Trapped in a Downward Spiral?

The Changing Role of Opinion Polling Data in the Policy Processes of Digital Democracies

by

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Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned **Tristan Bath,** hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted as part of the requirements of any other academic degree or non-degree programme, in English or in any other language.

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Abstract

In light of recent changes to the political and media landscapes, the need to explore how policy practices within democracies can be evolved to catch up with and meet the needs of voters, and to understand how the limitations of democratic proxies can lead or mislead policy-making, has become more urgent. A key part of this ecosystem is the industry of opinion polling.

This thesis formulates a deeper understanding of how changes in opinion polling practices reinforce and/or contradict democratic principles. It explores how policy-makers can better understand the evolving usage of public opinion polling online, with a view to improving modern democratic systems. This thesis opens with a discussion of how scholars characterize the relationships between opinion polling, policy-making, and social media, and goes on to make new discoveries based upon qualitative structured interviews with experts from two European democracies – the UK and Austria. This thesis aims to be of relevance to any actors operating within modern democracies, as it sheds light on post-digital structures and behaviours emerging worldwide.

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List of Abbreviations

EU	European Union
FPÖ	Freedom Party of Austria (*German: Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*)
FPTP	First-past-the-post
MSP	Member of Scottish Parliament
MP	Member of Parliament
SNP	Scottish National Party
SPÖ	Social Democratic Party of Austria (*German: Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*)
UKIP	UK Independence Party

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1. Introduction

Considering the subject matter of this thesis, no British author could ignore the discourse-defining significance of having their status as European Union Citizens pegged for revocation at the decision of the public of the United Kingdom in the 2016 Brexit referendum. This much-discussed 52-48 result has since been deemed – depending on whom you ask – either a muddled knife-edge outcome granting no clear mandate, or a stonking great victory manifesting the very will of the people. In any case, the most immediately measurable result of the vote has no doubt been recent years of debate and number crunching in the UK and beyond, from amateur and professional statisticians alike, rifling in search of a better understanding of what it is that *they*, the public, really want.

One key constant throughout the political fallout that came after the result was the insistence from many so-called 'Remainers' wishing to stay in the EU that a repeat run of the vote would never deliver the same result. Such actors deemed 2016's outcome a freak occurrence dooming future generations to a course of action they would never have taken. The key weapon in this war of delegitimization became the opinion poll, with an extended field day for the British press, publishing countless articles utilising polling data to tell the same story of a public changing its mind. Already by November 2016, less than six months after the June referendum *The Independent* reported remaining in the EU as "now having majority support by the narrowest of margins" (Fenton 2016). Under the subheading "Lower Brexpectations", *The Economist* reported on a poll in December 2017, not only finding staying in the EU to now be in the majority, but finding hopes for a successful post-Brexit trade deal to be dwindling amongst those who voted in favour of Brexit (*The Economist* 2017). The plot thickened in 2018, with *The Guardian* reporting on a "stark new analysis" in August that

proved how "most constituencies now have [a] majority who want to Remain" (Savage 2018), while three months later an article seemed to show the vehemently pro-Brexit *Daily Express* capitulating with the following headline reporting on opinion polling data: "Brexit bombshell: CLEAR majority would now vote REMAIN" (Weston 2018).

As history has made clear, however, such headlines did nothing to help the 'Remain' cause with the UK leaving the EU at 11pm on 31st January 2020, putting an end to 47 years of membership. Yet the tone of the conversation continues in present day Britain, renewing debates along the same tired Brexit battle lines. Not only has the Remain-Leave divide come to typify the nation's spiritual partitions, but the language of public opinion polling persists across the spectrum. In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, Nick Ferrari – one of the most popular radio presenters in the country, with a regular audience of some 1.2 million listeners – featured an interview with YouGov pollster Peter Kellner on his LBC programme in April 2021, describing the role of the then-prevalent vaccine row with the European Union through the framework of both the 2016 Brexit and opinion polling. The YouGov representative described the UK's decision to leave the EU as "more popular than it has been at any point since the 2016 Referendum," citing the EU's hostility regarding the crisis as responsible for the changing figures (Jones 2021). What are the implications for policymakers now that this single-minded modus operandi is seemingly here to stay, with pollsters seemingly committed to deploying 2016 politics to describe the public of 2021?

In the context of the post-Brexit chapter in domestic British politics, old frameworks like the policy cycle – proposed in 1956 by Harold Laswell, but repeatedly updated since into a five-stage chronology (Jann and Wegrich 2007) – seem of diminishing utility. In 2006 *Time* magazine named "you" its Person of the Year (Grossman 2006), acknowledging the Web 2.0

revolution, and suggesting that user-generated content was "seizing the reins of the global media". Years have since passed, with the re-engineered web turning an endless supply of opinion into perhaps *the* dominant force in society. In the overwhelming breakneck media landscape, where news cycles can last hours rather than weeks, this 20th century framework describing the policy process as a tesseract-like structure of interconnected and interdependent decisions (ibid., 57) arguably begins to collapse in on itself, crushed by the sheer weight of information and flurry of opinion that surrounds policymakers and public alike. The gaps between policy cycle areas such as 'agenda setting' and 'implementation' blur and overlap, with every atomic particle of the decision-making process relegated to little more than polling well, or polling badly; as either receiving that all-important 'like' or not. It should be noted that it's also been suggested that the portrayal of a chronological and clear-cut policy cycle as being typically 'Lasswellian' does a disservice to the original author, who in fact never "postulated the decision process as a temporal model or predictive clock" (Auer 2017). Any updated 2020s model of the policy process must perhaps inevitably be further simplified, dragged away from complexity by the sheer rampant speed of online conversation to little more than 'political activity' and 'public reaction'.

Studies have found that in representative democracies, policymakers will tend to move away from the centre in response to failing polls (Schumacher and Öhberg 2020). Faced with diminishing support, politicians will choose to radicalize their policies and advocate new positions to win elections – though sometimes such moves are in fact very much to their detriment, and come at the cost of exacerbating further loss in voter share (ibid.). In short, being led to believe they are in trouble with the voters can make political actors, assuming they act rationally, tend towards extremes. In this sense, perhaps it is best to see the post-Brexit rightward step of Westminster, landing as it did upon an 'extreme' form of Brexit and

ushering in the most overtly conservative election result in decades, as having happened *due to* rather than *despite* counter-Brexit opinion polling data following the referendum result.

Away from traditional methods of gauging public opinion, the wealth of real-time information regarding how people 'feel' on social media is still staggering – and general understanding of how it might be put to use is still arguably in the development stage. In the case of the 2016 Brexit referendum, where the top opinion pollsters failed to accurately project the (admittedly rather close) outcome, it has been shown that analysis of the sentiment on social media was ultimately far more accurate than any traditional poll, correctly projecting the result within one-tenth of a percentage point (Poesio and Bartle 2016). Had this type of social media analytics, sometimes dubbed 'automatic polling', been correctly put to use at the time, perhaps the anti-European forces in British politics wouldn't have felt cornered into rhetorical extremes.

Outcomes aside, one could perhaps find this shift to simply indicate an uptick in the basic 'amount of democracy' enjoyed by democratic societies. The internet has provided a place for any and all opinions to be heard, and direct democracy has been of growing importance in recent years internationally, with key landmarks including votes on Catalonian and Scottish independence, Irish abortion law, or a new Chilean constitution. Yet a dissatisfaction with democracy has been nonetheless slowly uptrending (Wike, Silver, and Castillo 2019). Thus it seems urgent to explore how policy practices within democracies can be evolved to catch-up with and meet the needs of voters, and to understand how the limitations of democratic proxies can lead or mislead policy-making.

This thesis formulates a deeper understanding of how these changes in opinion polling practices reinforce and/or contradict democratic principles. It proposes how policy-makers can better understand the evolving usage of public opinion polling online, with a view to improving modern democratic systems. This thesis opens with an exploration of how pre-existing studies by a variety of scholars have characterised the relationships between opinion polling, policy-making, and social media, and goes on to make new discoveries based upon qualitative structured interviews with experts from two European democracies, the UK and Austria; however, this thesis aims to be of relevance to any actor operating within any modern democracy, as it sheds light on post-digital structures and behaviours emerging worldwide.

2. Literature Review

2.1 A Brief History of Opinion Polling

When it comes to the subject of opinion polling, academics in political science have generally (and unsurprisingly) agreed from almost from the outset that they exert a direct and potent influence over politicians. Writing in the 5th volume of New York's *Journal of Marketing* in 1940, Albert B. Blankenship already characterised the public opinion poll as "one of the most phenomenal yardsticks ever conceived" (Blankenship 1940, 110), and was already well aware of the necessity to poll scientifically and representatively. In his formative critique of public opinion polls, Blankenship puts forward many of the same pros and cons that persist in the discourse 81 years hence, citing the sheer "usefulness" of polls to policymakers as a way of gauging public attitudes and preferences (ibid., 113) while identifying problems of "phrasing the question" so as not to distort or bias results (ibid., 112). On balance, Blankenship's revealing early analysis of what opinion polls might mean for the future of policymaking is an optimistic one, in admiration of the practice's democractic implications: "What appears to be happening is that the power of legislation is being handed over to the public at large" (ibid., 112).

Decades later, the biggest changes in political opinion polling have run in parallel to technological advances that mirror the scale, ubiquity, and speed with which globalised societies now operate. The proliferation of the practice has come to dominate political debates, with polling data unsheathed as a weapon of choice by political candidates and pundits to counter or reinforce all manner of claims made during discourse (Asher 2016). Originating in postal votes conducted by American newspapers (Squire 1936), much political opinion polling moved over to landline telephones by the 1980s (Lavrakas et. al 2007), before

migrating again to internet-based practices by the turn of the 2010s (Messer and Dillman 2011). It was initially observed that this step into the digital realm led to a general reduction in response rates (Asher 2016), not to mention the increased possibility of nonresponse bias due to certain respondents lacking ample coverage or digital know-how (Messer and Dillman, 430).

By the mid-2010s, however, scholars were also already describing an entirely new form of "passive" monitoring taking place via increasingly omnipresent social media platforms, with the potential to replace "active" polling methodologies altogether with data analysis of the public's online activity (Murphy et al. 2014). Though still in its infancy, passive practices of text mining social media to gauge public opinion are increasingly common and show huge potential – such as a 2020 study by the University of Houston's Department of Computer Science, in which a "social media sentiment analysis" was able to reveal a detailed picture of the public's complex opinions on the first 'reopening' periods to occur in certain American states following the first wave of COVID-19 in Spring 2020 (Ahmed, Rabin, and Chowdhury 2020). Similarly, social media has been shown to accurately predict public sentiment pertaining to specific firms, of huge potential benefit to stock market investors seeking reassurances (Tan and Tas 2020).

2.2 Opinion Polling and Policy Change

When it comes to what policymakers actually *do* with polling data, the literature has described a variety of ways in which this relationship plays out. With regard to election campaigning specifically, polling results can have one of the most direct impacts in the sense that a certain level of poll performance has been used as a key criterion for participation in televised pre-election leaders' debates in democracies including the USA, France, UK,

Canada, and Australia (Asher 2016; Wintour 2014). When it comes to agenda setting and policy formulation, advocates of all shape and size commonly utilise opinion polls as a sort of "policy-related intelligence" to attempt to guide policy discourses during formative stages (Greenwald et al. 2013, 189), and to particularly strong effect with regards to more "emotive" or flagship topics such as abortion or tobacco controls (ibid., 185). The 2003 study into California health policy by Greenwal et al. Noted that 42.4% of policy process participants described public opinion polls as having a "strong" effect on the actions of policy-makers, while only 33.7% rated the work of policy analysts as effective as a guiding force (ibid., 185). This tendency for "high profile" issues requiring policy change to be more susceptible to the polls was also noted by Petry and Mendelsohn in their 2004 exploration of the decade-long premiership of Jean Chrétien in Canada. Conversely, this means that responsiveness to polls on "less important" issues – i.e. those less dominant in public discourse – were deemed to have no "perceptible effect" on support amongst the electorate (Petry and Mendelsohn 2004, 524).

A more recent study, looking into how Swedish politicians react to the polls, was conducted by Schumacher and Öhberg in 2020. It demonstrated even more clearly the ways in which policymaker behaviour is directly affected by opinion polling data – even when data are statistically insignificant. The study noted clear changes in the political rhetoric of certain politicians faced with 'bad' polling data, leading, it must be added, to mixed results for those same politicians on election day, with the researchers advising policymakers to be "extremely cautious in using polls to motivate policy changes" (Schumacher and Öhberg 2020, 5).

2.3 Opinion Polling and Rhetorical Change

The Clinton and Blair years in the USA and UK were, as emphasised by Jacobs and Shapiro (2001), a period when public opinion polls were used to formulate the tone, style, and symbols of political communication with the public, rather than to actually inform policy itself. A similar conclusion was found in turn-of-the-millennium Switzerland, adding, however, some emphasis on opinion polling's role in certain elements of the policy cycle, namely agenda setting (Rothmayr and Hardmeier 2001, 134). Looking at younger democracies and away from the Global North, Dirk Tomsa elucidated a parallel trajectory for the Indonesian polling industry, which finds itself on a route to professionalization against a backdrop of 'post-truth' politics (Tomsa 2020). Interestingly, Tomsa's analysis describes a fast-evolving Indonesian political landscape leapfrogging several stages in the development of opinion polling and heading directly to the scepticism with which the industry is faced in the West after failing to correctly predict vote outcomes in Australia, the UK, and the USA (ibid., 1). Tomsa describes online threats against pollsters, as well as angry social media interactions involving 2019's losing Indonesian presidential candidate, Prabowo Subianto, whose accusations that pollsters utilised fabricated data were indeed themselves backed up by fabricated data (ibid., 2). Such behaviour is trending, with Donald Trump's refusal to accept the outcome of the 2020 US election drawing comparisons to Subanto's rhetoric (Guild 2020).

This is an apt portrayal of the weaponised use of polling data as rhetorical blunt objects against a backdrop of growing scepticism regarding data, and an embattled electoral environment as familiar to North America and Europe as it is to South East Asia or South America. In an environment "supercharged by online media, in which emotions overwhelm facts" (Tapsell 2017), the role of polling data becomes less that of a tool deployed in

evidence-based analysis, and something rather more unnuanced, more closely resembling verbal missiles in an unchecked war of words.

2.4 Opinion Polling and the Public's Opinion

Few papers have explored the influence opinion polling has over the public *themselves* and their opinions. One study drew a direct parity between pre-election poll results and the voter turnout – both negatively and positively due to contagion or bandwagon effects respectively (Panagopoulos, Endres, and Weinschenk 2018). Conversely, rather than being swayed in their opinions by polls, other scholars have described the public as being largely unmoved, and succumbing to all manner of confirmation bias in their trust or mistrust of polls. In other words, the public are seen for the most part as believing the polls they agree with, and remaining sceptical of the polls they don't (Madson and Hillygus 2020), though some recent work has proven the counter hypothesis that the public are "perfect Bayesians", who respond cautiously to new information and are only dogged by mild confirmation biases (Hill 2017, 1416). The inconclusiveness of research in this area makes it a good candidate for future work.

2.5 Opinion Polling and Social Media

Additionally, there remains somewhat of a gap in the literature on the ways in which public opinion polling data are changed and shifted by the prism of social media. Gaisbauer et al.'s exploration of how two German political events were perceived through Twitter concluded that it can give a "misleading" picture of opinion proportions on the platform, amplifying both dissenting and silenced minority voices of all types (Gaisbauer et al. 2020, 18). The paper also notes how social media platforms muddle users' innate ability to estimate the

majority opinion of those in their immediate surroundings, particularly in light of quasi-statistical 'like' and 'share' data delivered alongside posts to measure popularity (ibid., 3).

As already described in section 2.1 of this thesis, 'post-polling' methodologies of gauging public opinion via passively mining social media data itself has been proposed as something of a replacement for traditional survey methodologies deployed by pollsters (Murphy et. al 2014: Ahmed, Rabin, and Chowdhury 2020). Similarly, Ennser-Jedenastik et al.'s study of contemporary Austrian party politics found Facebook engagement to be a strong new form of "voter–elite linkage", able to "promote elite learning, responsiveness and dynamic representation" as political parties themselves circumvent pollsters and measure direct engagement statistics to guide policy changes (Ennser-Jedenastik et al. 2021, 11). With 'traditional' polling methodologies still relevant to democracies and policymakers around the world though, there is a conspicuous gap in discussion regarding how social media as a means to both distribute and scrutinise such data might be changing the conversation.

2.6 Policy Change without Public Opinion

Naturally, there are scholars whose evidence renders opinion polling data entirely unimportant to the policy process. Leah Cardmore Stokes' *Short Circuiting Policy: Interest Groups And The Battle Over Clean Energy And Climate Policy In The American States* builds on pre-existing models of "policy feedback", describing a process whereby the success of a policy depends largely on pre-existing conditions and a self-contained feedback loop of support from both elites and the public (Cardamore Stokes 2020, 44). The public's role is notably limited in this model, and the "power and resources" rich interest groups and stakeholders are cast as holding the keys to a success that no amount of "narrative" (e.g. opinion polling data) can supersede. Such interests have an ability to block any policy that

could kick off a 'feedback loop' – e.g. a 'demonopolising' policy that would naturally create a plurality of future opponents to any policy reversal – and thus incumbent interests on the political landscape appear to have an insurmountable advantage, revealing policy change to be a question of little more than elite will (ibid., 47). Such a vision of the policy landscape leaves no major wiggle room for public opinion to truly influence policy.

3. Theory & Argument:

A 'Socials-Opinion-Policy' Feedback Loop

As elucidated in the introduction and literature review of this thesis, pre-existing descriptions of policy process structures appear threatened by democratic discourses moving onto modern, 21st century digital platforms – in particular social media. The process whereby policy-makers take public opinion into consideration is evolving rapidly, with concepts such as 'agenda setting' and 'evaluation' sorely needing updates within a framework where public scrutiny happens more or less in real time. Old media are playing an increasingly unimportant role, most sharply with regards to fresh agenda setting on policy and formative discussions on newer policy issues, or policy areas lower on current party political agendas and thus still largely undefined – a sweet spot where social media have been seen to play a decisive role (Ennser-Jedenastik et al. 2021). Thus, discourse mediated and commented on through social media "nudges parties toward talking more about issues outside their comfort zone" (ibid., 11).

The effects of social media over user behaviour is a widely studied, yet fast-evolving and quickly 'out of date' section of the literature. Vitally, it has been noted how content-delivering algorithms such as YouTube's typically drive users to extreme content and radicalise their political opinions (Valentino 2020), while users experiencing feelings on anxiety are more likely to "engage with different political views", "to be intentionally exposed to political information" generally, and to rely on limited heuristics in the process of understanding said 'different' views (Knoll et al. 2020, 151). Conversely, *positive* feelings are described as having a tendency to "distract from political content" altogether (ibid., 152). Borrowing from the structure of *policy feedback* (Cardamore Stokes' 2020), it is perhaps thus

conceivable that policies decreasing a general sense of well-being in a user can understandably drive them towards extremes, locking them into a social media feedback loop that increases their predisposition towards more extreme political views. This would arguably incentivise policies that are in fact damaging to the well-being of social media users, projected to number 4.8 billion people, 57% of the global population, by 2024 (Financesonline.com 2021).

Proposed unimportance of polling data to policymakers notwithstanding (Cardamore Stokes 2020), evidence that policymakers tend to shift away from the centre in response to flailing public polling data (Schumacher and Öhberg 2020) would add weight to a potential new cycle pushing both incumbent and opposition parties alike towards new policy extremes. This 'Socials-Opinion-Policy' feedback loop would help account for many of the recent political changes in many democracies around the world – and could also be of use to policy researchers aiming to find new ways to decelerate or reverse this seemingly one-way process.

The following chapter of this thesis will detail the design and methodology behind its qualitative interview-based approach, seeking to confirm, flesh out, or disprove the arguments made in the above section. Discussions with policy and polling experts will seek to delineate or challenge the above model of a trifecta wherein social media, public opinion polling, and a mutating policy process lock into a feedback loop, pushing policy-makers to new and previously unworkable extremes.

4. Research Design

4.1 An Abductive-Deductive Inquiry

In contrast to the field under discussion, composed as it is of large-scale polls, masses of data points, and increasingly the use of artificial intelligence, this thesis takes an approach that aims to integrate personal and focused reflections from a few key actors to analyse the topic. Thus, the hypothesised framework as proposed in chapter 3 – in which public opinion data and social media behaviour are seen as conspiring to push policymakers to increasing extremes – will be contrasted with accounts from a small number of qualitative expert interview subjects.

The approach aims to go beyond a mere *deductive* "framing" of the phenomena under discussion, and to integrate elements of an *abductive* "inquiry" as proposed by Brinkmann (2014). While Brinkmann's description of a qualitative process that amounts to an inquiry into "everyday life" may not seem pertinent to the realm of opinion polls and policy, it is precisely the ways in which digital media have closed previous gaps between policymakers and the public that have caused curious breakdowns in our understanding that initiate abductive processes (ibid., 723). Within this Brinkmannian model of an abductive inquiry, the myriad contradictions that appear to disrupt notions of how policy comes into being or how public opinion is formed in light of modern digital practices become key "stumble data" points, i.e. the motivational moment that throws the researcher off balance and triggers inquiry itself (ibid., 724). It is to the researcher's advantage that his own curiosity provides a very own inherent objectivity in how the topics at hand have been selected, providing an 'anti-framework' for the inquiry at the heart of this thesis which lends itself to a human-centred and interview-based methodology. What better way to map out the young connective

tissue conjoining social media, public opinion, and policymakers, than by asking some of this no man's land's inhabitants what they think?

With that in mind, however, the opening chapters of this thesis have already comprised some of the key abductive work, triggered by the confusing political events of recent years in the United Kingdom and elsewhere to examine strange new trends.

4.2 Methodology: Expert Interviews and Realist Evaluation

As also elucidated by Svenn Brinkmann, any serious objective academic should prioritise a process of "denaturalizing" interviews (Brinkmann 2016, 525). Similarly, this connects with aims described by Ana Monzano pertaining to how one should conduct interviews wishing to produce a "realist evaluation" of a theory (Monzano 2016), namely by ultimately putting the stated theory through an iterative process.While taking care to follow this critical guidance however, this thesis nevertheless still emphasises an abductive and curiosity-led approach to the subject matter. Thus, rather than three stages of interviews as proposed by Monzano, this thesis' inquiry will utilise insights gleaned from four expert interviews to refine a proposed framework of an ever more extreme 'feedback loop' of opinion, policy, and social media.

The interviews conducted in this research took a structured route through a series of questions designed to yield responses that could be comparable between policymakers and pollsters from very different national and professional contexts. ,Throughout the process the researcher, in the name of neutrality, proposed a systematic interview strategy to minimise potential distortion during the interviews that could stem from the interviewer having framed themself within pre-existing 'insider/outsider' perspectives in the eyes of the interviewee (ibid., 344). This largely comprised a strict set of interview rules formulated with the aim of

straying as little as possible from the listed questions, and included a self-imposed time limit on the meetings (40 minutes) in order to encourage the interviewer to refrain from commenting (as they are wont to do). In terms of the desired output from the interview subjects, the process straddled both epistemic and doxastic approaches (Berner-Rodoreda et al. 2020), seeking both 'doxastic' tales and personal experience from the subjects – proverbial war stories about how to grapple with public opinion – *and* their 'epistemic' insights as thinkers and 'maestros' in the techniques of policy making and/or opinion polling.

Circumstance also, it must be noted, played a key role in the design of this research. Conducted as it was during the COVID-19 pandemic, switching to the 'Zoom' format of remote video interview was essentially the only sensible choice. Many of Deakin and Wakefield's comments on Skype interviews remain relevant in 2021, notably its cost- and time-effectiveness, empowerment of the interviewee to withdraw during the interview should they wish, and the massive boon of sheer flexibility (Deakin and Wakefield 2013, 613). The researcher credits the latter as having been instrumental in securing discussions with high-level experts in the UK while conducting research from Austria – 'analogue' methodologies would have made this process far more difficult. Additionally, many of the main drawbacks to video interviews cited in the past, such as interviewee discomfort, a lack of interviewee know-how hindering the remote process, the necessity to purchase additional recording software, or signal problems freezing the conversation (ibid.), have all but disappeared by 2021, with an intimate understanding of the software essentially universal amongst relevant experts.

What is more, not only does the Zoom format provide free recording capabilities as standard, but it has become a central part of the workplace toolkit for millions of professionals working

from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, meeting on Zoom in 2021 in fact means meeting in the "place" where these subjects work (ibid., 609), making the interview setting inherently more 'realistic', comfortable, and relevant to the work at hand.

4.3 Ethics

Again, older questions regarding the ethics of consent and privacy (ibid., 610) seem less complicated due to improved familiarity of the 'Zoom call' format amongst interview subjects stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on ways of work. Of far greater ethical concern is the potential for unintended consequences stemming from this research, inasmuch as it pertains to an evaluation of a framework that could arguably further muddy and delegitimize the roles of democracy in determining policy while promoting questionable new methods of procuring, and even manipulating, public opinion. The possibility for negative unintended consequences to arise as out-of-scope after effects from policy-related research is discussed by Oliver et al. (2020), who note how realist evaluation can be useful for understanding "processes and micro interactions", yet can be inadequate in identifying large-scale intervention processes (Oliver et al. 2020, 71). Such limitations in research have thus been taken into account when formulating future recommendations in the conclusion to this thesis, with consistent consideration of a 'do no harm' principle. Furthermore, it should be stated that the abductive approach to the subject matter of this thesis is being undertaken with the intention of improving understanding of the democracies under discussion to protect and progress them towards an improved landscape for future policy processes to inhabit.

4.4. Reflection on The Scope of This Study

As a British citizen and an Austrian resident, it seemed expedient for the author to engage with these two countries as the key case studies for this research. Both countries are referred

to on-and-off as part of 'Western Europe', with the UK occasionally deemed rather as lying in 'Northern Europe' and Austria occasionally as lying in 'Central Europe'. Both countries were also placed in the top 20 "Full Democracies" in the world in 2020 (Economist Intelligence Unit 2020), though they notably harbour very different electoral and parliamentary systems. The UK functions using first-past-the-post, while Austria's government is elected using party-list proportional representation, leading to some key differing dynamics in their political systems.

5. Interviews and Analysis

5.1 Interview Approach

The following section will introduce the interview approach undertaken for the purposes of this study, followed by an analysis of the key findings before a discussion of results. While the 'structured expert interview' methodology is limited in its scope, the qualitative content of data collected through such a methodology can prove fruitful, rich, and contextually sensitive beyond mere quantitative means. A key inspiration for utilising this approach in this study was Katarzyna Kaczmarska's interview-based approach in her 2019 analysis of the role of academia in the policymaking process in Russia, in which anonymous experts offered a revealing spectrum of insights into the mysterious Russian political system rampant with smoke, mirrors, and caution amongst academics and policymakers alike, all revealingly described by the depth this research methodology offers (Kaczmarska 2019). While this thesis' scope remains admittedly far more limited than that conducted by Kaczmarska, the central idea of fleshing out understanding of a system by speaking to inside actors remains central.

Considering the aims and approach described in chapter 4 of this thesis, a minimum of three interview subjects was envisioned for this study to meet a base criterion of representation. This meant finding "frontline practitioners" (Manzano 2016) to act as representatives for each of the following areas:

- British policy / politics
- Austrian policy / politics
- International Polling industry

Ultimately, one expert with relevant experience was secured for each area, with an additional expert found with decades of experience in both British and Scottish national politics. These respondents will be introduced in the following sub-chapter.

The process of selecting and approaching interview respondents was undertaken following an abductive-inspired 'stumbling' approach drawing from personal experience to identify relevant organisations harbouring potential interviewees in the three sectors identified above. This approach was taken under the assumption that the researcher's own position at the nexus of the key topics (a British citizen resident in Austria with an interest in politics and polling data, and active on social media) would make his pre-existing knowledge an indicative compass towards relevant actors. This was followed by a 'cold-call' methodology undertaken via both Twitter direct messaging and emailing to both personal and 'corporate' email addresses and accounts with the direct messaging function enabled. Initial contact included a generic introduction to the research question of this thesis, in addition to an introduction to the researcher himself and to Central European University. Any positive responses were followed up with a confirmation of time and date for a Zoom interview, and respondents were asked if they would like to remain anonymous. Of the six positive responses to initial contact, four interviews were organised. The interviews were all conducted via remote video call format between 12th May and 1st June 2021, with a 40-minute time limit imposed by the researcher, and took the form of a structured list of 12 questions (see *Appendix*), with the interviewer only allowed to clarify or rephrase questions in order to yield a response.

The following section will introduce the four interview subjects, including brief background details on their experience. Next, there will follow a report of discoveries made during the interview process, identifying the common range of opinions and experiences mentioned by

the experts. Finally, these discoveries will be contrasted with the theoretical 'feedback loop' framework pushing politics into extremes, as proposed in chapter 3 of this thesis.

5.1.1 Note on Interviewee Anonymity

The option to interview anonymously, and to state when topics were 'off the record', was explicitly ensured during every stage of the process once contact with interview subjects was initially made. Of the four experts interviewed for this subject, three opted to remain anonymous. All respondents nonetheless agreed to the meetings being recorded for the purposes of the research, so long as anonymity and privacy were respected. As political actors, and considering the public scrutiny under which their work operates, this decision was not only understandable, but advisable. They have thus been given pseudonyms in the following chapter for the purposes of easing the reading experience, while brief descriptions of their true workplace and roles have been included, excluding enough details to uphold their anonymity.

5.2 Introduction of Interviewees

5.2.1 Interview Subject #1: Jennifer

Jennifer has six years' experience working for the British government, developing policy for a variety of areas. She was born, grew up, and was educated in the United Kingdom, and is currently employed by one of the Departments of the Government of the United Kingdom, based out of their offices located in London. Her responsibilities involve testing and developing policy, and she has no political party affiliations. Jennifer's interview was conducted from her 'home office' in London, which she has been using for the majority of

her working hours since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Jennifer is not her real name, as the subject wished to remain anonymous during this study.

5.2.2 Interview Subject #2: Sasha

Sasha has four years' experience working in Austrian government, and is a party-affiliated advisor. He grew up in Austria, and is currently employed by a government body based in Vienna. His responsibilities have included advisory work pertaining to a variety of policy areas both city- and country-wide, and he has experience in election campaigning in Austria at both the federal and local levels. Sasha's interview was conducted from his desk at the offices; he stated that he (just like the rest of his colleagues) had in fact *not* been working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sasha is not his real name, as the subject wished to remain anonymous during this study.

5.2.3 Interview Subject #3: Joe

Joe Twyman is the co-founder and director of the independent, UK-based "public opinion consultancy" Deltapoll, founded in 2017. Prior to co-founding Deltapoll, Joe had worked as a key researcher for the opinion polling firm YouGov, describing himself as "employee number 3", having joined the firm at the time of its founding in the year 2000. Joe is also an affiliated lecturer and professor at various British universities, and has been a key provider of expert analysis on general election coverage in the British media for BBC, Sky News, and ITN amongst others. Joe's interview for this thesis was conducted from his home office, deemed his main place of work since the COVID-19 pandemic. Joe did not deem it necessary for him to remain anonymous during this study.

5.2.4 Interview Subject #4: Angus

Angus is a high-level Scottish politician with several decades of experience working in Scottish politics. He has served as a Member of Scottish Parliament (MSP) taking on various ministerial positions throughout his career, in addition to playing key organising roles in election campaigns in the country. His responsibilities have included both policy development, party political duties and international negotiations. Additionally, Angus has authored several books about topics relating to Scotland. Angus' interview for this thesis was conducted from his home office, deemed his main place of work during 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Angus is not his real name, as the subject wished to remain anonymous during this study.

5.3 Analysis: Common Narratives

This section will elucidate the common narratives that emerged during these four interviews. The analysis of the interviews undertaken by the research sought to identify current commonalities between the interviews collected for this study, keeping the 'stumble data' concept in mind at time of study. The findings will provide an overview of how the nexus of policymaking, polling, and social media functions, and what – if any – recent changes to the policy process can be described.

5.3.1 A Political realignment is happening … but it's not down to social media

All four interview subjects were in solid agreement as to the scale of political change they've witnessed in recent years. Polling expert Joe stated that people in his line of work refer to the post-2014 period as "the craziness", noting, much like former-MSP Angus, the rise of the Scottish independence question as the start of a long-term shift. Joe described it as "the

period of time when public opinion seemed to be all over the place", and "unlike anything I'd experienced in my 20 years" of working in polling. The UK is going through, in Joe's opinion, "a realignment in British things where we don't think just in terms of left and right", and new identities such as "socially conservative and fiscally liberal" are gathering pace.

Sasha described a similar shift in Austria, where the recent coalition governments led by Chancellor Sebastian Kurz have accelerated a break from the long-standing tradition of more "authoritarian" and 'top-down' governance approaches towards the "charismatic leader" model associated with populism in the 20th century (Gaisbauer 2021, 19).

The respondents were in agreement as to the surprising explanation for these changes in both the UK and Austria, each describing having sensed the seeming 'inevitability' of a change in the political spectrum. They miraculously report it as more or less having merely coincided with the emergence of new digital media and changes in opinion polling practices.

"People don't vote for more of the same," said Sasha, referring to the frustrations incumbent Viennese city authorities feel having to deal with the city's sheer success – it's been repeatedly voted the world's "most livable city" for over a decade (Wien Tourismus 2019). This surprising statement suggested that stability and the long-standing dominance of the SPÖ party in the city's government is coming up against a desire among the populace for change *despite* policy success. Angus similarly describes the SNP's decision to craft a bold manifesto full of new ideas in 2021 as the result of 14 years in power making it simply time to "reinvent themselves". Similarly, Jennifer noted a more 'public-centred' approach increasingly informing the UK policy process in the broader sense, describing how the public more and more often "pave the way" when it comes to policy.

Angus summarized this view of a growing 'bottom-up' and public-opinion-informed tendency towards policymaking in comparison to the older paradigm of a 'representative' governance:

> It's the old [Éamon] de Valera[1] stuff, you know? That he knew the people of Ireland 'in his heart', so he was able to speak on policy matters with no difficulty at all. I don't think any of us would believe that now! (Angus)

The absence of social media being attributed with any major responsibility for the shift in politics by the respondents seemed, in the researcher's opinion, a conspicuous one.

5.3.2 Public opinion via social media is nonetheless of *growing* important to policymakers

All four respondents agreed that the most important role pollsters play towards policy remains the surveys commissioned by parties and governments to measure attitudes towards policy directions both before and after they are taken. Joe described polling organisations like Deltapoll as being "Westminster adjacent" in the UK, going on to describe how, "the vast majority of polling never sees the light of day…[like] Coca Cola testing a new drink.

However, commonly described by all interview subjects was the way in which 'public opinion' as perceived through the modern online environment is definitely of *increasing* importance when it comes to formulating new policies, which can be a very personal experience that breaks through institutional barriers. "People are able to be much more up

[1] Éamon de Valera was arguably the most important Irish statesman of the 20th century, serving as Taoiseach three times and playing a key role in passing the Constitution of Ireland in 1937 (Kissane 2007).

front behind a screen", stated Jennifer, describing the ways in which social media posts can have a direct impact on policymakers: "I will sometimes ring someone up at work and say, "I've just seen this thing on Twitter, what do you think?"

Sasha, Angus and Joe echoed these statements, describing an environment whereby internal party politics has become intimately linked to social media activity, with polls forming one of the most important and direct forms of messaging. Discussing how MPs react to Deltapoll publishing results on social media, Joe explains:

> If you ask MPs, they never read the polls – and that is a lie! ... In the same way a Hollywood movie star will say they don't sit and read reviews. (Joe)

While all respondents agreed that public opinion doesn't necessarily end up being *mirrored* in policy, three of them citing polling on Brexit policy as an example, there was no doubt that social media and polling data are important personal sources of information for policymakers. Even Angus, the oldest respondent and a self-described social media sceptic, admitted to using social media regularly in both a professional and personal capacity.

Angus and Sasha also reported on the tendency for political parties to utilise polling data shared via social media as an important tool for rallying their own people and keeping supporters, party activists, and party politicians armed with useful polling data to back up claims and policy arguments:

> You have to keep your own people very informed, so they can react to arguments … Showing polls is more motivation for your own people than the opinion makers … It's a complex

> debate often [that their allies participate in]...so it's very important to keep them informed. (Sasha)

5.3.3 Social media encourages simplistic and argumentative discourse – and confirms biases

"[Social media] can be quite dangerous," stated Jennifer, referring to what the respondents agreed upon as the worst limitation of platforms like Twitter and Facebook being used to host political discourse. Twitter in particular was seen as being a largely argumentative space, dominated by the political and media class, while Facebook was seen as somewhat less incendiary, and other platforms were not namechecked in any of the conversations. Angus was clear as to the potency of emotion through social media platforms generally though, admitting that while he avoids it as a source for policy thinking, that he may "pick up angst, and anger, and concern… and that might be influential" over his thinking when formulating policy.

The respondents also uniformly agreed that social media is a distinctly powerful well of confirmation bias. "I am more and more of the view that it is an echo chamber," stated Angus, with Jennifer also describing how the phenomenon of "information overload" is leading to people "coming up with their own conclusions", even to believing conspiracy theories. She was also of the opinion that people are set in their ways and, for the most part, don't change their minds about anything anyway. Joe's experience as a pollster backed this up, typifying the effect of social media as having made it all the more likely that a user would "pick the poll that they want to believe – even if that poll is their mate's Twitter poll."

With regards to polling data put online, the hunger for content that can confirm a users' pre-held views has been a huge driver for businesses like Joe's, despite pollsters claiming intentions free of any political affiliation:

> All reputable pollsters are looking for things to go viral... but not looking to push any particular agenda...There has been a move towards click-baity things. I guess I am as guilty of this as other pollsters; occasionally running certain questions just to attract attention. (Joe)

5.3.4 Publicised polling data has some powerful unintended consequences on elections

Considering the country's proportional representation system, predicting the outcome of an Austrian general election is a relatively simple job based on a national poll – there's no need to factor in, for example, the constituency level differences of heightened importance under first-past-the-post – the system in the UK. While true results largely don't differ from polling predictions, Sasha reported two "classic phenomena" that tend to happen: the centre-left Austrian Green party tend to mostly do worse than predicted, and the far-right FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria) largely do better than stated in the polls. Sasha put the effect down to a hesitancy amongst Austrians to report their true feelings about the FPÖ when responding to polls, stemming from the stigma that comes with publically supporting a political party with Nazi roots, not to mention a recent history of German nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric. In essence though, this gives more extreme political parties, as Sasha put it, an unfair advantage in the political ecosystem, when flailing polling numbers can be (correctly) perceived as undercounts. Angus decried a similar unintended consequence in UK elections, noting how perceptions of polling data can have a huge effect on both reducing mainstream voter turnout, and boosting votes for more extreme ideologies. According to Angus, a "perceived closeness" can hugely motivate people to go to the polls – and the opposite can also occur,

with a seeming "foregone conclusion" of victory for an electoral candidate slowing turnout. The latter effect was notably credited as reducing overall turnout in the 2021 London mayoral elections, where victory for incumbent Sadiq Khan was seen as all but certain, while the former effect conversely drove *up* turnout in the 2021 Scottish Parliament election with parties that supported Scottish independence neck and neck with those that did not in leadership polls.

In general, the interviewees gave accounts of polling data enabling both more extreme policies and parties away from the mainstream to enter the discourse. The 'foregone conclusion' effect described by Angus, whereby a vote is seen as already decided by pollsters before a single ballot has been cast, can 'free up' people to vote for "third" candidates in the UK. In Austria, a similar effect has aided the far-right FPÖ party in recent years, where voters feel safe to vote for more extreme candidates after questionable polling has told them that the political centre remains strong. Joe was also quick to point out the ways in which a 'false sense of security' stemming from opinion polling led to former UK Prime Minister David Cameron taking the risk of the Brexit referendum vote, despite his own desire for the country to remain in the European Union. According to Joe, David Cameron only offered the rare plebiscite because "the polling pointed to the fact that he could win. Angus echoed this sentiment, stating that he too "would have thought that polling would have indicated that [Brexit] would not have been the public's preference", stating that politicians still should ultimately have to "make informed and ethical choices" of their own.

5.3.5 Social media is a sideshow, and old media and polling habits are still dominant

In contrast to some of the other findings, the interview subjects were also quick to describe their relationship to 'old media', such as newspapers or radio, as still very much important. It was with no small amount of pride that Joe from Deltapoll described his following on Twitter

as comprising "all the newsdesks" and most important journalists in the British media. Sasha also described the closeness of the media, pollsters, and politicians in Austria, stating how easy it is to "feed" journalists on Twitter – while also notably decrying the simplicity to which the platform binds conversations along with the amped up pressure for journalists to deliver copy in larger amounts. In addition to the social media audience in fact being 'old media journalists' anyway, it is also Sasha's opinion that the voting public themselves still formulate their political opinions as consumers of 'old media' forms, such as radio and news television. Jennifer similarly (and somewhat contradictory to her thoughts on confirmation bias) explained how "if [the] BBC breaks something about polling, people will pay more attention to it."

Against the narrative of digital technology as having driven changes in the political environment through the advent of social media, an emphasis was also put on the importance of *private and unpublished* opinion polling simply being more readily available.

> The impact of the internet on polling has been far far greater in terms of the operational changes that it has brought about, than simply the dissemination of information...It's cheaper, it's faster – but the end result is that there's just much more polling out there...[Polling] used to be like a fine whiskey – something to be sipped and savoured, because once a month you would be granted like, five questions that would be put out into the public...and big surveys that would run would cost millions of pounds, so the number of policymakers who could afford them was very very small. But now, polling data is like a firehose. Rather than the drip of a fine malt whiskey, it's this firehose of information, and that means there's just a lot more data out there. (Joe)

5.4 Discussion & Results

5.4.1 Discussion

These four interviews confirmed much of the modern landscape as described in chapter 2 of this thesis. The description of an environment "supercharged by online media, in which emotions overwhelm facts" (Tapsell 2017), chimes closely with the emphasis social media puts on emotions as cited by Angus and Jennifer, not to mention Joe's description of how pollsters revel in results that get an excited online response after publication.

Conversely, while the respondents' accounts went counter to the idea that more extreme ideas *enter* the political landscape as a result of social media – namely the way in which discourse mediated through social media "nudges parties toward talking more about issues outside their comfort zone" (Ennser-Jedenastik et al. 2021, 11) – they seemed to agree that current structures *strengthen and amplify* such ideas (Madson and Hillygus 2020; Valentino 2020). This is reflected in the respondents' myriad claims that the public are fundamentally set in their ways and that they will "pick the poll", they want to believe and utilize such data to legitimize their views in arguments. In this regard, the combination of confirmation bias with the perceived legitimacy of opinion polling data, and the amplified emotive rhetoric of social media seems to have an all but inevitable negative consequence on measured policy responses.

While some effort was made by the respondents to paint a picture of an evidence-based and expertise-fuelled policy ecosystem, the reality of a bottom-up, psuedo-populist base was clear in all four interviews. As described in chapter 2.3, public opinion (be it polling data or a softer 'sense' of said opinion in the eyes of a policymaker) can indeed directly influence

policy choices and rhetoric amongst politicians (Greenwald et al. 2013; Rothmayr and Hardmeier 2001; Russmann et al. 2020; Schumacher and Öhberg 2020), with this thesis' respondents in agreement that – even when their stated aim is to keep a distance from polling data and social media – they are deeply susceptible to the perceived importance of the former and the emotional potency of the latter.

Finally, the effect of polling data on public behaviour was seen as largely helping challengers to incumbent parties and ideas, and of being put to use by the public to confirm their viewpoints – somewhat different from the idea of a discredited industry put forward by Panagopoulos, Endres, and Weinschenk (2018). The example from the Austrian system shows how fringe far right parties can benefit from their consistent underrepresentation in opinion polls (Sasha), similar to the way in which the Brexit referendum was never perceived as a true threat by incumbent Prime Minister David Cameron at the moment he called it (Angus, Joe).

5.4.2 Results

The results of this thesis for the most part confirm the description of the current policy ecosystem, as well as the structure of a 'Socials-Opinion-Policy' feedback loop proposed in chapter 3. The biggest differences between the narratives to have emerged from the interviews and the literature as reviewed in this thesis pertained to a continued dominance of evidence and expertise over courses of action taken by policymakers, and a general agreement that the seeds of dissatisfaction with the status quo originate elsewhere – even if it is very much emboldened and amplified by the prism of social media to the point where it can wield sway over the political landscape.

With regards to these findings, it should be again noted how this thesis, in chapter 1, stated a desire to work towards the improvement of modern democratic systems. It is worth reviving this sentiment in light of the findings described above, as dissent against incumbent power is a tool within a functioning democracy to be protected. However, the extant feedback loop of 'Socials-Opinion-Policy' elucidated in this thesis seems to have strayed far from the original utopian democratic assessment of opinion polling laid out by Albert Blankenship in 1940, as cited in chapter 2.1 of this thesis, in which "the power of legislation is being handed over to the public at large". The reality of the system, however, suits neither such utopian ideas of an opinion-led democracy, nor the growing (and simplistic) 21st-century narrative that sees 'bottom-up' tendencies as leading inevitably to a so-called tyranny of the majority. Public opinion clearly appears to sharpen as a result of social media discourse, and public polling is ready to provide adequate "click-baity" material. Policymakers, too, are unable to escape the gravitational pull of 'click-bait' driven conversation, even should they try their best to do so – such is its power.

This following section will conclude this thesis with a brief prediction of how this current system linking policy, opinion, and social media could develop. The recommendations have been designed to uphold the ideals of improving democracy, and in recognition of the clear potential pitfalls of authoritarianism and censorship. In short: censoring opinion, muting social media, and stopping policymakers from engaging with public conversation (regardless of how clearly it seems to exacerbate and simplify debate) can never be options for a path to the future seeking to improve rather than impede democracy while pursuing a better world. So the question then becomes: in what ways can we seek to improve the relationship between public opinion and policy-making against a backdrop of social media-borne discourse which, for the foreseeable future at least, appears likely to be only of increasing importance?

6. Conclusion

6.1 The Path Ahead

This analysis has proposed and fleshed out the complex system of interactions between policymakers in modern democracies, sped up and digitised opinion polling practices, and the amped up discourse facilitated by social media. Following on from a review of pre-existing scholarly works on these subjects, interviews with four experts from policy and polling provided their subjective insights and experience to confirm or rebuke a so-called 'Socials-Opinion-Policy' feedback loop put forward by the author. The outcome was largely a confirmation of this proposed framework, leaving behind a worrying picture of a future for democracy not only with a discourse dominated by fringe ideas, but with policymakers themselves inevitably drawn into a process distorted by confirmation bias masquerading as strength of evidence.

The spectrum of 'public opinion' is always going to be more nuanced and complicated than any social media account, pollster, or political party can ever hope to represent. While this democratic deficit previously put the median voter in the proverbial driver's seat (Stone and Simas 2010), the changes described in this thesis have put such power far away from the centre ground. With it having been proven that polling data has a habit of persuading policymakers to shift their positions similarly away from the centre (Schumacher and Öhberg 2020) while the digital discourse emboldens and strengthens angrier and fringe voices, the further encroachment of increasingly extreme policy into political mainstreams seems, without intervention, to be an inevitability.

6.2 Recommendations

There are a variety of steps which could be taken to mitigate a democratic landscape seemingly set on a self-destructive path away from measured, balanced, and nuanced considerations. In the case of the United Kingdom, a shift towards a voting system based upon proportional representation rather than first-past-the-post in general elections could be a useful first step, as the current system can enable a majority government to form with as little as 35% of the popular vote, as seen in the 2005 General Election. While the example of Austrian politics and its system of proportional representation makes it clear that electoral reform would be no panacea, the tiny margins through which FPTP can mean life or death for a dominant party. This phenomenon left the UK's Conservative Party susceptible to votes being haemorrhaged to the Eurosceptic UKIP party, leading to David Cameron's drastic Brexit vote decision, with drastic outcomes for his premiership.

Another safeguard would be to ensure the continued – or increased – inclusion of academics and experts in the policy-making process, as something of a counter-balance to the more simplistic and emotive inputs streaming in from both social media and polling data. In an interview for this thesis, one respondent described the continued responsibility for policy-makers to "make informed and ethical choices", despite the sheer availability of both opinion and data that could be seen as easing said responsibility. The responder in question, a seasoned policymaker, also explained the extent to which it is becoming an increasing rarity to see academics brought into meetings and discussions that drive policy. Thus it seems all the more urgent to facilitate a renewal in reliance on expertise amongst policymakers, and to put in place long-term solutions to ensure these voices remain a part of policy deliberations.

In light of the effects polling data can have on voter turnout, it is suggested that additional research should be done into the feasibility of introducing new compulsory voting systems, comparable to those currently in operation in democracies such as Australia or Belgium. Typically, these systems make it a legal obligation for citizens to participate in elections (including the ability to abstain), while the law and punitive measures for non-participation are enforced to varying degrees. Such a system could counteract the effects described by this study's interview respondents in Austria and the UK, whereby the perception of a foregone conclusion in a vote can lead to surprising – and democratically misrepresentative – results.

Finally, the polling data is a tool that should be broadly considered for closer scrutiny. In this thesis the sheer power of opinion data was revealed, especially with the amped up and heightened mood and pace of conversation in the social media era. In light of such findings, research should be undertaken to explore the feasibility of establishing new international regulations and oversight for market research and opinion polling industry firms. The aim of such regulations would be to limit the ability for polling firms to impede upon the democratic process. Some countries already include relatively extreme bans on public opinion polling ahead of elections, including Canada, Norway, Poland, and Brazil. A 2012 study by the University of Hong Kong found that 19% of countries described such bans as being put in place in the name of "protecting the democratic process" (Chung 2021, 16).

While this paper is most certainly *not* calling for any bans on publication of polling data, it is indeed calling for a renewal in efforts to assess the heightened potential dangers posed by this resource to both proper democratic processes and measured policy processes.

Assessments of opinion polling's impact on democracy should also be tied to the ongoing efforts to formulate long-lasting and robust regulation of social media companies' liability and practices for similar reasons that are currently taking shape in both the EU and US (Drozdiak and Brody 2020). The relationship between the two areas is far from tenuous, and the democracy-protecting solutions sought in one would, it is predicted, be of use to the other. Any study of such measures should thus include considerations with regard to their legal implications, including the proportionality of potential measures to protect freedom of speech while freeing evidence-informed policy processes from the distorting power of modern discourse.

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8. Appendix

List of questions used in structured interviews conducted for this study:

1. What source do you think is the best to understand the public's opinion?
2. How would you describe the changes in the opinions amongst the general public in [COUNTRY] recent years?
3. How much attention do policy-makers pay to public opinion?
4. When it comes to politics in your country, who sets the agenda, and how?
5. What external factors can guide policy-making?
6. Do you have a social media account? What are your personal online habits?
7. What role does social media play in your job?
8. What effect do you think coverage of public opinion polling in any media has?
9. How do you think social media has changed the role of polling in politics?
10. What differences (if any) do you expect to see between opinion polling results and election results? How do these differences (if any) affect voters?
11. Do you think reporting opinion polls in the media (digital or old-style) helps users to get a reality check from outside of their 'media bubble'?
12. Can you think of an example of polling data setting the agenda?