



POLLING ON TRIAL: LESSONS FROM THE 2004 CANADIAN ELECTION¹

For many observers, the 2004 Canadian federal election had all of the earmarks of a profound shift in the Canadian political landscape. After a decade of Liberal rule, the polls were showing an incredibly close race. The near dead heat that was evident in most of the final polls suggested a Conservative minority government or even constitutional crisis from a deadlocked Parliament. Virtually all of the final polls were closely aligned regarding party support levels. Of those who projected a winner, most forecast a Conservative minority government. Notably, EKOS took the somewhat lonely view that a Liberal minority government would ensue. Come Election Day, however, the final results were decidedly different than what any of the polls from the previous weekend had shown. Not only was the Liberal win a surprise to many, the size of the victory was also considerably larger than would have been predicted from the final polls.

As the dust settled and it became clear that some of the more pyrotechnical claims about Liberal defeat and constitutional crisis were ill founded, the media and others turned, with some zeal, to the apparent pratfall of the pollsters. A number of prominent media treatments vigorously questioned the validity and utility of the polls. Coupled with broader concerns that have been expressed elsewhere about its value, polling was put on trial. Indeed, many critics of the industry alleged that “sloppy methodology” was to blame for the putative letdown of the polls and that factors such as low response rates call into question the integrity of polling in general. Others

¹ This article was originally published in the December 2004 edition of *Imprints*, the monthly journal of the Canadian Professional Marketing Research Society, in a special issue entitled, “Polling on Trial: An Inside View of the Recent Federal Election.”

argued that the polls did not account for the fact that many respondents simply lied about how they were going to vote.

Unremarkably, those who had conducted election polls defended their results and offered other explanations for why their numbers did not match the outcome of the election. Most suggested that a last minute shift in public opinion occurred. Those who polled through the weekend leading up to the election on June 28th said that they became aware of the shift, but were unable to share this information because of the ban preventing the broadcasting or publishing of polls twenty-four hours prior to Election Day. Some also asserted that voters simply did not make up their mind until the last twenty-four hours, meaning that the polls measured and reported on what voters had been thinking earlier, but not their final decision.

There were also substantive qualitative explanations that suggested that the performance of the leaders in the final days of the campaign and negative advertising might have affected how Canadians voted, especially in Ontario where the largest discrepancy between the polls and the actual results occurred. An additional hypothetical explanation for the late shift was the media's different treatment of the various parties during the later stages of the campaign, particularly the tone of coverage of the only two parties who could hope to form government — the Liberals and Conservatives.

The significance and attention that polls receive in modern Western democracies is undeniable. Concerns about the veracity and value of election polling are by no means unique to Canada; consider Michael Schwartz's recent polemic on polls as the "opiate of the electorate". For members of Canada's market research industry, election polling is a symbol of the power and value of market research. There is little wonder why there are acute concerns about how an activity, which contributes such a trivial fraction of industry revenues, may have stained the overall reputation of the industry. Asking firms to heavily subsidize election-media polling has become tantamount to asking the dog to fetch the stick with which it is to be beaten.

At the heart of this issue is whether or not there was a last minute shift in voter intention or was this claim a smoke screen to occlude the methodological deficiencies of the polls? The goal of this discussion is to offer some evidence, logic and conclusions about these questions. We will argue that despite growing methodological issues, the overall discrepancies between the final polls and the result of the election was mostly a product of voter shifts. We will rely upon both existing and new evidence to support this conclusion. We will then conclude by discussing the broader implications for the future of polling as it relates to media, democracy and elections and examine what lessons and alternatives exist for the future.

COMPARING THE ELECTION AND THE FINAL POLLS

Exhibit 1 shows the results of four final media polls reported in the final week of the campaign against the final election results (3 to 5 days later). Two things are notable: 1) there was a strong degree of consistency across all the final polls, and 2) the final polls all have the Liberals lower than their final result (by 3-4 points), the NDP higher (by on average 3 points) and the Conservatives somewhat higher than their actual results (by on average 2.5 points). It is not surprising to find this consistency among these firms, as the quality and astuteness of Canada's market research industry has largely inured us to the more embarrassing failures seen in other jurisdictions.

Exhibit 1: Comparison of national polls five days before the election

	LPC	CPC	NDP	BQ	Green	Other	Polling Firm	Sample Size
Election Results: June 28	36.7	29.6	15.7	12.4	4.3	1.4	N/A	N/A
June 25	32	31	17	12	6	2	Ipsos-Reid	2000
June 24	33	32	19	11	5	1	EKOS	5254
June 24	34	30	21	12	4	--	SES Research	1000*
June 23	33	33	18	11	4	--	EnviroNics	1500

Note: numbers shown as a percentage of 100

*rolling poll

Although the actual differences between the polls and the election results were fairly modest, given the closeness of the race, mechanical extrapolations of final polls would have suggested a Conservative minority government, when what we instead saw was a fairly strong Liberal minority government emerge.

WAS IT A SHIFT OR ERROR?

So what went wrong? Both hypotheses (that the polls were wrong or there was a last minute shift) can be problematic for our industry, but it is truly important to disentangle the question of whether there was endemic and shared survey error or whether there was a final shift. The first hypothesis, which was offered by a range of experts (few, if any who were actually polling at the time), is by far the more damning. If rising non-response rates, or other methodological errors such as systematic lying by respondents were responsible for the gap, then this would cast a serious shadow over the validity of these sorts of data.

If, on the other hand, the second hypothesis is true (i.e., that a late shift occurred), then at least we can disentangle errors of *incorrectly projecting to the future from turbulent data* from invalid data. It is our view that the data from the final week were basically sound, but that the flawed projections magnified the apparent errors. It is worth mentioning, however, that not all firms participated in what we believe was the crucial error – namely, assuming the future would resemble the past (Hume’s classic problem of induction). We actually adjusted our projections and forecasts based on clear empirical evidence that the Liberals were poised to make significant gains by factoring in things like the relative softness of voter intentions, short-term trends, voters’ leaning intentions, the underlying attitudinal factors and election 2000 behaviour. These were measured in a variety of ways and lead us to predict a Liberal minority. Other firms either abstained from predicting (perhaps a more prudent strategy), or called a Conservative minority. Notably our data, mechanically inserted in a seat projection model, would have also yielded the Conservative minority prediction.

While correctly calling the qualitative outcome and anticipating the Liberal rebound, we still underestimated the strength of the rebound, particularly in Ontario. At the end of the day, it was really quite simple: the Liberals gained about 4 points in the final days of the campaign; the Conservatives and NDP each lost about two or three points; and the effect was largely focused in Ontario. So why (apart from obvious self-interest), do we believe this explanation is true as opposed to the more damaging claim that all the final polls were wrong (even at the time they were conducted)? Previously, we have offered the following evidence and logic in support of this claim.

First, it is improbable (but not impossible) that all firms shared the same contaminating error. At the very least, the methods were reliable (inter-subjectively repeatable) by evidence of the closeness of the final inter-firm polls. We know that one can have reliable yet invalid data but this is

typically not the case. Second, some of the firms, along with the political parties, continued to poll throughout the weekend before the election and noticed the shift occurring. If the methods were endemically flawed due to non-response and measurement errors, then they should not have accurately seen the shift. Third, the final shift was evident and predicted (in advance) in the case of our analysis and forecast. Finally, the current experimental research on the impacts of non-response bias suggests that, while increasingly troublesome, non-response has surprisingly little effect on the robustness of parameter estimates from telephone surveys, although this conclusion may rapidly become obsolete.

For these reasons, we continue to believe that the final polls were correct about where the voters were at the time, and that the error of the pollsters (which was unevenly shared if not evenly worn) lay in failing to detect and incorporate the directional movements in final forecasts. The evidence is, however, hardly conclusive and we decided to conduct some further basic testing to evaluate the relative plausibility of our hypothesis.

OUR TEST

It is important to note that our hypothesis was framed before we collected our data (which lends further power to the test). Basically, we drew a random sample of Canadians and asked them how they voted in 2004, whether they changed their minds in the final stages of the campaign, the relative importance of four different factors in changing their minds, and how they voted in 2000. To complete this analysis, we also have demographic data from this sample of about 1,200 Canadians. A stronger design would have been to return to the panel of 5,000 we conducted in the final week of the campaign, but resource constraints precluded this option for the time being. If the shift hypothesis is correct, then we should expect to find a much higher incidence of Liberal voters who changed their minds in the final stages of the campaign. This can be expressed more formally as a directional hypothesis and tested with a number of significance tests.

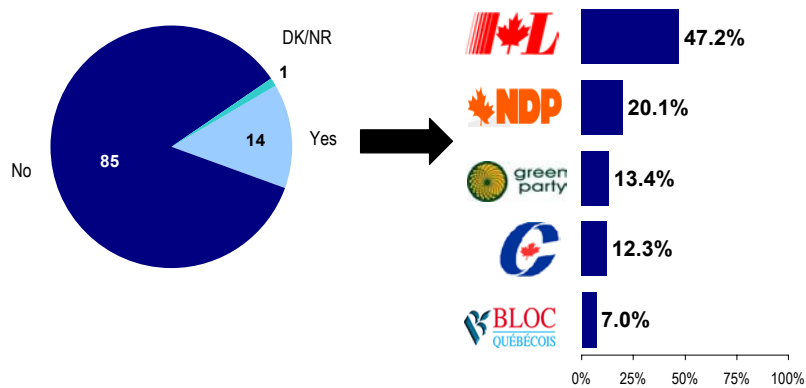
First of all, the 968 (claimed) voters are drawn from a broader sample of some 1,200 Canadians. There is evidence of social desirability, as we note that only 16 per cent of our sample claimed not to have voted, whereas in fact it was around 40 per cent of eligible voters who did not cast a ballot. Putting aside this bias, we see other evidence of survey errors. For example, voting for the Liberals is “over remembered” by about four per cent (history loves the winner) and Conservative support is “under remembered” by a similar margin. Other parties are within the

margin of error of the election results. Whether this bias is measurement or sampling error is uncertain, although we suspect it is the former. In any case, the sample is quite adequate to provide a usable test of the shift hypothesis.

Exhibit 2 shows that a sizable cadre of voters (14 per cent) claimed to have changed their minds in the past week of the campaign. This is quite consistent with the inflated incidence of those saying they would change their mind that we found in our final pre-election survey (one of the factors leading to our “adjusted” forecast).

Exhibit 2 - Change in vote intention

Q: Still thinking about the last federal election, did you change your voting intention during the last week or so of the election campaign, that is to say, did you originally intend to vote for a different party?



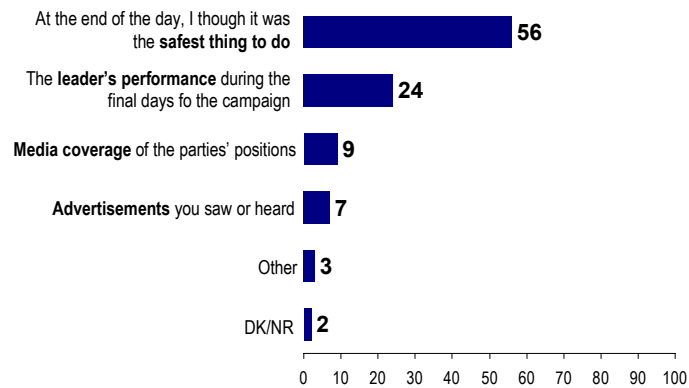
Base: All Canadians; October 13-17, 2004, overall n=968

Exhibit 2 makes the key point that, overwhelmingly, Liberal voters are overrepresented amongst the “changer” population. At 47.2 per cent, nearly half of all changers voted for the Liberals, eclipsing the incidence for all other parties. This is clear evidence that there was a large shift and that it dramatically favoured the Liberal Party of Canada. In fact, if we were to make rough adjustments for some Liberal defection and gains for other parties, the rough gains are in the ballpark for explaining the final poll versus the election gap. The Liberals late gains were very strong in Ontario and focused amongst women, boomers, and pre-retirees (what we refer to as the “Grumpies”, Canada’s greying urban male professionals), who returned to the Liberals after having flirted with alternative parties. Late Liberal shifters also show an unusual concentration of 2000 Liberal voters returning to the fold. All of this seems to reinforce the “caution over censure” hypothesis, which we originally offered to explain the late shift.

Although not central to this discussion, the issue of why the shift occurred is highly interesting. Several alternative hypotheses have been offered, including the view that negative advertisements by the Liberals prompted the shift. Although difficult to precisely disentangle the effects, we tried the direct test of asking late shifters why they turned. Four factors were randomly presented and respondents were forced to choose. This test (shown in Exhibit 3), while clearly imperfect, did yield some interesting results.

Exhibit 3 – Motivation for changing vote

Q: What would you say was the MAIN reason why you decided to ultimately vote for the Liberal Party of Canada?
[Filter: those who changed their vote intention and voted for the Liberals]



Base: Voters in 2004 who changed their vote to Liberal; October 13-17, 2004, n=61

The results suggest that caution was indeed the overall prime factor (56 per cent), although final leader performance (24 per cent) also swayed shifters. Interestingly, media influence and advertisements were largely discounted. This was consistent with other analyses, which showed that, early in the campaign, voters had remained quite confident in the direction of the country, economy and labour markets, despite losing confidence in the direction of the federal government. The censure (ethics) motivation, which caused the atypical rupture between confidence in the incumbent and confidence in the economy, waned in the final stages of the campaign as the desire to maintain current economic and national direction was reasserted (at least amongst the final shifters). This may well explain why the rebound was strongest in Ontario where the initial damage caused by the negative (if somewhat irrational) response to Premier Dalton McGuinty's budget dissipated in the face of a more rational evaluation of voter interests and values.

THE FUTURE OF POLLING AND DEMOCRACY

So what can be learned from this debate? Having attempted to disentangle errors and truths, what are the lessons for the future? We can begin with some fairly specific conclusions and recommendations and then broach the broader questions surrounding the place of polling in contemporary democracies. In our view, this debate is not about to go away, but neither is election polling. For better or worse, there is a symbiotic relationship amongst pollsters, the media, politicians and the electorate. Polls may be the “opiate of the electorate”, but if they did not exist today then we would undoubtedly be re-invented.

At the most basic level, polls provide a scientific mirror on what the electorate are thinking and intending to do. In increasingly sceptical, post-modern societies, the opinions and guesses of stakeholders and “experts” are no longer adequate. For a variety of reasons, electorates will continue to insist on knowing how they collectively think and feel. None of this is to suggest polling must not improve and continue to keep pace with the changing capacities and interests of the public. Just as the “man in the street” methods used in Britain have been abandoned as methodological anachronisms, so too will current telephone methods fall to replacement methodologies which adapt to the growing need for permission-based access and avoid the burgeoning difficulties associated with wireless-only respondents, call display, and blocking technologies. A new wave of Internet-based technologies and broader extensions of electronic democracy will undoubtedly reshape the methodologies of the near future.

In the short-term, the shelf life of phone-only based methods is increasingly limited. Having said this, we should recognize that it was not so much technical flaws and small ‘m’ methodological errors that produced the brouhaha regarding the 2004 election. The more serious errors were of the large ‘M’ methodological sort, and were associated with failing to understand why the future often does not resemble the past when attempting to predict or explain the complexity of collective human behaviour. Better attention to understanding the underlying forces driving voter behaviour can have two immediate benefits: better forecasts and better understanding of the non-horserace parts of elections (e.g., the issues, expectations, needs and aspirations of voters).

Putting aside the thorny methodological issues, we have even bigger questions about whether we should poll at all – particularly during elections. Clearly, the prohibition against reporting polling late in the campaign period is premised on the assumption that there may be something corrosive to the democratic process in knowing the intentions of the overall electorate.

This concern is expressed by many others and, in part, underlies the Canadian Broadcast Corporation's decision not to poll in the 2004 campaign. One suspects that this loftier motive may also have been buttressed by budgetary considerations and knowledge that there would be an ample supply of polls from other sources.

So what if there really was no polling during elections? First of all, it is utterly preposterous to imagine political parties conducting campaigns cut off from the crucial feedback provided by polls and second, it is equally hard to imagine that the corporate sector and markets would not want to anticipate the impacts of elections. That aside, imagine a public denied knowledge of polls during campaign, not only the horserace results, but also the top issues and expectations of the voting public. Polls provide a crucial public discipline that forces the parties to reconcile their platforms with broad public interests and values. Polls also provide the public, and others, with knowledge of the success and failures of the offerings and performances of leaders and parties. And what if people actually adjusted their voting behaviour as a consequence of knowledge of the polls (so-called strategic voting)? The evidence suggests this phenomenon is relatively small and even if it were not – so what? Voters make ballot decisions on the basis of all kinds of factors, many of them capricious and irrational. Why should they be denied knowledge of broader voting behaviour in order to best “invest” their vote to secure what they see as the best results? In our view, an immediate and obvious reform would be to eliminate the pre-election reporting ban.

CONCLUSIONS: A FEW FINAL THOUGHTS ON THE MANTLE OF POLLING

Many pollsters believe that they have inherited Auguste Comte's notion of sociologist as philosopher-priest. Seeing the collective aspirations and values of societies through the prism of the probability survey does provide a unique and powerful perspective. Increasingly, modern societies are reflexively self-aware and polling, properly conducted, can provide a crucial source of knowledge and advice.

Pollsters, however, should recognize that their value and authority rests on the quality of the empirical data and analysis they assemble and analyze. There is an interpretive function, but it should be clearly linked to evidence. Scientific public opinion rather than pollster opinion should

be paramount. Careful attention to both small and large 'm' methodology, along with a more modest and circumspect style would be welcome additions.

We need to rebalance polling efforts to look beyond the horserace to the deeper structures underlying voter preference. What are the key interests, values and aspirations of the public and how are they arrayed across various fault lines? Elections are fascinating exercises in macro sociological judgement and potentially rich sources of societal understanding. This perspective may suggest a different set of yardsticks to measure polling against.

One could argue that in turbulent conditions such as those seen in the last election, the "closest" poll to the final result would have been the most flawed. More importantly, did we get the issues right? Were the parties held accountable to the public values and interests? Did we heighten the quality of public debate? Did the research better elucidate the contradictory values and interests within our society and how these are mediated through the political process?

Oh yes, and perhaps we should put away the seat projection models when there is evidence of such flux and closeness.

Frank Graves is President of EKOS Research Associates Inc., which he began in 1980. He would like to kindly acknowledge the support of EKOS' media partners, The Toronto Star and La Presse, for their contribution to this research. He would also like to extend his gratitude to his colleagues, Andrew Sullivan (Vice-President) and Angela Scanlon (Senior Research Analyst), who collaborated closely with him in the election research and in the preparation of this paper. Additionally, conversations with colleagues at other research firms, in particular Darrell Bricker of Ipsos-Reid, have proved extremely enlightening in understanding this issue.