A NOTE ON IVR POLLS

FRANK GRAVES RESPONDS TO EVALUATING THE POLLS: AN OPEN LETTER TO ONTARIO'S JOURNALISTS BY DARRELL BRICKER AND JOHN WRIGHT

[Ottawa – September 16, 2011] – Darrell Bricker and John Wright have recently taken a pretty harsh scattergun to many of their media polling competitors. While they score a number of direct hits on polling, and the media, they also say some things which are simply unfair. Given the failure of public opinion polls to accurately predict the 2011 election results, the frustration expressed by Mr. Bricker and Mr. Wright is understandable. Some of the claims that have been made regarding Interactive Voice Response (IVR) technology, however, are wildly inconsistent with the facts.

It is important to remember that not all polls are equal. While there are specious illustrations of almost all types of polls it is unfair and inaccurate to label all IVR polls as unreliable. IVR is no more a polling method than is internet or live operator. There are bad versions of all types of polls: there are bad phone surveys, bad mail-out surveys, and yes, bad IVR surveys (though we tend to agree with Mr. Wright and Mr. Bricker that there some currently formidable problems with opt-in online polls). The question, however, lays not with the method, but with how well the method is implemented. Good polling should be based on random probability sampling which covers the entire target population with equal probability of each member of the population appearing in the sample. Declining response rates, rising incidence of difficult to reach subpopulations such as those who have cut their land lines in favour of a cell phone, and the conspicuous absence of the nearly one in three who never use internet from all online polls are just some of the challenges. On top of this both the resources devoted to polling by the media have dramatically declined, as has the methodological fluency of major media outlets.

Despite these challenges it is still possible to do good polling and the search for new methodological innovations to deal with these challenges should not be dismissed without careful assessment. We at EKOS were quite sceptical about IVR polling which is now standard fare in the USA, and we remain unconvinced about opt in online polling. We have, however, have good success in adapting traditional polling methods to the economic and coverage challenges posed today.

At EKOS, we always provide all weighted data and we have made our unweighted data available when requested. In our hard testing our IVR methods are as good as or better than our live CATI methods (we use both and have rigorously tested in parallel for years). This is true both in terms of data quality and that is the conclusion is shared by the no less than the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)[1]. Obviously, these conclusions only apply when sound sampling and measurement approaches are applied. We didn't have 'massive' errors in our last polls, although we did underestimate the final actual vote because there were highly unusual correlations between propensity to turn out and vote and support for the Conservative Party.

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[1] AAPOR, "An Evaluation of the Methodology of 2008 Pre-Election Primary Polls", April 2009

For example, we randomly covered cell phone only households. Good sampling covers all members of the population and does so in a random method. It turns out that cell only respondents are both more likely to not vote and to not support the Conservative Party. This may have been an error in forecasting, but it was based on better modelling of the overall population of eligible voters.

In conclusion, the sweeping depiction of all IVR is egregiously unfair and inaccurate in our case. We did parallel tests and refinements to the methods for an entire election before bringing it out in public. We are well aware of some specious IVR applications but we are scrupulous in our methodology and no one provides more disclosure than us. Apart from a final forecast error last time which we have clearly acknowledged (and which was not based on bad polling data but bad understanding of turnout dynamics), we have an excellent record of getting elections right. Indeed, one need only look to the 2010 Toronto mayoral election where CATI polls were calling a statistical tie between Rob Ford and George Smitherman. Indeed, EKOS' IVR poll stood alone in accurately predicting Ford's landslide victory. A number of our own background reports and references to the expert literature are appended to this note.

Background Reports:

Frank Graves. **Accurate Polling, Flawed Forecast: An Empirical Retrospective on Election 41** (June 2011)
http://www.ekospolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/accurate_polling_flawed_forecast.pdf

EKOS Research Associates. **Interactive Voice Response: The Past, Present, and Into the Future** (January 2011)
http://www.ekos.com/admin/articles/2011-01-21-MRIA.pdf

EKOS Research Associates. **EKOS' Observations on MRIA Study – Canadian Online Panels: Similar or Different?** (January 2010)
http://ekos.com/admin/articles/MRIA-Comparison-Panel-Study-2010-01-27.pdf

Bibliography – Published Sources:

1. AAPOR. **An Evaluation of the Methodology of the 2008 Pre-Election Primary Polls** (Revised 2009)
   http://www.aapor.org/uploads/AAPOR_Rept_FINAL-Rev-4-13-09.pdf
2. Don A. Dillman, Glenn Phelps, Robert Tortora, Karen Swift, Julie Kohrell, Jodi Berck, Benjamin L. Messer. **Response Rate and Measurement Differences in Mixed-Mode Surveys Using Mail, Telephone, Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and the Internet** (Revised 2008)
   http://www.irss.unc.edu/odum/content/pdf/Dillman%20Mixed%20Mode%20Soc%20Sci%20Research%202009.pdf
3. Kreuter, F., Presser, S., & Tourangeau, R. **Social desirability bias in CATI, IVR, and web surveys: The effects of mode and question sensitivity**. (2008)
   http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/content/72/5/847.full.pdf+html
4. Roger Tourangeau, Darby Miller Steiger, David Wilson. **Self-Administered Questions by Telephone: Evaluating Interactive Voice Response**. (2002)
   http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/content/66/2/265.full.pdf+html
5. Cassino, Dan., Jenkins, Krista., Woolley, Peter J. **Are Polls Becoming Equal?** (2009)
   http://www.amstat.org/sections/srms/Proceedings/y2009/Files/400014.pdf
6. Mark M. Blumenthal. **Toward an Open-Source Methodology: What We Can Learn from the Blogosphere**. (2005)
   http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/content/69/5/655.full.pdf
7. Mark M. Blumenthal. **Does IVR Explain the Difference?** (2009)
   http://www.pollster.com/blogs/does_ivr_explain_the_differenc.php?nr=1

Bibliography – Online Sources:

1. Scott Keeter, Jocelyn Kiley, Leah Christian and Michael Dimock, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. **Perils of Polling in Election '08**. (2009)
   http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1266/polling-challenges-election-08-success-in-dealing-with
2. Mark M. Blumenthal. **Bialik on IVR Polling**
   http://www.pollster.com/blogs/bialik_on_ivr_polling.php?nr=1
3. Nate Silver blogs about IVR (or Robopolls)
   http://www.fivethirtyeight.com/search/label/robopolls
4. Mellman, Mark. **Robo-polls and Human Error**. (2010)
   http://thehill.com/opinion/columnists/mark-mellman/79351-robo-polls-and-human-error
5. Precision Polling. **How Accurate are Automated Polls?** (2010)
   http://www.precisionpolling.com/blog/?p=182