#### Why Do Polls Go Wrong Sometimes? The Canadian Case

Presented by

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#### **Goal of the research project**

+Understand why polls go wrong... sometimes but not always.

+Find ways to predict whether polls will be biased in a given election.

# " "Polls go wrong" What does this mean?

- +Two phenomena:
  - +Wrong winner predicted.
  - +Systematic & substantial bias in estimation of vote share.
- +Usually, all pollsters err in the same direction,
  - + Sometimes with suspicious unanimity among the pollsters (France 2002).
- +Terms used: disaster, debacle, "Black Sunday", catastrophe.

+ Used mostly when wrong winner is predicted.

# Why do polls go wrong?

#### +3 levels of explanation:

- +1) Methodological
  - + Coverage, sampling, prop. of non disclosers
  - + Estimation: weighting, adjustment, treatment of nondisclosers, etc.

#### +2) Socio-political

+ Characteristics of the campaign, of the parties, of the electoral system, etc.

#### +3) Sociological & psycho-social

- + Inaccurate declaration of information from respondents, due to socio-political climate?
- The relationship between the socio-demographics that are controlled for on one side and voting intention on the other side is changing, weakening.

**Data: The Canadian case** Four cases + Canada May 2011 Federal election: + Whole Canada +Quebec + Ontario +Alberta April 2012 +Quebec September 2012 +BC May 2013

# Analysis

#### **+**Review +Poll bias in published polls + Model the evolution of preferences. + Difference between polls' forecast and the vote. + Impact of methods, all things equal. +The campaign climate + Media coverage: Hostility against one party? +Qualify: Bias in the polls versus "catastrophe". +Why? Could it be anticipated, prevented?

#### Canada 2011 - total



+Cons: - 3.7%; +Web: -1.5%, +IVR: - 3.0% +Nanos: +Lib +3.8, +NPD - 1.7

+ Bias against the Conservative party.

- Methods (Web and IVR) contribute to the bias in a similar direction.
- Nanos uses a quite different question than the others; estimates differ.

# Canada 2011 - Ontario



+Cons: -4.1% +Nanos: + +2 Cons + +3.2 Libs

+Bias against the Conservative party.

+Only Nanos differs significantly from the other pollsters/methods.

## Canada 2011 - Quebec



+Right on! +IVR: +Bloc: - 2.8

 Though there was huge movement, prediction is almost perfect.

+IVR underestimates the Bloc (contrary to usual).



+Wild Rose: +4.9; Cons: -11.8 = **16.7** +Web: WR:-2.6; PC: +2.1: reduces bias +IVR: WR: +2.1; PC: -2.9 : contributes to bias

#### **Quebec 2012**



+Underestimation of the Quebec Liberal Party though no substantial movement.

+IVR contributes to reducing bias. Web has no impact on bias per se.

# **British Columbia 2013**



+ There is movement towards the Liberal party.
+ Liberals: -7.5; NDP:+2.9, Total: 10.4 pts
+ WEB (68% of polls): NPD: +4.3

#### **Synthesis**

+Two elections clearly problematic :
+Alberta is THE catastrophe
+ Wrong winner predicted, huge bias.
+BC is the second candidate
+ Wrong winner predicted, mostly because Libs substantially underestimated.

#### +Bias:

- + Against the right-wing side: Quebec/partly, BC, Canada-Ontario.
- + Against the Liberal Party: Quebec and BC.
- + Against the Conservative party: Canada/Ontario, Alberta.

+Against the left-wing side? Never?

### **Synthesis: Methods**

#### +Web makes a difference:

- + Against the Conservatives (Canada)
- + Against the Wild Rose party (Alberta)
- + In favor of CAQ (Quebec)
- + In favor of NDP (BC)
- + Contributed to bias in Canada & BC; reduced bias in Alberta.

#### +IVR makes a difference:

+ Against the Conservatives (Canada )
+ Against the Bloc (Canada/Quebec)
+ Against the Progressive Conservative party (Alberta)
+ In favor of the Liberal party (Quebec)
+ Contributed to bias in Canada & Alberta; reduced bias in Quebec.

# **Synthesis: Methods**

- +Coverage:
  - +Cell-phone only, non-internet users,...
- +Non disclosers:
  - +Proportion very high in some polls in Quebec.
  - + Attribution of preferences to non-disclosers should be examined.
- + Estimates for some specific groups:
   + In Quebec, estimates of non-francophones' preferences seem to be problematic.
- +Participation:
  - + Should pollsters use likely voter models?

### Synthesis: socio-political

- +The "first past the post" system encourages strategic vote
  - +Even more when there is more than one "major party" like in Quebec 2012 election and Canadian elections in some provinces.

+The presence of long-term incumbents in Alberta, Quebec and BC and a high level of dissatisfaction towards the government may have played a role.

 Hesitation between change and status quo when proposed change is not what people are looking for.

# Synthesis: sociological, psycho-social +Socio-political climate:

- May make it difficult to tell about your preferences.
  - + Noelle-Neuman: spiral of silence.
  - + Telling a pollster that you will vote for the "other" party has no consequence but it allows sending a message to the ruling party that your do not appreciate its behavior or politics.
- + Role of media in feeding the hostile climate?

+Samples are weighted according to sociodemographics.

 Post modernity means socio-demographics become less related to political preferences. May contribute to bias.

#### **Can we foresee?**

# +Yes!.. well probably. +Bias is almost always present. +Bias is almost always in the same direction. + In all these elections, there was an incumbent that had been in power for a long time and a desire for change in the population. The contender did not manage to convince. +At least in some elections, there was a media climate of criticism of the incumbent.

#### **Questions, comments?**

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