

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Abstract: *Every time you open a newspaper, listen to the radio, watch TV or browse the Internet, you will see some numbers and stats. All these numbers come from different sources like a national statistics office, an organization or an individual that has conducted research. These numbers can give a brief overview of the world surrounding us and are often used by people or organizations to strengthen their message. The way experts collect all the raw data to come up with all these clear-cut numbers is an important part of the process. In this respect, an experiment has been designed to see how a person can manipulate a poll to obtain the desired numbers and a lot of ways have been found.*

Key words: *experiment, manipulation, market research, polls.*

1. Introduction

Last week, our attention was drawn by two different polls. The first poll considered that 65% of the Romanians would vote for the USL alliance during the next elections and the other argued that 53% of the population would vote for the USL alliance. Where did this 12% difference come from?

The polls were made in the same period of time, on the same population, same number of people, same sampling and collecting data method. Theoretically the results should be the same. The only two different things were the companies who did the studies and the beneficiaries. One was for the USL alliance and the other one was for their opponents, the PDL party. Was this just a statistical error or a case of manipulation?

When people use statistics, they assume or, at least, want their listeners to assume that the numbers are meaningful.

This means, at a minimum, that someone has actually counted something and that they have done the counting in a way that makes sense. Statistical information is one of the best ways we have of making sense of the world's complexities, of identifying patterns amid the confusion.

If you hire any market research company to do a study for you, they can probably engineer almost any result you wish by setting up the study in a certain way that biases the data. This is the garbage in - garbage out phenomenon. Just because the number was accurately calculated it does not mean that what is being measured is being measured properly.

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The messages and statistics are then released to the media through press releases, advertising or delivered by a spokesperson, or in some cases they are delivered directly by company representatives or politicians. This is remarkably effective because the media will often use these "sound bites" of information without checking to find out if they are accurate - this is especially true of numbers and statistics. As news services continue to cut back on investigative journalism resources and staff, this is becoming more and more common.

This is a very unfortunate phenomenon because the general public tends to trust the media to be true and accurate. As soon as the numbers appear in the media, they become more credible and are usually treated as facts. This makes it much easier for the politicians to mislead us. But bad statistics give us bad information. [1]

According to Oxford Dictionaries, manipulation is "the action of manipulating something in a skilful manner" or "the action of manipulating someone in a clever or unscrupulous way." [2]

The key to a successful manipulation is to use as much of the truth as possible. In the case of numbers and statistics, it works best to use real numbers rather than making them up. The distortion begins with the source of the numbers.

One of the most powerful forms of manipulation used by politicians is to quote numbers and statistics that support their assertions and conclusions. They love to show how people love them by using numbers from polls they ordered.

2. "YES SIR" Experiment

In our research, we found a lot of ways to manipulate using polls. There are easy and rough ways like just faking the numbers and there are more sophisticated ways like influencing people's answers. An experiment was designed to see how a person can manipulate a poll to obtain the desired numbers by influencing people's answers. One of the easiest and most frequently used method is setting up the study in a certain way that biases the data. The way they do that is by asking a lot of questions that lead the respondent to the desired answer or by asking the question in such a manner that the respondent feels compiled to give the desired answer.

The wording of the questions, the order in which they are asked and the number and form of alternative answers offered can influence results of polls. For instance, the public is more likely to indicate support for a person who is described by the operator or a previous question as one of the "leading candidates". This method uses the spiral of silence technique. The theory asserts that a person is less likely to voice an opinion on a topic if one feels that one is in the minority for fear of reprisal or isolation from the majority.

Why is this method so efficient? Because it uses a lot of persuasion technique and it manipulates people in so many different ways. When our questioner was built, we tried to use different technique like foot-in-the-door and the halo effect.

The foot-in-the-door technique (FITD) is a compliance tactic that involves getting a person to agree to a large request by first setting them up by having that person agree to a modest request. The foot-in-the-door technique succeeds due to a basic human reality that social scientists call "successive approximations". Basically, the more a subject goes along with small requests or commitments, the more likely that subject is to continue in a desired direction of attitude or behavioural change and feel obliged to go along with larger requests. FITD works by first getting a small yes and then getting an even bigger yes. The principle involved is that a small agreement creates a bond between the

requester and the respondent. The other person has to justify their agreement to themselves. They cannot use the first request as something significant, so they have to convince themselves that it is because they are nice and like the requester or that they actually are interested in the item being requested. In a future request, they then feel obliged to act consistently with their internal explanation they have built.

This technique is used many times by politicians when they want to manipulate people. For instance, Traian Băsescu, the president of Romania, used this method of manipulation in the fall of 2009 with the occasion of Presidential election. The polls placed him on the second place after his opponent, Mircea Geoană. The same polls showed that the institution with the worst reputation was the Parliament, so Traian Băsescu speculated this to his advantage by organizing a national referendum asking people if they wanted to abolish one of the Parliament's chambers and to reduce the numbers of MPs. The result was that the people went to vote in large numbers, voted for the referendum and then voted for the candidate who proposed it.

The halo effect is a cognitive bias whereby the perception of one trait (i.e. a characteristic of a person or object) is influenced by the perception of another trait (or several traits) of that person or object. An example would be answering multiple questions in the same ways just because the questions look alike.

Recently, some politicians tried to speculate these techniques by organizing a local referendum about the way Bucharest should be organized. They proposed a questionnaire with seven questions. First, five questions referred to some problems that the city has, like stray dogs, in order to remind the people of the negative things and influence them to vote the people who can change these things. After a huge scandal, made by mass-media and the specialists, the politicians who proposed the question gave up and removed the first five questions, leaving just the questions referring to the problem in hand.

For our experiment, 3 false questionnaires were designed, in which there was an attempt to influence the respondents' answers by triggering some positive and negative emotions with a couple of questions carefully placed right before the question we tried to influence.

For the first questionnaire, which was given to the control group, only a simple question was used.

For the second questionnaire, which was given to group B, 5 questions were used before the question we tried to influence.

For the third questionnaire, which was given to group C, 4 questions were used before the question we tried to influence.

Parts of all the three questioners are shown below.

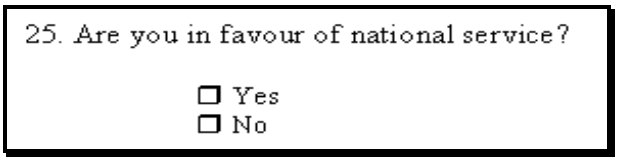
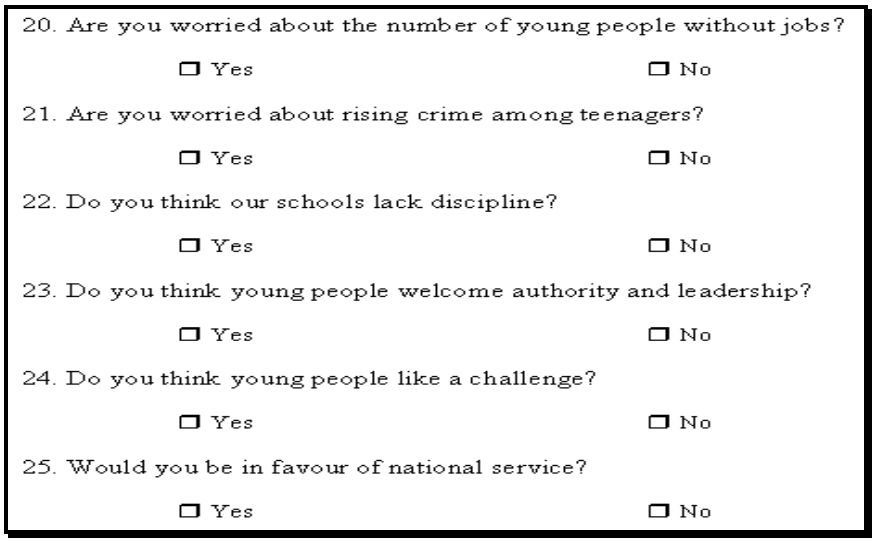


Fig. 1. *Form A of the questionnaire*


20. Are you worried about the number of young people without jobs?

❒ Yes ❒ No

21. Are you worried about rising crime among teenagers?

❒ Yes ❒ No

22. Do you think our schools lack discipline?

❒ Yes ❒ No

23. Do you think young people welcome authority and leadership?

❒ Yes ❒ No

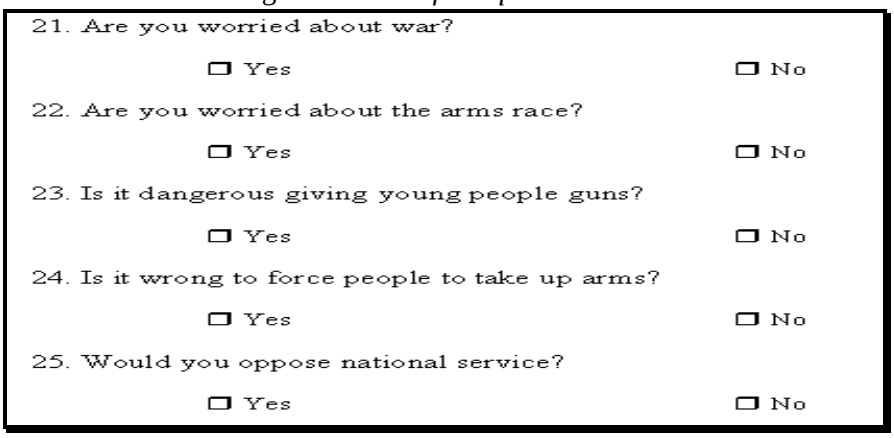
24. Do you think young people like a challenge?

❒ Yes ❒ No

25. Would you be in favour of national service?

❒ Yes ❒ No

Fig. 2. *Form B of the questionnaire*


21. Are you worried about war?

❒ Yes ❒ No

22. Are you worried about the arms race?

❒ Yes ❒ No

23. Is it dangerous giving young people guns?

❒ Yes ❒ No

24. Is it wrong to force people to take up arms?

❒ Yes ❒ No

25. Would you oppose national service?

❒ Yes ❒ No

Fig. 3. *Form C of the questionnaire*

The purpose of this experiment is to see if this method of manipulating the polls by leading respondent to the desired answers really works and if so how much this influences the end result. The starting hypothesis is that this method really works and we can influence people's answers.

The subjects of the experiment are students from *Transilvania* University of Braşov. The numbers of participants in this study is 120. The participants are very homogeneous, coming from all different backgrounds. They were told that they just had to complete a normal questionnaire about politics as part of a survey. Because of the fact that the sampling was not done using a probabilistic method and the fact that the sample comprised only 120 people, the results cannot be extrapolated.

First, they were split into two groups of 60 people. The first group participated in the first week of the experiment and the other group took part in the experiment in the second week. This way, we tried to see if we can replicate the results of the first experiment.

The subjects were divided into six 20-people groups. Two groups (40 people) were the control groups. They were given a standard questionnaire without any

alteration and form of manipulation (form A). Their answers will be compared with the answers of the other groups.

The other groups received a modified form of the same questionnaire. Two groups got form B of the questionnaire and the other two groups got form C of the questionnaire. After all the data were collected, the results were analyzed using the SPSS software and Microsoft Office Excel.

3. Conclusions

As we can see from the figure below, 59% of the respondents from the control group are not in favour of the national service, 40% would be in favour and we have a 1% non-response (NR).

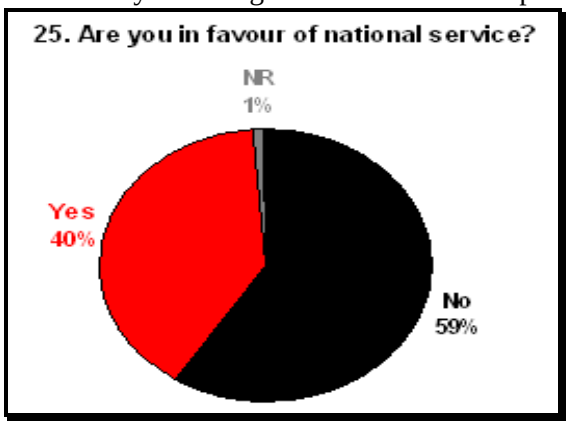


Fig. 4. *Answers from the control group (group A)*

When we analyze the numbers from group B we see that the respondents who would not be in favour of the national service have decreased to 54%, while the number of respondents who are in favour of national service has increase from 40% to 46%.

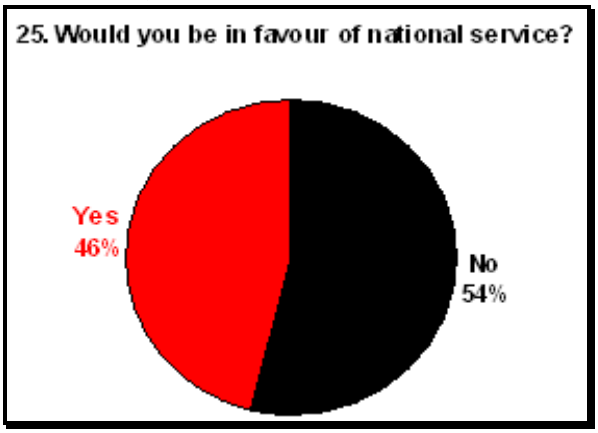


Fig. 5. *Answers from group B*

Finally, when we analyze the numbers from group C, we see that the respondents who would not be in favour of the national service has increase from 59% to 62% compared with the results from the control group, while the number of the respondents who are in favour of the national service decreased from 40% to 38% compared with the results from the control group.

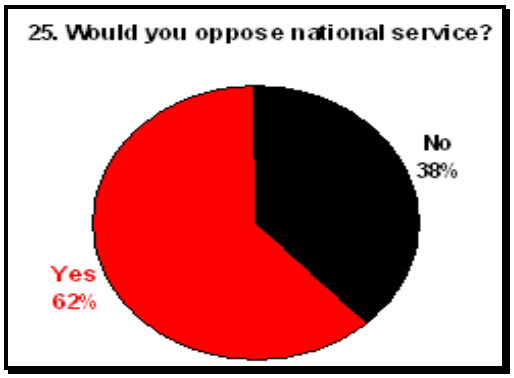


Fig. 6. *Answers from group C*

Analyzing these numbers, we can draw the conclusion that this method of manipulation works very well. Comparing the results from the three groups, we can state for sure that we can influence people's responses by just adding some questions to guide their answers.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

[1] Best, J.: *More Damned lies and statistics*. University of California Press, Los Angeles, 2004, p. 45.

[2] Http://oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m_en_gb0497580#m_en_gb0497580

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