

The unbearable slightness of polling

Polling firms love election campaigns, but waiting to find out whether you got it right or not can be wrenching

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Anaesthetists may not put themselves to sleep, and teachers tend not to take their own tests, but pollsters have often submitted themselves to their own methods, a curious kind of self-reflection that just adds to the pressure they feel in this, the most poll-driven campaign in Canadian history.

The pollsters have polled to find out how trusted they are, and what they've discovered isn't promising. They usually come in below 50 per cent, ahead of lawyers (and journalists) but far behind nurses and farmers.

Pollsters have many critics. Plus they're stuck with the knowledge they could get it wrong, and tomorrow night when the polling stations close, everyone will know by how much.

So in the frenetic swirl of a federal election, is the burden too much to bear?

"Oh yes, there are some fitful nights," says Frank Graves, president of EKOS Research, whose firm was the first to show the Conservatives pulling away from the Liberals in this campaign.

"We're doing this for the public to consume, and you've got to get it right," echoes Ipsos-Reid president Darrell Bricker. "It's a tremendous feeling of responsibility and anxiety."

This election has been the subject of more polls than any other campaign in history, confirms Barry Kay, a political scientist at Wilfrid Laurier University's Laurier Institute for the Study of Public Opinion and Policy.

Part of the increase has been the introduction of more nightly tracking polls, such as those by EKOS and SES Research, and polling on the Internet by Ipsos-Reid.

More polls also means pollsters have never been more scrutinized.

If they're wrong, it's disastrous.

The 2004 election was a good example, when most pollsters were predicting a Conservative minority and failed to measure a last-minute shift to the Liberals, who ended up with 135 seats to the Tories' 99.

They were vilified in the media and plunged into self-flagellation mode for weeks.

EKOS's Graves predicted a Liberal seat minority, but even he severely low-balled the figure. This time, he's doing seat projections but not releasing them publicly.

Being wrong is terrifying. Graves fleetingly experienced that horror during the 1999 Ontario election,

having predicted another win for then-premier Mike Harris. As he sat on a TV panel, however, riding after riding was turning up Liberal red, and Graves' stomach was falling away.

"I'm going, 'Oh my God,' and beads of sweat are popping out on my forehead," he remembers. Still, he repeated his prediction on-air, "because if I was going to go down, it might as well be in flames."

He ended up being right, but it was a test of his fortitude.

Laurier's Kay says elections are the one time that pollsters' work can be tested against results.

"One can put their feet to the fire and see how right they are," he says. "When they're trying to figure out how many people will buy Pontiacs, say, it's hard to figure out how they're doing."

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"Elections," says SES president Nik Nanos, "are like the Olympics for pollsters, and we can see who's good and who might not be as good."

Surprisingly, pollsters say they don't make money doing election polls. Kay says they do it to publicize their name and bolster their reputations. "If you can capture the gold medal in being accurate," Nanos adds, "it pays dividends in the long run."

Polls can have flaws, Kay says, and if there is a problem "it could have financial implications."

But for the most part, he notes, "they have a good track record."

Even in 2004, pollsters' methodology wasn't wrong, Kay says. They just weren't polling at the election's end, and missed the Liberal leap. "I understand everyone wants to jump all over the pollsters. But the polls were just fine, as far as we could tell."

At least one firm, SES, will try to guard against a last-minute change in voter intentions this time by releasing a final poll tonight. For competitive reasons, others aren't saying what they'll do. That hasn't stopped the scepticism. Last Tuesday, the Strategic Counsel showed the Tories ahead of the Grits by 18 percentage points, yet the same day SES pegged the lead at just 5 points.

Kay chalks up the difference to "sampling error," while the Strategic Counsel's chairman, Allan Gregg, took the public's heat on *The Globe and Mail* website.

Gregg said it was a result of their "rolling" three-day poll. "We were dropping the results from four days ago, when we recorded an abnormally low day for the Conservatives. So we might have been a little high in today's numbers."

If it's not the polls being scrutinized, it's the firms themselves. Since the election began, they've been pummelled daily on blogs.

Graves' firm is regularly accused of bias against the Conservatives. "It's a long-standing view that we systematically erase Conservative support so that bureaucrats in Ottawa give us lots of work," he says. "It's obviously ludicrous. It'd be commercial suicide."

Other pollsters say they're accused of being handmaidens for every party at one time or another.

Do the pollsters share any other traits?

Many of the firms' leaders, such as Graves and Bricker, were schooled at the same place: Ottawa's public-service Mecca, Carleton University.

Some think they had a gift of being able to spot trends early. When he was a child, Graves could always pick the song on the radio that would top the charts. "Be it Eric Burdon or the Rolling Stones, I could always tell the dog from the number one," says Graves, now 53.

They all love politics and policy, and watch Canadian news instead of *Desperate Housewives*.

They tend to see numbers in everything. The 41-year-old Nanos can tell you he has done 121 interviews since the election began, and that 397,518 poll reports have been downloaded from his website.

They also like their jobs.

"I like the truthfulness of it. A well-done poll cuts through all the bullshit," says Bricker, 44. "I'm sick of all the talking heads and spin doctors — and no one actually asks people what they think. Our job is to hold up the mirror."

And they know that, no matter how they've done during this long, eight-week campaign, their results will be compared to tomorrow's ballot.

Then, as usual, the second guessing will begin.

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