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# **What Happens When Polls Go Wrong? Two Canadian Elections of 2012**

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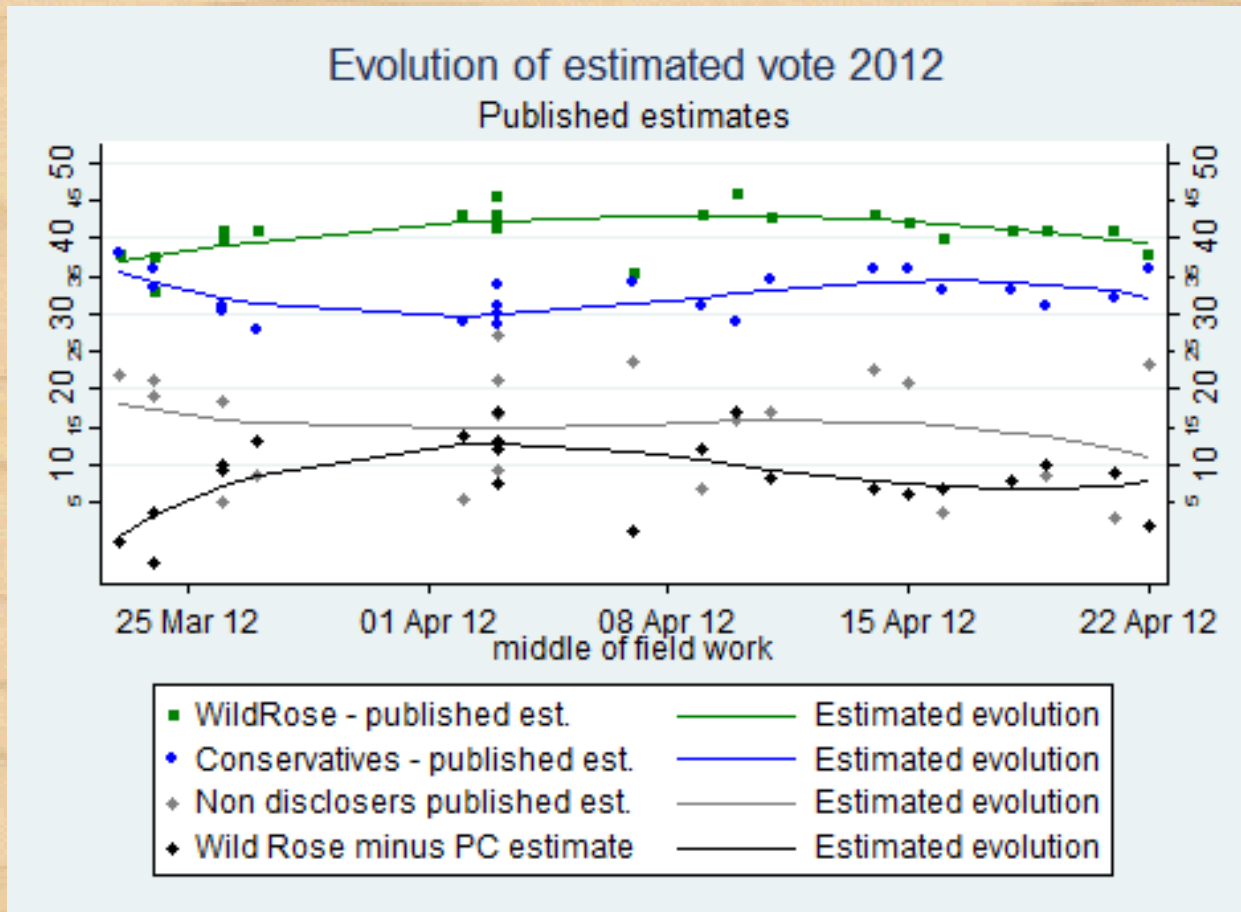
# Outline

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- Two elections where polls went wrong:
  - Alberta, April 23, 2012
  - Quebec, September 4, 2012
- What happened?
- How were polls interpreted by the media?
- Did the interpretation contributed to polls' error?
- What was the reaction to the error in polls?

# Alberta 2012

## Evolution of vote intention



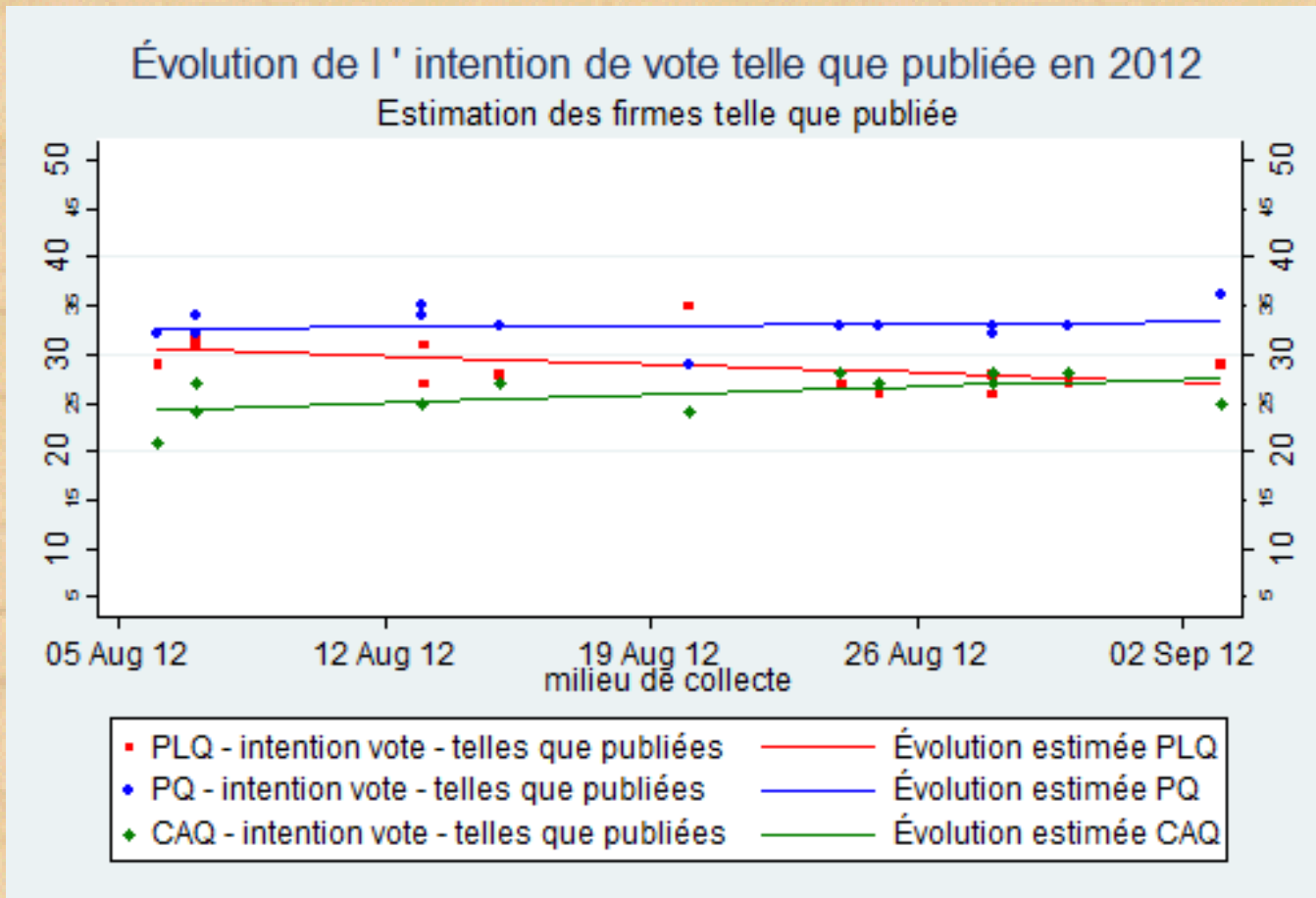
Estimate by polls:  
**Wild Rose: 39.2%**  
**P Cons. : 32.2%**

Election results:  
**Wild Rose: 34.3%**  
**P Cons. : 44.0%**

Difference vote -  
poll:  
**Wild Rose: -4.9%**  
**P Cons. : +11.8%**

# Quebec 2012

## Evolution of vote intention



Estimat. by polls

PQ : 33.3%

PLQ : 27.6%

CAQ: ↑ 27.1%

Election results

PQ : 31.9%

PLQ : 31.2%

CAQ: 27.1%

Diff. vote - poll:

PQ :-1.4%

PLQ : +3.6%

# Comparison Alberta-Quebec

| Average                        | Alberta | Quebec |
|--------------------------------|---------|--------|
| nb. of polls                   | 23      | 15     |
| Party 1 - Winner               | 32,5    | 33,0   |
| Party 2 - Contender            | 40,9    | 28,9   |
| Party 3                        |         | 25,8   |
| non disclosers                 | 15,2    | 9,6    |
| difference winner vs contender | 8,4     | 4,1    |
| difference vote vs winner      | 11,5    | -1,5   |
| difference vote vs contender   | -6,7    | 3,0    |

- Alberta clearly worse than Quebec. Order of arrival reverse
- Quebec characterized by a 3-party race. First and last well predicted. Presumed 3rd arrived 2nd.
- In both cases, the incumbent was underestimated.

# How were the polls covered in the Newspapers?

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Last two weeks up until 2 days after election day

- **Quebec, in the two main newspapers**
  - ▶ 123 articles referring to polls
    - 20 articles the day after the election.
    - From 3 to 14 the other days.
- **Alberta, in the two main newspapers**
  - ▶ 73 articles referring to polls
    - 21 articles the day after the election
    - From 1 to 5 per day



# How were polls covered in Alberta

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- April 8: Wild Rose at 43, Prog. Conservatives at 30
  - ▶ *WR solidly in the lead,... poised to end the Tories 41-year reign*
  - ▶ *...but politicians and observers say nothing is settled yet.*
  - ▶ *The provincial election has marked the Wildrose party as a rising force in provincial politics, with recent polls showing them solidly in the lead and potentially poised to end the Tories' 41-year reign in power on election day April 23.*
- April 10th: outlier Léger poll that shows the 2 party within 2 points:
  - ▶ *WR, dropped 6 points, unable to maintain its support.*
- April 12th: HQ poll show WR at 43, PC at 29
  - ▶ *Reference to instances where polls went wrong.*

# How were polls covered in Alberta

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- April 18: New poll shows WR at 42, PC at 36.
  - ▶ *“WR has been effective at getting their message out”; consolidating support.*
  - ▶ *Recent events may change the situation. Minority government possible.*
  - ▶ *“The two parties with a pollster’s chance of forming the next gvt”.*
- April 20th: WR at 41, PC at 31
  - ▶ *“With polls showing a significant possibility of a minority government,...*
  - ▶ *“If election polls bear out on election day”*
- April 21th: WR at 41, PC at 32
  - ▶ *Polls don’t give the portrait in Edmonton where 2 to 4 local contests.*



# How were the polls covered in Alberta

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The day before, the day after April 23, 2012

- **April 22: WR at 41, PC at 32**
  - ▶ *Pollster Think HQ say PC has momentum in the last days.*
  - ▶ *“Despite polls showing the strong likelihood of a WR victory”.*
- **April 24: Polls were bad:**
  - ▶ *“I guess the polls played jokes on all of us.” WR*
  - ▶ *“... inaccuracy of all the pre-election polls.”*
  - ▶ *“Redford cruise to poll defying victory.”*
  - ▶ *I need to know if any of these companies were using their polling as a leader instead of measurement”*
- **Voters change their mind:**
  - ▶ *“Voters appear to coalesce in the final days.”*
  - ▶ *“Many decisions were made at the last minute.”*

# How were the polls covered in Alberta

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- We were looking for confidence in polls that would bring journalists to speak about the future collapse of the Progressive Conservative party.
- Instead, we found...
  - ▶ In Alberta newspapers,...
    - *If early election polls are to be believed...(April 1st)*
    - *If the opinion polls are correct... (April 12)*
    - *If election polls bear out on election day...(April 20)*
  - ▶ In Toronto newspapers
    - *Alberta's Progressive Conservatives have stopped their election campaign freefall, but pollsters are divided over where voters stand. (April 11)*
    - *Nonetheless, both show Alison Redford's PCs either stabilized or closer to Danielle Smith's Wildrose after collapsing over the past two months.(April 11)*

# How were polls covered in Quebec?

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- August 20-21: 2 polls with PQ lead of 4-5 points, 1 poll with PLQ lead of 6 points.
  - ▶ *Reference to PQ leader: “The one who leads in the polls...”*
  - ▶ *Legault (leader of the 3rd party), a newcomer who was trailing in the polls,...*
- August 25: PQ at 33, PLQ at 27 (CAQ at 28)
  - ▶ *The PLQ leader ... at a moment when a CROP poll reminds that a majority of undecideds are allergic to instability, ...*
  - ▶ *If CAQ (3rd party) continues to rise in the polls, ... it may...*
  - ▶ *PLQ lost 11 points compared to last elections,...*

# How were polls covered in Quebec?

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- Continued...

- ▶ *Quebecquers made their choice: going to the polls but more divided than ever. No party will get support from the majority.*
- ▶ *The last Leger poll puts PQ at a hair's breadth of a majority*

- August 28: PQ 33 PLQ 26 CAQ 27 (evolution: 28-24-27)

- ▶ *CAQ (3rd party) is indeed the only party to see its support rise.*
- ▶ *In the field, the tide is in favor of CAQ.*
- ▶ *CAQ continues to rise...*

# How were polls covered in Quebec?

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## ■ August 29:

- ▶ *François Legault and Pauline Marois, “the two politicians who, according to polls, are the most likely to finish first next Tuesday,” ...*
- ▶ *The Prime minister... at a moment where a CROP poll estimates support for his party at 19% among Francophones”.*
- ▶ *“Despite polls who put his party 3rd in voting intentions,...*
- ▶ *“...the day when we published a poll showing that the battle will be between CAQ and PQ,...*
- ▶ *“all the polls say that she (PQ leader) is unable to go beyond the ceiling of 33% of support..”*
- ▶ *“He will go to his constituency, a sign that he feels threatened. Polls say...”*



# How were polls covered in Quebec?

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- August 30th In a constituency, ...
  - ▶ *One poll shows candidate1 3 points ahead of candidate2, another poll shows the reverse. Therefore it is statistical equality.*
- August 31: PQ 32, PLQ 26, CAQ 28.
  - ▶ *Polls tell us that we are most probably heading towards a minority government.*
  - ▶ *If we look at the 4 campaign polls, PQ is stable, PLQ decreased but stabilised, CAQ slowly increased but it has stopped rising.*
- September 1st:
  - ▶ *PQ sails towards victory, but it could be a minority government, if we rely on opinion polls.*
  - ▶ *PQ is still ahead but support for PQ did not change during the campaign while support for CAQ inflated.*



# How were polls covered in Quebec?

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## ■ September 1st (continued)

- ▶ *“His speech contrasts with the succession of polls showing that his party is 3rd in terms of support, with support particularly weak among Francophones”*
- ▶ *An appearance in a well known TV program and no pollster will be able to predict election results.*
- ▶ *The actual election is one of the closest, if not the closest, in modern Quebec history.*
  - *Poll-based scenarii.*
- ▶ *Polls offer the best measurement tool*
- ▶ *The publication of a poll showing that support for the different parties has stabilized provoked a realignment of the attacks....*

# How were polls covered in Quebec?

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Election day

## ■ September 4

- ▶ *Whatever polls say, the results of these elections are impossible to predict.*
- ▶ *5 scenarii: PQ minority with CAQ official opposition most probable.*
- ▶ *Even if... polls put him third, Jean Charest appeared confident...*
- ▶ *“Tomorrow, I think the winner will be democracy but the losers are going to be the pollsters (minister Gignac). Refers to undecided...”*
- ▶ *The polls published during the last days let believe that the race will be close.*
- ▶ *Support for PQ has not moved, either up or down.*

# How were polls covered in Quebec?

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The day after

## ■ September 5

- ▶ *1st surprise: collapse of CAQ*
- ▶ *2nd surprise: resilience of PLQ*
- ▶ *“thanks to the ballot-box bonus, defeat is a lot less stinging than what the polls predicted” ...*
- ▶ *“polls have again underestimated the PLQ vote, which has not collapsed in favor of CAQ”.*
- ▶ *Maybe shy to reveal their political option, PLQ supporters surprised the pollsters by their number.*
- ▶ *Liberals perform much better than what the polls predicted*
- ▶ *The strength of the Liberal party, which had the polls lie,...*
- ▶ *Far from collapsing as the polls and media predicted, the Liberal party...*

# How were polls covered in Quebec?

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- As in Alberta, we were looking for confidence in polls that would bring journalists to speak about the future collapse of the Quebec Liberal Party.
- We found:
  - ▶ *Much more references to polls than in Alberta*
  - ▶ *Misinterpretation of poll results (3rd vs 2nd within 1-2 points, in particular).*
    - *Stating the rise of a third party and the collapse of the Liberal party, where the polls were not that clear.*
  - ▶ *Caution at the end reminding that it is a close election.*

# Discussion

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- **What happened?**
  - ▶ *Alberta: may be some movement at the end but not sufficient to explain the level of error.*
  - ▶ *Quebec: underestimation of the Liberal party was foreseen and pollsters and journalists should have known better.*
- **Indices of the possibility that polls go wrong**
  - ▶ *High proportion of non disclosers/undecided.*
  - ▶ *Hostile climate: possibility of a spiral of silence (Bodor 2012)*



# Discussion

- Did interpretation of polls by the media contribute to poll error?
  - ▶ Maybe in Quebec
    - Where the likely possibility of an underestimation of the Liberal vote was not mentioned
    - Where the media were generally hostile to the Liberal party.
    - Where the minor differences between polls for CAQ were falsely interpreted as a major movement away from the Liberals.
  - ▶ Unlikely in Alberta,
    - Where it seems that journalists tended not to believe the polls.
    - Perhaps because polls were rather variable before and during the campaign.
  - ▶ In both cases, the political situation was that of a large proportion of the population wanting to change a party who had been in power for long, but not seeing a viable alternative.



# Conclusion

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How to prevent polls going wrong?

- There were a number of indices that could have brought journalists and experts to be even more cautious:
  - ▶ The political climate, hostility, presence of a close race.
    - The proportion of non-disclosers
  - ▶ The presence of a long-standing incumbent.
- The question is, can we figure what would be the indices that tell us in advance whether a party is likely to be underestimated in a given election?