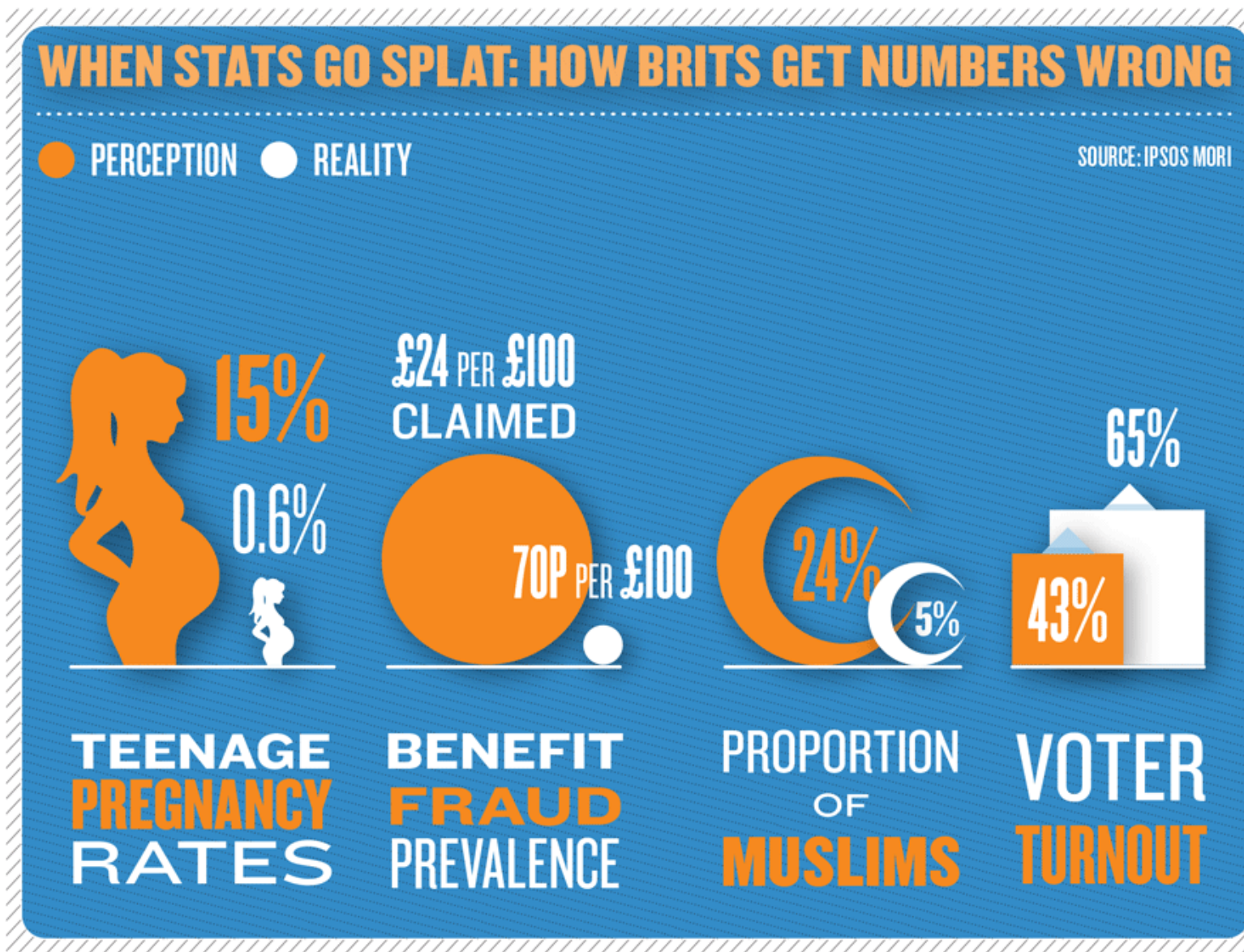


Voters wrong about almost everything, says poll



A new survey has embarrassed the British public by showing that they are misinformed about important issues from crime to teenage pregnancy. Does this discredit democracy? (1)

Pop quiz: what proportion of British teenagers become pregnant each year? Ten percent? Twenty? Thirty?

If your guess was in this region, you are in good company: on average, the estimate British people give when posed this question is 15%. Unfortunately, you are also wildly wrong. The true rate of teenage pregnancy in the UK is in fact just 0.6% – 33 times lower than the public believe. (2)

That is just one of the embarrassing errors made by respondents to a new survey by polling agency Ipsos Mori entitled ‘Perils of Perception’. Confronted with statistical questions on a series of heated political issues, voters’ beliefs about the state of their nation consistently failed to come close to the reality. (3)

People apparently believe that a quarter of people in Britain are Muslims. The real figure is one in twenty. Just 8% of British people are jobless, yet the average guess is a startlingly pessimistic 22% (which would put us in straits almost as dire as Greece and Spain). And while 70p in every £100 of benefits claims are thought to be fraudulent, the popular estimate is £24. (4)

Crime is rising, the public insist. It has been falling fairly steadily for 20 years. Britain has a third as many immigrants as we imagine, less than half the number of over-65s and more than nine times fewer single parents. (5)

The researchers identified several interesting patterns. For one thing, we tend to be far more gloomy than the statistics justify. And we are much likelier to believe a statistic when it backs up our subjective opinions. But most striking was the stark fact of how misinformed we are. (6)

This political ignorance is an international phenomenon: in a global comparison of current affairs knowledge by the European Journal of Communications, Britain fared relatively well. One third of Americans, meanwhile, could not even name their Vice President. (7)

Does it matter? Yes, say the survey’s authors: many people who go to the ballot box with the conviction that immigration, crime or benefits are too high may be guided by deeply mistaken beliefs.

Facts, facts, facts

For many who trust in the wisdom of crowds, surveys like this make depressing reading. What is so virtuous about democracy, they ask, when ordinary voters are so desperately and consistently wrong? Rule of the people does not seem so rosy when you realise the people are blind. (9)

But others are less ready to abandon faith in democracy. Our statistical illiteracy is a little embarrassing, they admit, but how many people really vote based on data? Principles, not percentages, are the backbone of our beliefs – and that is just as it should be. (10)

Activities:

1. Vocabulary – What do the words in blue mean? Can you guess from the context?
2. What are some of the statistical errors that British public made when questioned?
3. According to the article, how could statistical errors made by the public affect the democratic process?
4. Summarise the last 2 paragraphs of the article. Which of the two points of view put forward in the last two paragraphs, do you most agree with?

You decide

1. Has a statistic ever changed your mind?
2. Should democracy only exist in societies where people are well-informed?

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Democracy is the worst form of government – except for all the others.' Winston Churchill

WHAT DO YOU THINK?