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## How to read the polls

Being able to glean deeper meaning from surveys requires some knowledge about the different methodologies involved

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At the halfway point in the election campaign four companies have released polls to the media. Soon after the writ was dropped, Compas released the results of a poll suggesting a five point lead for the Liberals, at 46 per cent.

A later Ekos poll suggested a more even playing field, which was apparently confirmed by Decima's Internet poll earlier last week. This, in turn, was followed by an Ipsos poll proclaiming the largest lead yet for Dalton McGuinty's Liberals.

Last week alone, then, there have been two varying assessments of Liberal support. Throughout, the NDP has earned consistent support from approximately 12 per cent of the electorate.

Can all these polls be correct? Are these examples of wide swings in public opinion or is there something more to these results?

Being able to glean any deeper meaning from the polls requires more than having the different voting intentions.

It also requires a bit of knowledge about the different methodologies involved.

One of the first things to check when reading a poll is whether we're comparing two similar items. Of the two most recent polls, several features distinguish them.

First, when tracking the proportion of voters who support a party, most polling companies calculate support among decided voters.

For Ipsos, then, 49 per cent of decided voters said they were going to vote Liberal.

This was not the case with the Decima results.

Instead, Decima reported the proportion of total survey respondents — including decided voters and undecided voters — who backed the Liberals. The original assessment was a dead heat, with 31 per cent for the Liberals, and 31 per cent for the Tories.

If we recalculate the results used by Decima so that they match the method reported by the others, we find that the Liberals have 39 per cent of support among decided voters, as do the Tories. Obviously this doesn't change which party is in the lead, but it helps to clarify what could have been seen as widely varying results.

The margin of error is worth checking because it gives an indication of the accuracy of the poll.

Early in the campaign, an Ekos/Toronto Star poll reported that the Liberals had 43.5 per cent of the vote and the Conservatives were close behind, with 42 per cent support.

The margin of error on that poll was 3.1, 19 times out of 20. What does that mean?

It means that we can be 95 per cent confident that the number reported is either 3.1 points higher or 3.1 points lower than what was reported. In other words, at that point in time, the Liberals were in the lead, but their support could have been as low as 40 per cent and Conservative support as high as 45 per cent.

In general, the margin of error decreases as the sample size increases. This makes intuitive sense: A poll of 1,000 people is usually more accurate than a poll of 200.

The date and method of interview also help to clarify things.

Opinion polls will never accurately predict how voters will behave once they get in the ballot box. At best, they are an accurate reflection of what people were thinking at one point in time.

We should be able to determine, then, when that "one point in time" was; whether last week or much earlier.

In a related issue, we should know whether the poll was conducted in person, over the phone, or over the Internet.

Sometimes participants will be less likely to answer sensitive questions in a face-to-face interview.

In 1992, the British polling companies under-predicted Conservative support, in part because survey respondents

weren't willing to admit to interviewers that they were going to vote for John Major and the Tories.

Internet polls are in a class by themselves. This affects not only the method of interview but also how the sample is selected.

Normally, a method of random selection is best. Since we can't interview everyone in Ontario, the most reliable way to get a snapshot of how people feel is to gather a random sample that is broadly representative of the population.

Internet polls, by definition, are restricted to that portion of the population with access to a computer, the Internet, and time. Some Internet polls, though not all, are little more than availability samples, asking those who visit a web site to provide their opinions on issues of the day.

For its Internet poll, Decima selected a quota sample from among its regular Internet poll population, a group initially recruited through Sympatico or previous telephone polls.

It is still difficult to gauge the accuracy of each Internet poll, in part because the method of sampling is usually non-random.

Others would argue, however, that the computer-owning population is similar to the population that turns out to vote.

In the recent Scottish elections, the Internet polls were more accurate than those using more conventional methodology.

A last thing to check is the wording of questions. The way that questions are phrased, and their order in the survey, can alter the responses. Mentioning SARS before asking about important issues can encourage someone to indicate that health care is very important.

For polls released during federal elections, the Elections Act indicates that the following facts are helpful when examining opinion polls: The name of the sponsor and company conducting the survey, the date of fieldwork, the sample population and size and the margin of error.

These guidelines are designed to help the public understand the conditions under which the data were collected, and provide them with cues for how to read that information. The more informed the voter, the more likely that the polls will enlighten rather than confuse debate.

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