

## Transcript

### General Election 2015 - 79Rewind Opinion polls in a nutshell

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Back in 1824, the Harrisburg Pennsylvanian asked readers who they were going to vote for, and in an exceptionally close race they correctly predicted that Andrew Jackson would be the next president.

[FIREWORKS]

This was the first known opinion poll, and possibly the only interesting thing the Harrisburg Pennsylvanian ever did. Since then opinion polls have been used by the media to fill up pages of newsprint and hours of television, and the politicians have used opinion polls to find out how well they're doing, who they need to target, even if it's time to drop out of the race. But how do you know if the poll is accurate? How do you know if you've asked enough people for their opinions? It can help to think of the electorate like a huge vat of soup. Taking an opinion poll is like sampling a spoonful from the soup to see how the whole vat tastes, but the problem is the soup may not be consistent. It may have lots of ingredients. So there's a chance the sample might not be representative of the whole vat. If you just take a bit from the top, you might assume the soup is mainly croutons, or you might just get a spoonful of carrot, which is why it's important to stir up your soup and get a sample that includes all the ingredients in proportion, not just an isolated lump. For example, some ingredients might be hard to spot, because some groups of voters tend to be reluctant to speak to you. But if you know that's the case, you can try to adjust your results to take that into account. So if you do it right, quite a small sample of the electoral soup can tell you what the whole vat will taste like.

But more important than the size of the sample is the way you choose it. The Americans may have invented opinion polls, but they don't always get them right. In 1936 the US Literary Digest polled 2.3 million people and still got the election results wrong, because those polled were all of one type. They were all readers of the Literary Digest, and that was about as much use as a bowl full of croutons.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

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