How to Become Canada's "Best Pollster"

Reflections on possibilities for improving the current media-polling miasma

Presentation by Frank Graves to the MRIA's Beyond the Headlines Forum

Ottawa
June 14, 2012

Being the "best" pollster is great

Wealth, fast cars, CBC gig, power, and influence are just a few of the perks.

OOPS!

A pollster's painful reckoning: 'How could I have screwed up so badly?'

By Michael Valpy
From Saturday's Globe and Mail, June 17, 2011
http://goo.gl/BRkyS

Now what? Options and Strategies

1) Ignore, duck, and deflect

2) Construct congenial explanation (e.g., late shifting)

3) Conduct new primary research to find out why

Consolidate lessons

"Best" Pollster =

$$\min \left[\sum (\text{final poll} - \text{actual results}) \right]$$

That's it!

The best pollster is a rotating championship where you can go from champ to chump in one election.

5

The (Cynical) Version of the Lessons

The new best pollster playbook revealed

Step 1: Sampling for Success

a) forget random probability sampling – just use a convenience sample and adjust weight until it "looks right";

b) ignore the growing and different cell only population;

c) drop all "entrants" to the voting market place; and

d) ignore the younger half of the population, throw out all R's under 45 years of age.

Step 2: Focus on Your Final Poll

» Skip the race itself and focus resources on the "final" poll.

» No points in the best pollster sweepstake for the boring issues like whether you got the trends correct, saw the breaks in the campaign, understood the implications for the future, or tried to use this as an opportunity to understand the changing nature of Canadian society. This is BORING and RISKY and nobody cares about this.

» Get it all wrong throughout or don't even bother entering the race till the end. No points for the other stuff.

Step 3: Media Strategy

» Find a media partner who doesn't care about trivia like the international expert consensus on poll reporting and MOE.

» Who cares if AAPOR and all other serious third party experts suggest that MOE is only to be used for polls using probability sampling?

> *"Researchers should avoid nonprobability online panels when one of the research objectives is to accurately estimate population values. There currently is no generally accepted theoretical basis from which to claim that survey results using samples from nonprobability online panels are projectable to the general population."*
>
> *-AAPOR, March 2010**

» Sprinkle MOE around liberally regardless. It gives the patina of scientific accuracy and nobody in the media has a clue what it really means.

» Advertise on websites which adjudicate on polling quality.

Step 4: Hedge Strategy

» Don't put all your eggs in one basket!

» Maximise your chances. Have at least a couple of final polls. Use various combinations of last night, last 3 nights, last 2 nights, etc.

» If the final poll doesn't look right, do another one.

Step 5: Adjust Your Data

» Finally, DO NOT forget to apply the special algorithm which adjusts for a possible national voter suppression program. You have no chance of winning if you don't build these new features into your polling.

» In this brave new world it's not just guessing get-out-the-vote, it's understanding keep-home-the-vote.

Why this Model is Flawed (1/2)

» Nobody reads the last poll that comes out on the eve of the election (besides, we all know the exact answer 24 hours later)

- Vanity contest only?

» If you don't demarcate the voting public separately, then getting it right means you're wrong.

- Only works if there are no differences between voters and non-voters

» When most youth aren't voting and non-voters are very different from the rest of the voting population, this may be a flawed indicator of polling quality (unless the pollster says the population/universe of discourse is the voting population)

- Non-voters are a both larger group and different in terms of political preference
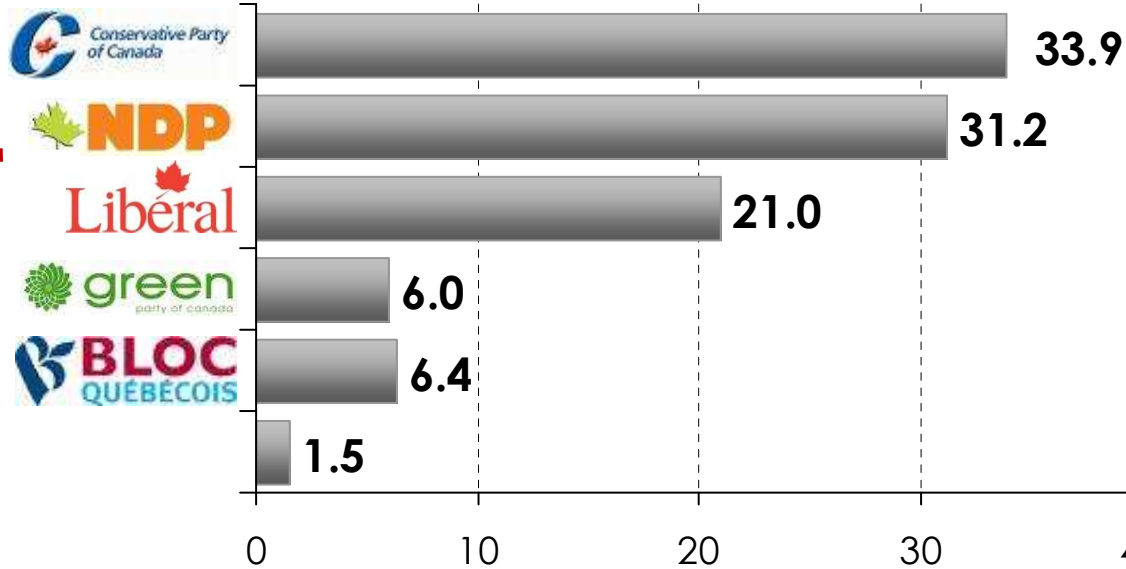
Why this Model is Flawed (2/2)

» Provides a spurious measure of quality

» Focuses resources on the wrong issues

- Misses life cycle of campaign – like going to the Indy 500 and skipping the first 499 laps.

» Encourages suspect practices

» Exposes the industry to collective ridicule when things go awry

» Misses the point of polling

Estimated Non-Voter Support

Voters (61.4%)

Non-Voters (38.6%)

EKOS final pre-election poll (April 29-May 1)

Party	Value
Conservative Party of Canada	33.9
NDP	31.2
Libéral	21.0
green party of canada	6.0
BLOC QUÉBÉCOIS	6.4
	1.5

(axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40)

Actual results

Party	Value
Conservative Party of Canada	39.6
NDP	30.6
Libéral	18.9
green party of canada	3.9
BLOC QUÉBÉCOIS	6.0
Other	0.9

(axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40)

Estimated non-voter support

Party	Value
Conservative Party of Canada	24.8
NDP	32.1
Libéral	24.3
green party of canada	9.3
BLOC QUÉBÉCOIS	7.0
Other	2.5

(axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40)

Bottom Line:

This model of quality would be a disaster if applied anywhere else.

Consumer research is dramatically and increasingly more interested in exactly those people we just threw out to be the best pollster.

How Polling Should Be Evaluated

» Good polling should accurately chart the rhythms of the campaign. It should tell the readers what are the evolving patterns of voter response:

- How, when, and why did things shift?

- What forces seem to explain the dynamics of the campaign and voter response?

- What are the key areas of differentiation in voter response across demographic and regional categories and what do these tell us about the fault lines in the political landscape?

- What are the preferences and attitudes of what will be about half of the citizenry who won't show up tomorrow?

- What will be the societal consequences of the outcome?

» These are far more important tests of polling quality than whether one happened to get the last poll closest, whether by chance or by design.

Ontario 2011 General Election (1/2)

» In the Ontario 2011 General Election, EKOS was among the first to predict McGuinty's victory.

» Some pollsters, however, had the PC ahead or in a dead heat with the Liberals up until the final days of the campaign.

- Suddenly, these polls showed a massive last minute shift.

- Our polling and other probability polls had shifts going the other way

» Furthermore, pollsters who polled earlier in the campaign, but not on the last day were unfairly scrutinized for being "inaccurate".

Ontario 2011 General Election (2/2)

» Pollsters were ranked based on aggregate error, where a difference between of 1/1000th of a point was used to sort the order of finish.

» Bottom line: A pollster can be off throughout the entire campaign (or even skip the campaign entirely), but release an accurate poll in the last 24 hours and be awarded the title of "most accurate pollster".

  • This discourages pollsters from figuring out what is going on during the campaign.

» Being within the MOE is haphazardly and incorrectly applied

  • MOE is not constant and cannot be calculated for non-probability polls

  • If being within the MOE is a criteria, pollsters should simply use tiny samples

Conclusions

» The VALUE of quality has plummeted

- The media pollster expression is by no means unique. Is this temporary or permanent?

- Industry a willing partner in this Pyrrhic auction to the bottom?

» The polling-media symbiotic relationship is not healthy ("parasitic" is probably a better description than "symbiosis").

- There are still, however, some absolutely superb journalists who show real wit and perspicuity with proper polling inputs.

» Fluency low, loyalty gone, and budgets laughable. Those in the media do not understand basic terms:

- While some journalists vaguely understand the concept of Type 1 errors (failing to reject a finding that is false), most are oblivious to equally erroneous Type 2 errors (rejecting a finding when it is in fact true).

Where Do We Go from Here? (1/2)

» In the US, AAPOR is a professional association of seasoned academics who serve as third-party experts to adjudicate public opinion research (there is also 538 and Pollster.com).

- We do not have anything like this – this is a HUGE problem.

» We need a Canadian authority to bring together the best experts to offer guidelines on what constitutes good practice.

- Perhaps we could use a Canadian version of AAPOR (or rather, "CAPOR"?).

» The MRIA is not well poised because of contradictory commercial pressures within its membership.

Where Do We Go from Here? (2/2)

» Perhaps it is time for pollsters to avoid the eroding relationship with the media altogether and to directly publish the results to the public.

- Stay tuned for the Frank Report.

» Lastly, polling needs to go beyond non-existent horserace and focus on the more important revelations about society and where we're going.

For more information:

Frank Graves

EKOS Research Associates

fgraves@ekos.com

(613) 235-7215

www.ekos.com