

Survey Methodology, Elections and the Law

Paper presented by Claire Durand,
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Recent context

- Thursday, May 20, 2004, Tony Burman, editor-in-chief of CBC, declared that CBC will not commission voter-preference polls during the electoral campaign. Two reasons are invoked:
 - ♦ A) Polls "suck the oxygen right out of the room" in terms of what's engaging, relevant and interesting to voters.
 - ♦ B) The poll samples are often so small as to be statistically meaningless. "The response rate is so low that the methodology is under attack and borders on the unscientific".

Polls may influence elections, bad polls can mislead the population, the political parties, the media, etc.

- There has been a number of instances where the polls misled the population, either by not announcing the right winner or giving the impression that a party was well in advance when it was not the case (US, 1948; Great Britain, 1992, 1997, etc.)
- Known occurrences that we studied are the Quebec election of 1998, the Canadian election of 2000 (in Quebec) and the French election of 2002.

Survey methodology and electoral polls

- Vachon and coll. (1999) showed, in the context of the Canadian election of 1997, that the more rigorous the methodology used, the less mean error and the less variation in error in the estimation of voter preference.
- Durand, Blais and colleagues (2001, 2002) showed that, in the case of the 1998 Quebec election, some methodological practices related to samples and refusal rates could explain the discrepancies between the polls and the vote.
- Durand (2002) showed that, in the case of the Canadian 2000 election, some pollsters seemed to produce estimates that were much more variable than others.

What type of errors may be present in polls

- In the international literature, the possibility that the left be generally overestimated is often mentioned and validated. In addition, the possibility that the extreme parties be underevaluated is also present.
- In the Canadian case, Liberals (provincial or federal) have been rather systematically underestimated in Quebec since 1998, with the notable exception of the Quebec 2003 election.
- Explanations may be at the methodological level (samples, response rates, quotas, etc.) or at the socio-political level (spiral of silence, social desirability, composition of the electorate of some parties).

Polls and the Law(s)

- The possibility that polls, and even fake polls, mislead the population on the real strength of the parties has brought some countries to promulgate laws controlling the publication of polls.

Polls and the law

France

- France (1977, 2002) at first banned the publication of polls during the week preceding the election and then, since 2002, only on the day preceding the election and on election day. The change became necessary because the new means of communication give access to poll results outside the country and because of European laws.
- In addition, the French law makes compulsory the deposit of all relevant technical and methodological information at the *Commission des sondages*, information that is made public to any individual who asks for it.
- In practice, the pollsters had an arrangement with the Commission so that the most relevant information, the figures before any adjustment, was kept secret. In addition, the Commission prohibited any photocopy of the technical information so that it was necessary to copy everything in handwriting.

Polls and the law

Canada

- The new Elections act (2000) make compulsory the publication of some methodological information on the published polls plus information on how to get more detailed methodological information.
- Our analysis (Durand, 2002) has shown that the more detailed information was not made available during the 2000 Canadian election.
- In addition, most media did not answer our request to provide the required information under the Law. One media stated clearly that the requested information was proprietary even after being informed of the legal requirements.

Polls and the Law

Canada, in summary

- In short, during the 2000 Canadian election, nobody made sure that the law was enforced.
- However, there has been a systematic tendency to underestimate the vote for the Liberals in Quebec,
- And there is a tendency to high variation in estimates when the methodology is less rigorous, and particularly when the response rates are low.

What about this election?

As of June 1st,...

- The law is even less respected than in 2000. La Presse and Toronto Star (Ekos), Globe and Mail (Ipsos-Reid): no report provided or mentioned.
- Figures for regional subsamples mentioned without information on sample size or margin of error; erroneous information.
- No information (or inexact information) on percent undecided, no information on allocation of undecided.
- Most polls conducted on three days.
- Information sometimes hidden within the text or as “discrete note” hidden somewhere.

Basic information provided, two first published polls of the campaign

Yellow: not provided; blue : erroneous information

Sponsor	Pollster	Publication	Name of sponsor and pollster provided	Period during which survey was conducted	Population from which sample was drawn	No. of people "contacted" (respondents)	% of undecided	Margin of error	Wording	Means by which a report may be obtained
Globe and mail/CTV	Ipsos-Reid	June 1st	✓	May 28-30	⚠	887	11,3%	3,3% ✓	✓	⚠
Toronto Star	Ekos	May 28	✓	May 25-27 ✓	18 years +	1306	⚠	2,7% ✓	✓	⚠
La Presse Article 1	Ekos	May 28	✓	May 25-27 ✓	Canadiens 18+	1306	⚠	2,7% ✓	✓	⚠
La Presse Article 2 (QC)	Ekos	May 28	✓	May 25-27 ✓		344	⚠	5,0% *	✓	⚠

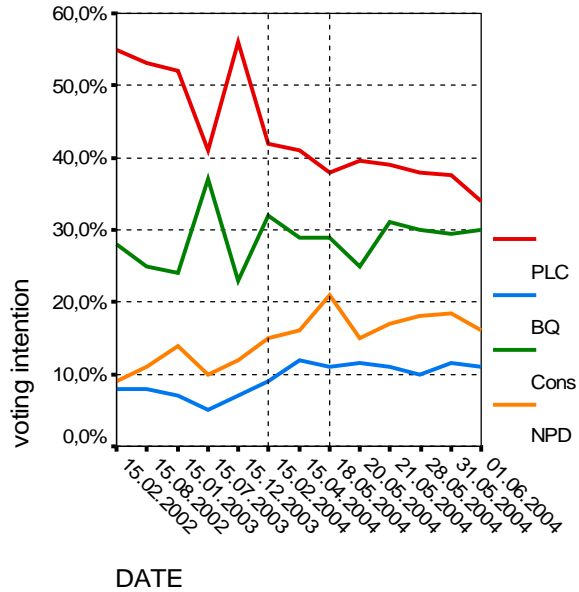
Sponsor	Pollster	Sampling method	Size of initial sample	Response rate	Refusals and ineligible (N & %)	Time of day of interviews	% non disclosers**	Allocation of non disclosers	Adjustment & weighting
Globe and mail/CTV	Ipsos-Reid	"representative randomly selected sample"	⚠	⚠	⚠	⚠	12%	⚠	region, age, sex, Census 2001
La Presse/Toronto Star	Ekos	"random sample"	⚠	⚠	⚠	⚠	(19,5%)	⚠	region, age, sex, Census (?)

What about this election? (...)

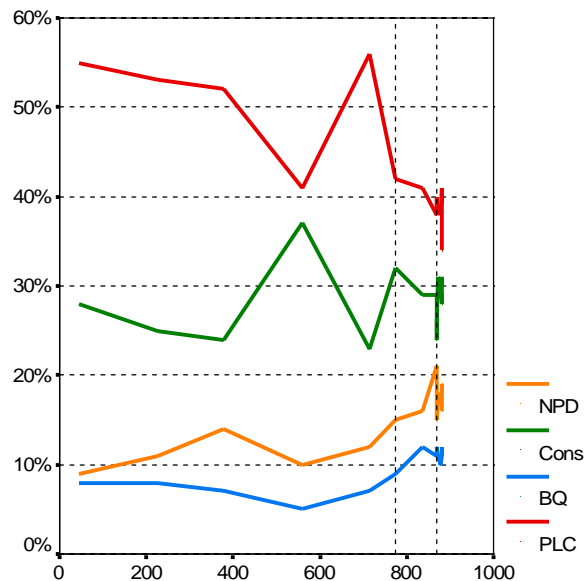
"Les perles" in media reporting

- In BC, Liberals are in third place, with 29%, behind the NDP's 30% and well behind the Conservative who have 37%...(margin of error? About 8%+) Toronto Star, May 28.
- La Presse knows only two parties in ROC.
- Ekos interviewed 1306 Canadians... with a margin of error of 2,7% ... BUT only 1051 indicated their preference (margin 3%).
- "The time line" : side by side election 2000, poll of August 2002, poll of August 2003, polls of April 2004, May 2004, etc. with same distance between the points.

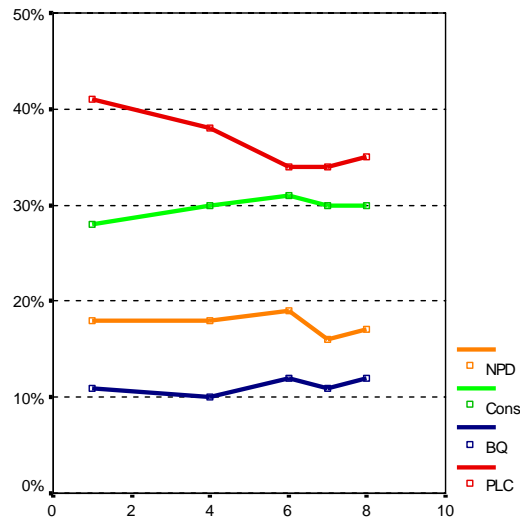
Example: The published evolution



Example: The real evolution



Evolution since the beginning of the campaign



What about this election?

Everything is in place for...

- The presence of bad polls and bad poll reporting
- An influence of the polls on the campaign
- A possible underestimation of support for the Liberals, at least in Quebec

What to do...

Elections Canada could - should?

- help media respect the law by providing...
 - ◆ A frame for the methodological report that is supposed to accompany media reporting of polls
 - ◆ Indications on how to present the figures for voter preference
 - ◆ Indications for the pollsters on the content of their methodological notice (Frame...)
- enforce the Law
 - ◆ Remind Media about the requirements of the Law
 - ◆ Send serious “avertissements” to the media who publish or report on polls without respecting the law.
 - ◆ Put on trial media who go on not respecting the law.