

Are Polls Good for the Voter? On the Impact of Attitudes Towards Surveys in Electoral Campaigns

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The research project

Durand and Goyder (2005-2009)

- Pertains more generally to the role of polls in society. Various small projects within
 - ◆ Replicate of “A survey on surveys” (Goyder 1987)
 - ◆ Prestige of survey occupations (Goyder and Durand, 2008)
 - ◆ Attitudes towards surveys among interviewers and performance (in progress).
- This research: **Attitudes towards surveys and**
 - ◆ Non response
 - ◆ **Electoral behavior**

Context

- Since beginning of polls (Gallup and Rae, 1940), researchers ask whether polls during electoral campaigns may influence
 - ◆ turnout
 - ◆ voting intentions
- Research comes from various disciplines and researchers' preoccupations are varied (see Hardmeier, 2007):
 - ◆ Social psychology : conformity and group norms may play a role : bandwagon and underdog phenomena
 - ◆ Public opinion research : proved influence of polls may trigger movements to ban polls during campaigns, regulate pollsters
 - ◆ Political scientists : put to test rational choice theory : strategic voting

Literature

- Hardmeier (2007) concludes from a metaanalysis of 34 studies (Hardmeier and Roth, 2001) that
 - ◆ no effect on turnout was validated
 - ◆ and no underdog effect was validated.
 - ◆ A small yet robust bandwagon effect, present most of all in studies using experimental designs, seems to be validated.
- Marsh (1985) shows that it is information on trends in public opinion that influences people.

Literature

- Many studies on strategic voting around National election studies (Canada, Holland, New Zealand, France) inspired by rational choice theory
 - ◆ Poll results impact on voting intention and vote through expectations.
 - ◆ Strategic voting is not always present. Needs specific conditions. More likely at the local level and when there are more than 2 candidates.
 - ◆ Reverse strategic voting in the French presidential election of 2002 likely responsible for Le Pen's qualification for the second round (Blais 2004).

Literature

- In public opinion and communication research, a number of studies where attitudes towards polls are more directly measured.
 - ◆ 3 elections in GB (McAllister & Studlar, 1991) - 3 parties.
 - ◆ Referendum in Denmark (De Vreese et Semetko, 2002)
 - ◆ Price et Stroud, 2005 in the context of the US presidential election of 2000
 - Knowledge of poll results
 - Influence of polls on others
 - Influence of polls on self
 - Polls are a good or bad thing for the country

Synthesis

- Impact of polls not in all elections :
 - ◆ More likely when election is close and many polls, not too ambiguous (SIC)
 - ◆ More likely when more than 2 candidates or options.
- Not on all people (more vs less sophisticated voters? Undecided or partisan?)
- May vary during an electoral campaign (beginning vs end)
- Multiple hypotheses on the process by which polls influence voters (affective vs cognitive, normative vs informative)

From a methodological standpoint, why should we look at the influence of polls in electoral campaigns ?

- Research presumes that polls are ok. So called bandwagon and underdog effects may be ways to explain out failures of the polls, preventing us to examine in depth the reasons for failures.
- If polls influence electoral behavior, it is likely to provoke discrepancies between voting intentions and real vote : it will then have an impact on the predictive validity of polls and hence on their general credibility. If polls influence electoral behavior, they **HAVE** to be reliable.
- Electoral campaigns constitute a privileged moment in which we can examine the relationship between attitude towards polls and a number of relevant variables, including non response. Helps us examine measurement issues.

Research question(s)

- 1. Do polls inform expectations regarding the results of the election?
- 2. Are attitudes towards polls related to the perceived influence of polls?
- 3. Do attitudes towards polls and perceived influence impact on the general evaluation of the role of polls?
- 4. Is perceived influence validated by data?

Our strategy

- Use similar measurement as Price and Stroud (2005), in order to be able to compare, but adapt and improve if possible.
- Assess the evolution during the campaign.
- Measure real vote in order to validate possible influence.
- Use open ended questions to have a deeper understanding of perceptions.

Research design

- Quebec election of March 26, 2007 which ended with a minority government. 3 main parties : Liberals (center-right), Parti Québécois (center-left, nationalist) and Action démocratique du Québec (right).
- Two pre-election polls (N=1001, 1053) at the beginning (March 1-8) and end (March 15-22) of the campaign ($r^2=34\%$).
- One post election poll among **respondents** to pre-election polls (n= 1664, $r^2=84\%$).
- One post election poll among non respondents to pre-election polls (n=393, $r^2=31\%$), see Goyder & Durand, 2008)

Measures - during the campaign

In pre-election polls

- In addition to
 - ◆ Voting intention, interest in campaign, opinion on different issues
- Read or heard about polls.
- If so, know who is leading in polls and whether this party is much ahead or a little.
- Believe that polls are ok. If not, why (open ended question).
- Perceived influence of polls on other people's vote.
- Rely on polls to know who is going to win.
- Polls are a good or bad thing for the voters? And why (open ended question)?

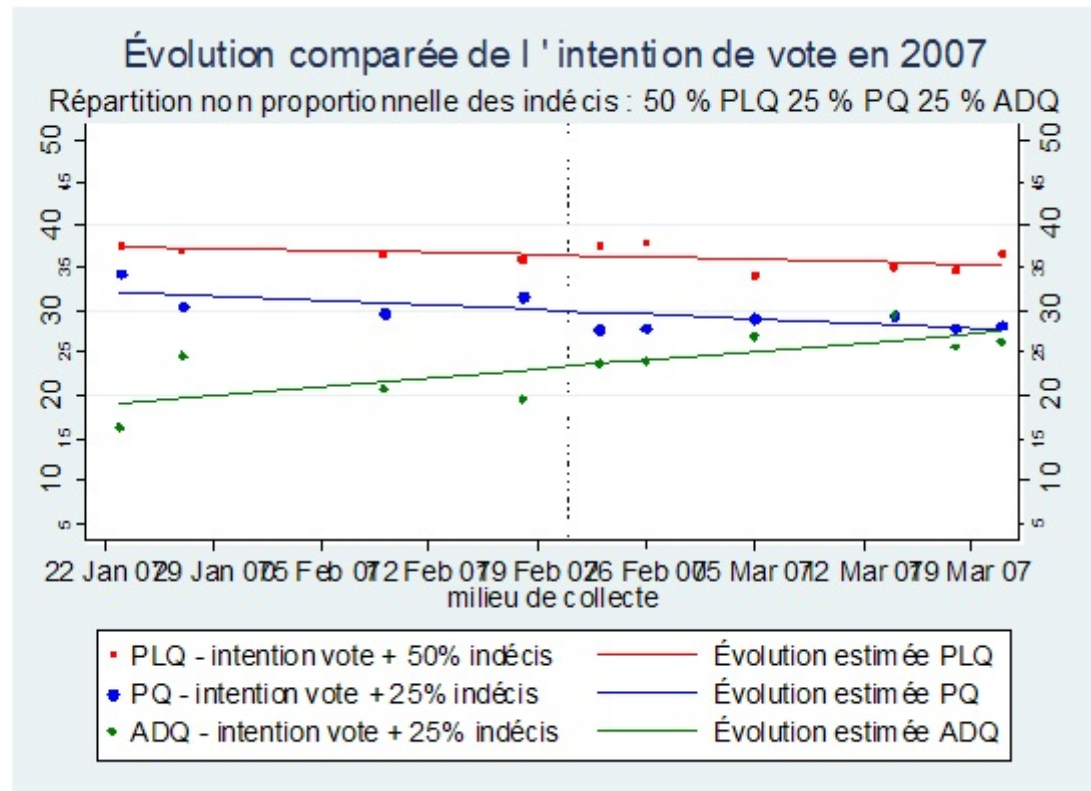
Measures - post-election

In post election polls among respondents to pre-election polls

- In addition to :
 - ◆ Participation and vote cast,
 - ◆ Indecision before voting,
 - ◆ When applicable, reasons for change between voting intention in pre and effective vote in post.
- Too many polls during the campaign?
- Polls made your decision more difficult or easier to take?

Evolution of voting intentions as measured by the polls

- Support for the Liberal party (in red): no evolution
- Movement in support for the 2 other parties.



Attitudes vs expectations

Evolution of perceptions during campaign

- **Read/heard about polls : 59% ⇒ 66,5%**
 - ♦ Older, educated, interested, French, men, choice definitive.
- **Correctly state that Liberals are ahead: 51% ⇒ 34%** (1st poll, educated, men)
- **Think that poll results are ok: 61% ⇒ 53%**
 - ♦ Younger, choice may change, know Libs ahead, satisfied with gvt, intend to vote for any party (vs dk).
- **Rely on polls to know who is going to win: 61%, 59%**
 - ♦ Interested, choice may change, seen polls, polls ok or Libs more ahead, satisfied with gvt., men
- **Think that Liberals are going to win : 79% ⇒ 72%**

First question, first conclusion

Do polls influence expectations?

- Those who think that the Liberals are going to win are more likely
 - ◆ To have read/heard about polls
 - ◆ To think that polls are ok or that the Liberals are more ahead than what the polls say
 - ◆ 22,7% of variance explained, Nagelkerke R².
- Declaring voting intentions (vs don't know) and being satisfied with the Liberal government also influence expectations.
- All things being equal though,
 - ◆ In the second poll, less people believe that the Liberals are going to win.
 - ◆ The more educated are more likely to state that the Liberals are going to win.

Attitudes vs perceived influence

Evolution during campaign, minimal

- **Influence on others**

- ◆ No influence 18% ⇒ 22%
- ◆ On turnout 12% ⇒ 8%
- ◆ To vote for my preferred party : 22% ⇒ 17%
- ◆ To vote for other parties than my preferred : 22%, 21%
- ◆ To vote for the Liberal party : 17%, 14%

- **Influence on myself**

- ◆ Polls made my decision more difficult to take: 9%, 9%
- ◆ Polls made my decision easier to take: 20%, 20%

- **General influence**

- ◆ On others and on myself : 3%, 3%
- ◆ On others but not on myself : 15%, 18%
- ◆ On myself but not on others : 22%, 23%
- ◆ No influence : 60%, 56%

Second question, second answer

Did Attitudes towards polls impact on perceived influence of polls

- At the beginning of the campaign, when polls were less ambiguous, people were more likely to think that polls will have an influence, on turnout or on party choice.
- Respondents who say that the polls influence people to vote either for or against their preferred party (vs no influence) are more likely..
 - ◆ To rely on polls to know who is going to win
 - ◆ To be interested in politics,
 - ◆ To be younger,
 - ◆ To declare their choice as being definitive,

Second question, second answer

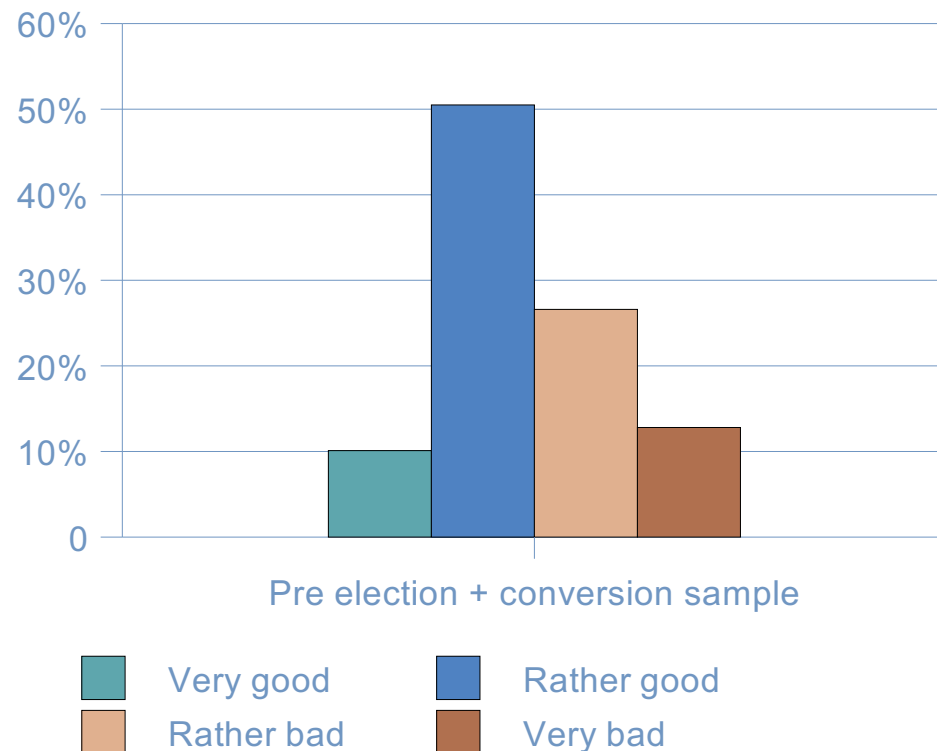
Did Attitudes towards polls impact on perceived influence of polls on self

- Respondents more likely to say that polls made their decision **more difficult** to take are
 - ♦ MORE likely to rely on polls to know the winner,
 - ♦ LESS likely to have said their choice was definitive,
 - ♦ MORE likely to intend to vote for Parti québécois (vs DK).
- Respondents more likely to say that polls made their decision **easier** to take are
 - ♦ MORE likely to rely on polls to know the winner,
 - ♦ LESS likely to have said their choice was definitive,
 - ♦ MORE likely to declare a voting intention (vs undecided).
 - ♦ They tend to be younger and less educated.

3. Attitudes towards polls and evaluation of polls : Are polls good for the voters?

Evolution during campaign : none

- Positive vision of polls : 60.6%
- (Price & Stroud: 30% but middle category of 36%)
- No difference between 1st and 2nd poll, between main & conversion sample



Third question, third answer

Do attitudes towards polls influence the general evaluation of polls as being good for people?

- Those who think polls are a good thing for the voters are more likely to say
 - ◆ That polls are ok
 - ◆ That they rely on polls to know who is going to win
 - ◆ That they are satisfied with the Liberal government
 - ◆ They are also younger
 - ◆ and more likely to be non french- speaking
- A bit tautological but why are polls good for the voters?

Why are polls good for the voters?

	prop. of mentions
Gives info on whole country	27,4%
Gives info on race	20,2%
Gives reliable info.	9,6%
Gives info on issues, raise interest	8,1%
Positive influence, helps undecided vote>	28,8%
Get people to question their positions	3,9%
Influence parties, leaders	3,7%
Comfort people in their positions	2,3%

- 65.3% mention elements of information as a positive impact of polls
- 38.7% mention the influence of polls as a positive asset

Why are polls bad for the voters?

	prop. of mentions
Gives info not reliable, biased	17,2%
Gives info manipulated	5,6%
Gives useless info.	5,7%
Make people change their mind	51,4%
People vote for the party ahead in polls	12,6%
Too much importance to polls, divert from issues	9,2%

- 25.5% mention elements of information -- not reliable, useless, biased -- as negative aspects of polls
- 73.2% mention the influence of polls as negative aspects

4. Attitudes towards polls and vote

Did polls influence some people to change their mind from their voting intention to the final voting decision?

- The post-election poll shows that
 - ◆ Among those who reveal their vote,
 - 20% have changed from a specific voting intention to a vote for another party.
 - 7% had declared that they were undecided and finally declared a specific vote for a party.

Attitudes towards polls and vote change

Declared influence on changers and non voters

- Those who have changed party from voting intention to declared vote (compared to non-changers)
 - ♦ Are more likely to have been interviewed in the 1st poll,
 - ♦ Were less interested by the campaign,
 - ♦ Are less likely to have voted for the Liberals,
 - ♦ **Are more likely (39%) to say that the polls either made their decision more difficult or easier to take.**
- Those who have finally decided not to vote...
 - ♦ Were less interested by the campaign,
 - ♦ Younger and more likely to be allophones (non French, non English)
 - ♦ **Are more likely to say that the polls either made their decision more difficult or easier to take.**

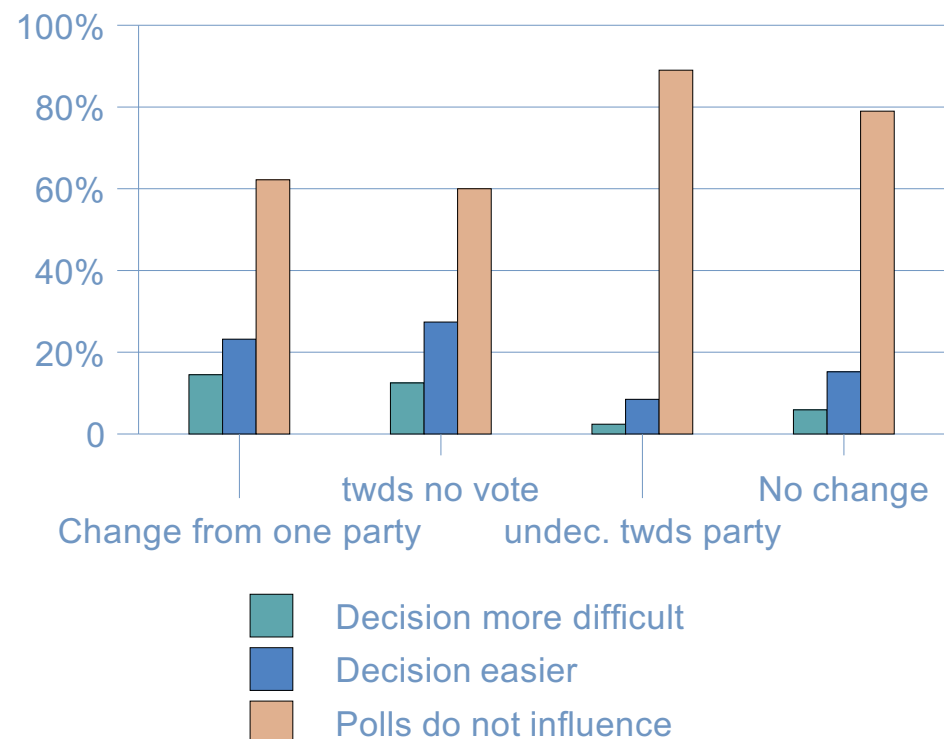
Attitudes towards polls and vote change

No declared influence on undecideds

-
- Those who have moved from indecision to a specific party
 - ◆ Tend to be older,
 - ◆ Were less interested by the campaign,
 - ◆ Are more likely to have voted for ADQ,
 - ◆ **BUT are not likely to say that the polls influenced them.**

For example, ...

- If people changed their mind between the pre-election poll and the vote, or decided not to vote, they are more likely to say that the polls influenced their decision.



Limitations

- The situation examined here has some specific characteristics that are not likely to be present in all electoral campaigns.
- We should have focussed more on people's perceptions of the trends. They seem to be more important in this type of context than the state of opinions (Marsh, 1985).
- We should have looked at people's perceptions of the situation at the local level (Blais et al.).

Conclusion

- Polls do seem to play a role in people's decision to vote for one party in specific situations....
 - ◆ People look at polls and estimate their reliability.
 - ◆ They use this information
 - to evaluate the likely state of parties' strength.
 - to estimate the likely influence of polls.
 - to make a decision as to who they will vote for.
- However, perceptions of poll results are also influenced by people's political opinion.

Conclusion

- Therefore, polls have to give an adequate portrait of the situation.
- BUT, their adequacy is hampered by people's reaction to them.
- Reverse strategic voting, influenced by the polls, may have played a role in the March 2007 electoral campaign in Quebec, leading to a “surprising result”, not forecasted by analysts, voters,...

Methodological conclusion

- Measurement of poll influence on self: very different results when, instead of using a direct question, we use the measure devised for this survey, i.e. “did polls make your decision easier or more difficult to take?”
- How to partial out a failure of the polls from a movement triggered by the polls : important to use post-election polls as a tool to better identify possible problems with the polls.
- Impact on academic surveys? People do not differentiate polls from surveys. Therefore, we have to be preoccupied by what happens to electoral polls, commercial firms’ work.