

## Approach polls with caution

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Anticipation of a federal election within weeks has pushed political polls back onto front pages.

Newspaper readers benefit most when political polls are used to identify the issues most important to voters, so that thoughtful election coverage can be shaped around those issues.

The eruption of recent poll stories signals that major media organizations have already teamed with research firms hired to do scientific surveys. This means the results are supposed to be a reliable guide to public opinion. EKOS Research and Associates Inc. will do polls for the *Toronto Star* and *La Presse* if an election is called.

But readers should keep in mind the many factors that can influence poll results on the road to publication: some relate to methodology, some to changing realities and others to the interpretation of survey results.

First: Political polls about voting preferences do not predict the future. They capture only what voters thought on the day they were surveyed.

Credible poll stories must answer several questions, beginning with who paid for the poll, who did the poll and how they went about it.

How many people were interviewed and was the sample random? Generally speaking the bigger the sample, the more accurate the poll is likely to be. The smaller the sample, the higher the margin for error. This number must be included too, along with the number of undecided voters.

What were the questions? During the coming federal campaign, survey questions asked in *Star*-commissioned polls will be available online so readers can see what questions were asked, and in what order. Studies have shown that the same two questions, asked in different order, can produce different responses.

Were people questioned over the phone, face to face, on the Internet or in mail-in questionnaires? What date was the survey done? The *Star's* policy guide requires reporters to answer all these questions. If the *Star* has not commissioned the poll, the requirement for caution is even tougher.

Telephone surveys are usually the approach of choice, but getting a scientifically valid take on Canadian views and voting intentions through telephone surveys is increasingly difficult.

The biggest challenge is finding people willing to answer the questions.

EKOS president Frank Graves said that 20 years ago, roughly 70 per cent of the people phoned were willing to answer the questions. Now it is 20 to 30 per cent — and if the company is doing nightly polls, it can be 15 per cent.

National surveys often rely on interviews of up to 1,200 people. In the past, the 70 per cent of those who agreed to answer questions represented a majority speaking for all. But the number of calls now required to reach 1,200 people means that survey results represent a minority speaking for all.

Graves says the problems around traditional telephone surveys are getting worse but are not so insurmountable that they invalidate the results.

He does expect that in future, perhaps within five years, most surveying will be done through the Internet. For the coming federal election, his company will use an Internet panel to supplement telephone surveys.

Sometimes problems lie in interpretation. In a close race, close attention must be paid to the margin of error.

For example, a poll conducted for the *Star* by EKOS and published on Page 1 last Saturday, said, in part, that if an election was held tomorrow, 33 per cent would vote for the Liberals, 28 per cent for the Conservatives and 21 per cent for the New Democrats.

The survey reached 1,275 Canadians and the national results are considered accurate within 2.7 percentage points, 19 times out of 20 (the margin of error is higher for regional breakouts).

Applying the national margin of error means that support for the Liberals would be at best, 35.7 per cent, and at worst, 30.3. Support for the Conservatives would be at best, 30.7 per cent, and at worst, 25.3 per cent.

Now, margins of error are not independent for each candidate, and there is a formula applied in this situation but, suffice it to say, if the numbers overlap, no one should be suggesting one candidate is ahead of the other.

Political polls are costly and they are a small piece of the paper's overall election coverage. Why do them at all?

*Star* editor-in-chief Giles Gherson says independent polls protect the newspaper and its readers from manipulation by political parties. Parties poll constantly during elections to see how voters are reacting to their campaigns. If the newspaper pays for its own polls, it does not have to rely on the campaigns for information.

He says independent polls help the paper to see what the politicians are seeing — and thus better understand their campaign strategies. "Polls are a starting point. We're looking for patterns, to test certain things. What are the issues that are driving the voters?"

And I must admit, in a close race they can be fun.

As long as political polls help shape the contextual coverage of issues and don't supplant it, don't drain resources or attention from coverage of local campaigns, mislead or discourage people from voting, on a dull day they are the *Survivor* series of politics.

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