Electoral Surveys in the 2000 Canadian Campaign; How Did They Really Fare?

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In conformity with the rules of the British parliamentary system, the Prime Minister of Canada resigned on October 21, 2000 and therefore the representative of the Queen in Canada, the governor general, called elections to be held on November 27, 2000. These elections have been called three years and a half after the June 1997 elections, this being contrary to a tradition of calling elections after at least four years of five-year mandates. Nor people, nor the media were enthusiastic about these elections and the winner seemed to be known in advance. Only one party, the Canadian Liberal party had chances to win. The other parties were two more recently founded regional parties -- the Canadian Alliance, a right wing party popular mostly in the western part of Canada and the Bloc Quebecois, a sovereigntist party with candidates only in Quebec -- and two traditional national parties, the Progressive Conservative party and the New Democratic Party, both with a few strongholds in various parts of the country.

In such a context, national figures for vote intentions do not mean that much since the capacity of parties to win a sufficient number of constituencies depends on their capacity to have concentrated votes in some key areas. Therefore, pollsters tend to use large samples, stratified by regions in order to be able to predict accurately the number of constituencies that may go to either party. Two issues were important in that matter : whether the Alliance would be able to win seats in Ontario, a Liberal stronghold, and whether the Bloc Quebecois would be able to keep its share of seats in Quebec.

This election also took place with, for the first time, a new law regulating the publication of polls in the media. Not only did the law stipulate on the methodological information that had to be present upon publication but it also stipulated that the media had to give the address where a detailed methodological report, including specified information, could be obtained.

In such a context, this paper will first address the issue of whether the law was obeyed and the related information provided. It will then present the analysis of the surveys conducted during

the campaign identifying how the individual surveys fared and the possible methodological reasons for the situation.

The Canadian 2000 election and the law

The Canadian law C-2 articles 326 states that the first person who transmits the results of an election survey must provide, together with the results, the name of the sponsor, the name of the person or organization who conducted the survey, the period during which the survey was conducted, the population of reference, the number of people who were contacted and, *if applicable,* the margin of error, the wording of the survey questions (for non broadcast presentation only) and the means by which a detailed report may be obtained. This report is required to give very detailed information like the sampling method, the size of the initial sample, the cooperation rate, the refusal rate, the ineligibility rate, the dates and time of day of the interviews, the method used to allocate non disclosers, weighting factors.

Throughout the campaign, information was gathered from the media and from the pollsters. After the campaign, we sent a letter to the media who sponsored the surveys advising them of the missing information and requesting that the information be provided. Most of these letters were not answered. One media told us that they would not provide the information since it was paid information. Many of them referred us to their pollster's web site but in many cases, all the information was not available on the sites. Table 1 presents the information that was finally made available from each firm.

The wording of the questions asked were generally provided and the way non-disclosers were dealt with (generally proportional allocation). The basis for adjustment was also provided by four firms out of eight. The firms rarely provided such information as their initial sample, their response, cooperation and refusal rates. Environics was undoubtedly the firm that provided the most detailed information. Surprisingly, it was the only firm that was not required to do so since its surveys were not sponsored by the media. It could also be noticed that the firms and the media adjusted their publication after the first week of the campaign in order to comply minimally with the law.

The National Campaign, the polls and the results

Twenty two polls were carried out at the national level from October 25 to November 25 with a mean of 2000 respondents, the minimum being 898 and the maximum 4102. Table 2 presents the weighted and raw estimates of vote intentions for the whole campaign and for the last week. It shows that vote intentions for the Liberals and Progressive conservative were rather well estimated while the estimates for the three other parties were not as good. More specifically, BQ vote is underestimated by almost 2 percentage points. For these three parties, the vote is rather concentrated, highly concentrated in Quebec in the case of BQ. The BQ voter intent will thus be dealt with only in the analyses for Quebec.

It is also possible to compare the final vote with the estimated evolution of the vote throughout the campaign. Figure 1. shows the series and the various estimates from survey firms for three mains parties, the Liberals, the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservative Party. It shows that a reasonable interpretation of the evolution of vote intentions is a decrease of almost five percent for the Liberals, a similar increase for the PC and no evolution for the Alliance. The forecast from the time-series overestimates vote intention for the PC by about one percentage point while the prediction is within the error margin for the two other parties.

The great majority of surveys were within the margin of error of the series to the notable exception of two pollsters, Environics and Zogby, both using a tracking poll methodology. In the case of Zogby, the average sample size is 932 while, in the case of Environics, it is 1711.

Errors in estimation of voter intent for the different parties are calculated as the difference between the estimation made by the firms and the estimated vote intention at the mid-point of the field period for each survey. Figure 1b. shows the distribution of errors for the Canadian Liberal Party by firm. It shows that Compas and Environics have the largest variance in error. However, only Environics' estimates seem to present a systematic bias in favor of the CLP. Figure 1c, which presents the corresponding figures for the estimation of vote intention for the Canadian Alliance shows again a larger variance for Environics and Compas but only Environics gets outside the margin of error. Finally, Figure 1d., which presents error of estimation for the Progressive conservative Party, does not show very systematic departure from an acceptable range of error in estimation.

Correlation analysis shows that no significant relation exists between the error in estimation and the sample size of the surveys, except for the PC estimation. Correlation between error in estimation for the Liberals and sample size is -.12 (p=.63); it is -.23 for the Alliance (p=.32) and .41 for the PC (p=.07) but in the latter case, it is .45 with a p of .047 when using Spearman'rho correlation.

The Quebec campaign, the polls and the results

A total of 20 polls were conducted during the campaign in Quebec, either polls that were conducted only in Quebec (n=5) or strata from national surveys. If we exclude a specific Leger poll with 3514 respondents, an average of 670 respondents were interviewed, an average of 990 for the Quebec only polls, and of 590 for the strata of Canadian polls. Table 3 presents the final vote and the estimates of vote intentions from the polls. It shows that, based on the surveys carried out during the last week of the campaign, the vote for the Liberal Party is seriously underestimated while the vote for the Canadian Alliance and for the Bloc Quebecois are overestimated on average. This situation is quite similar to what occurred during the Quebec provincial election of 1998 where the vote for the Quebec Liberal party was underestimated. At that time, observers wanted to attribute the bad estimation to a late campaign shift (Durand, Blais and Vachon, 2001). It is puzzling enough since, during the 1997 Canadian campaign, such a situation did not occur (Vachon, Durand and Blais, 1999).

How did the various surveys fare? Again, we may compare individual surveys to the evolution of vote intention as estimated by time-series analysis. Figure 2 and Figure 3 show the evolution of voter intent for the Liberal Party and the Bloc Québécois respectively. Figure 2. shows that Ipsos Reid, Environics and Compas, even when taking into account their reduced sample size (they constitute strata of Canadian polls) are usually far away from the estimate and outside their own margin of error. The same applies for the BQ series presented in Figure3.

Figures 3 and 4 show the distribution of the difference between the firms' estimates and the series for all the firms who conducted more than one survey. Environics tended to overestimate voter intent for the Liberals while Ipsos-Reid tended to underestimate it. Since in general voter intent for the Liberals was underestimated, we could think that Environics fared better but the

last Environics poll estimated voter intent for the Liberals at 36 percent, eight percent under the final vote. As for vote intentions for the Bloc Quebecois, again Environics and Ipsos Reid have the largest variability in estimates. Sondagem's two estimates are also quite apart while Léger and Ekos fare rather well. One may think that this situation reflects sample size. There are no significant correlation between error and sample size -- r=-.027 (p=.46) for CLP and .089 (p=.37) for BQ — nor with the square root of sample size -- r=,013 (p=.96) for CLP and r=,051 (p=.83) for BQ.

Conclusion

The 2000 Canadian election was the first with a new law that should have permitted to examine more closely the reasons for discrepancies between the polls and election results. It is undoubtedly a first step in the good direction. The wording of the questions is now usually available as well as the sample size, information on the allocation of non disclosers and on adjustment and weighting.

From the information available, is it possible to trace reasons for the discrepancies that have been presented, and particularly the bad estimates that seem to come from tracking polls? As in the preceding Canadian election, the firms from Quebec (Leger and Sondagem) seem to generally fare better. They differ in their response rates, ranging from 56% to 65%, while for the other firms, the same rates range from 10% to 40% at best due to general reliance on quotas with less callbacks and appointment taking. They also tend to adjust their data according to the language distribution of the population which is not the case for the other firms. Among the English Canadian firms, some seem to have quite stable and "accurate" estimates (in the sense that they did not depart from the estimates of other firms taken at the same time -- while others presented a lot of variability in their estimates and abnormal departures from other estimates. These firms tend to use a "tracking" methodology. Environics is one of these firms and it gave very precise information on the way it proceeded. Response rates are in the range of 24-28 % and it kept the samples from the previous days in the field when people were not available to answer. As for the other tracking polls (Zogby and Decima), it is very hard to know how they really proceeded. As well, the information for the other firms is scarce : In the case of Ipsos-Reid, we have only

the wording of questions and the final sample size. As for the reference population, some firms say that their sample is one of "decided voters", of "eligible voters" or of Canadians aged 18 years and older speaking French or English. The language spoken by interviewers can also play a role. In particular, it may be more difficult to recruit good interviewers speaking fluent French in Toronto or in New York.

As in the preceding Quebec election, there is a systematic underestimation of vote intention for the Liberal. In this respect, Leger and Ekos fared generally better than the other firms. It remains to be explained if it is a fortuitous even or not, and if not, the reasons for such a situation.

Media will most probably adjust to obey the law more systematically in the next election. This situation ought to be coupled with training of journalists so that they become competent in interpreting surveys and their methodology.

Table 1
Methodological information provided for the campaign surveys

	sample	ref. popul.	Initial N	rates	period	allocation of non disclosers	adjust& weight	wording
Ipsos Reid-Globe							x	x
Compas-Nat. Post						x		
Ekos- La Presse-Radio-Canada						x	x	x
Decima- Globe					x		x	x
Léger- J Montreal-TVA		x		x			x	x
Som- Gazette								
Sondagem- Le Devoir- Qc only	x	x		x		x		x
Environics*	x		x	x	x	x		x
Total(on 8)	**2**	**2**	**1**	**2?**	**2**	**4**	**3**	**6**

*Not published

Table 2
The National Campaign : Polls' results and the election

	Canadian Liberal Party (CLP)	**Canadian Alliance (CA)**	**Bloc Québécois (BQ)**	**Progressive Conservative (PC)**	**New Democratic Party (NDP)**
Election	**40.8**	**25.5**	**10.7**	**12.2**	**8.5**
Weighted. Estimate, last week (n=7 days)	40.7 (-.01)	26.2 (+.07)	8.9 (-1.8)	12.2 (0)	9.3 (+.08)
Surveys Last Week (n=8)	41.1 (+.03)	26.2 (+.07)	9.4 (-1.3)	12.0 (-.02)	8.9 (+.04)
Weighted estimate (n=42 days)	44.0	25.9	9.8	9.4	8.7
All surveys (n=22)	43.6	26.2	9.7	9.9	8.5

Table 3
The Quebec campaign : Polls' results and the election

	Canadian Liberal Party (CLP)	Canadian Alliance (CA)	Bloc Québécois (BQ)	Progressive Conservative (PC)	New Democratic Party + (NDP)
Election	**44.2**	**6.2**	**39.9**	**5.6**	**1.8**
Weighted. Estimate, last week (n=5 days)	40.8 (-3.4)	7.3 (+1.1)	41.0 (+1.1)	5.3 (-.03)	2.8 (+1.0)
Surveys Last Week (n=6)	40.0 (-4.2)	7.2 (+1.0)	41.8 (+1.9)	5.7(+0.1)	3.0 (+1.2)
Weighted estimate (n=39 days)	41.8	7.8	41.7	3.9	3.3
All surveys (n=20)	41.6	7.6	41.9	4.3	3.2

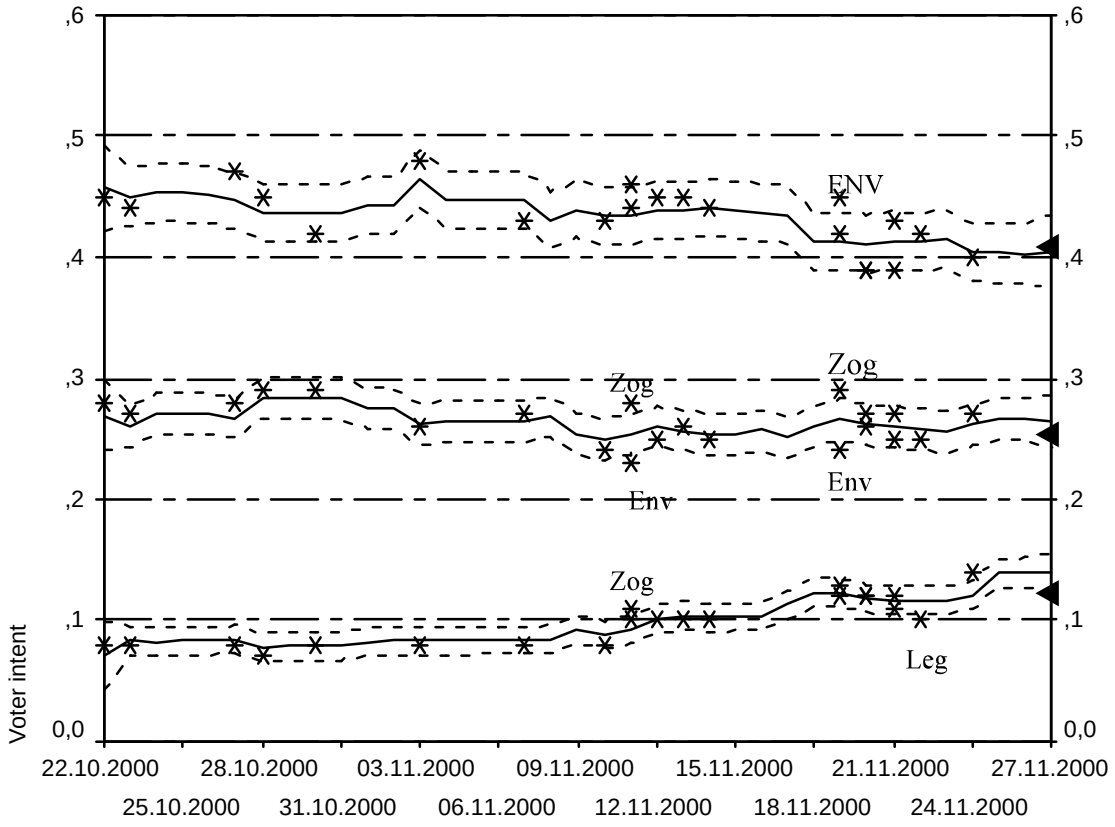

Figure 1. Series for CLP, CA & PC - Canada

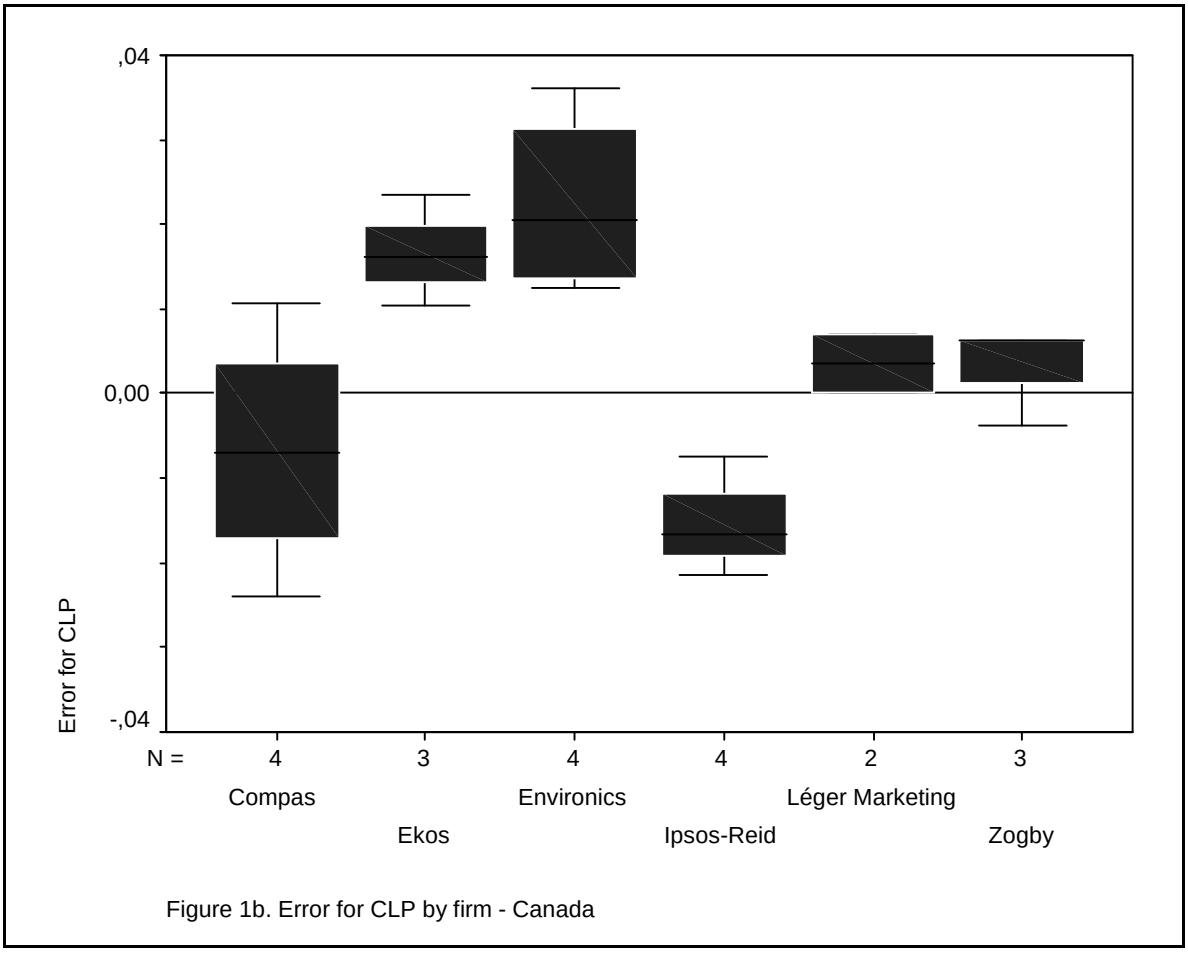

Figure 1b. Error for CLP by firm - Canada

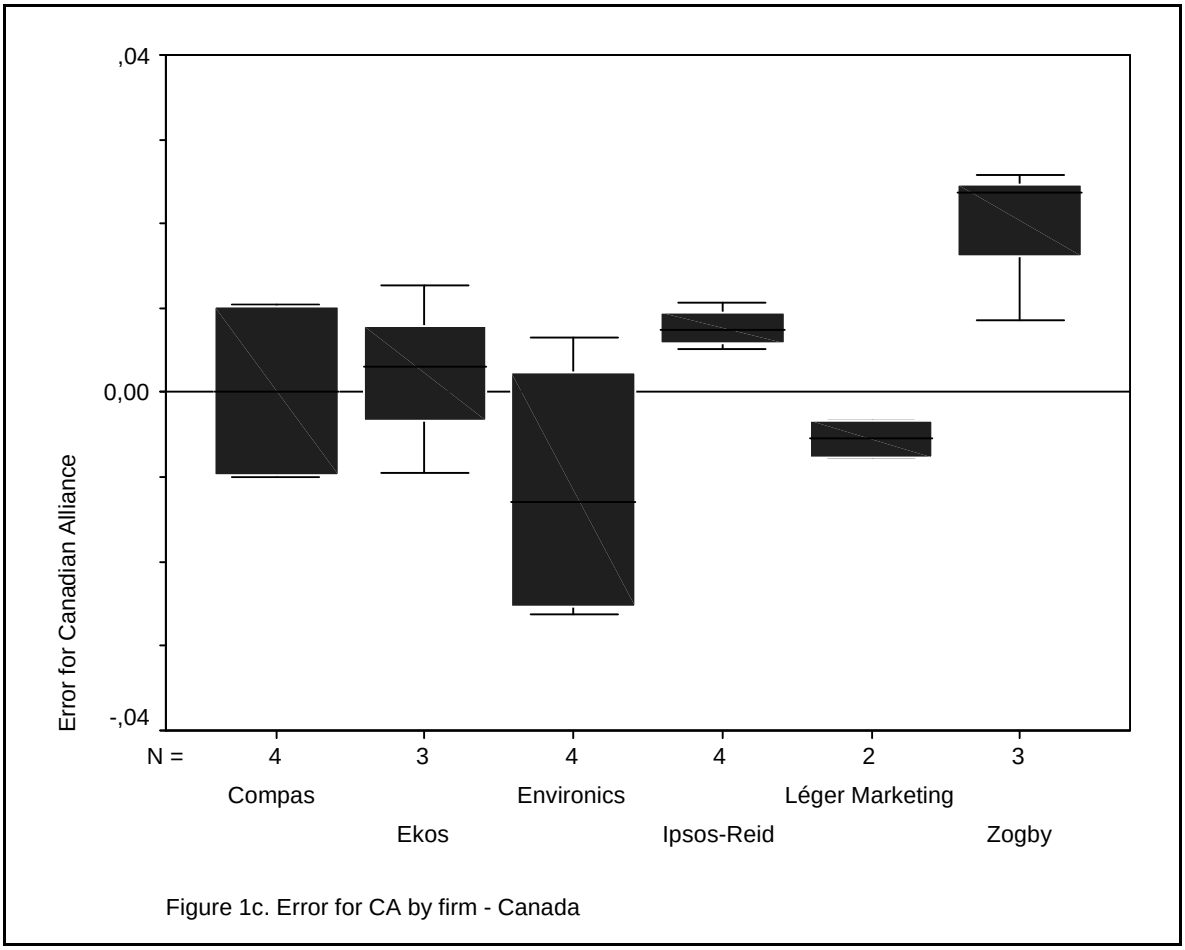

Figure 1c. Error for CA by firm - Canada

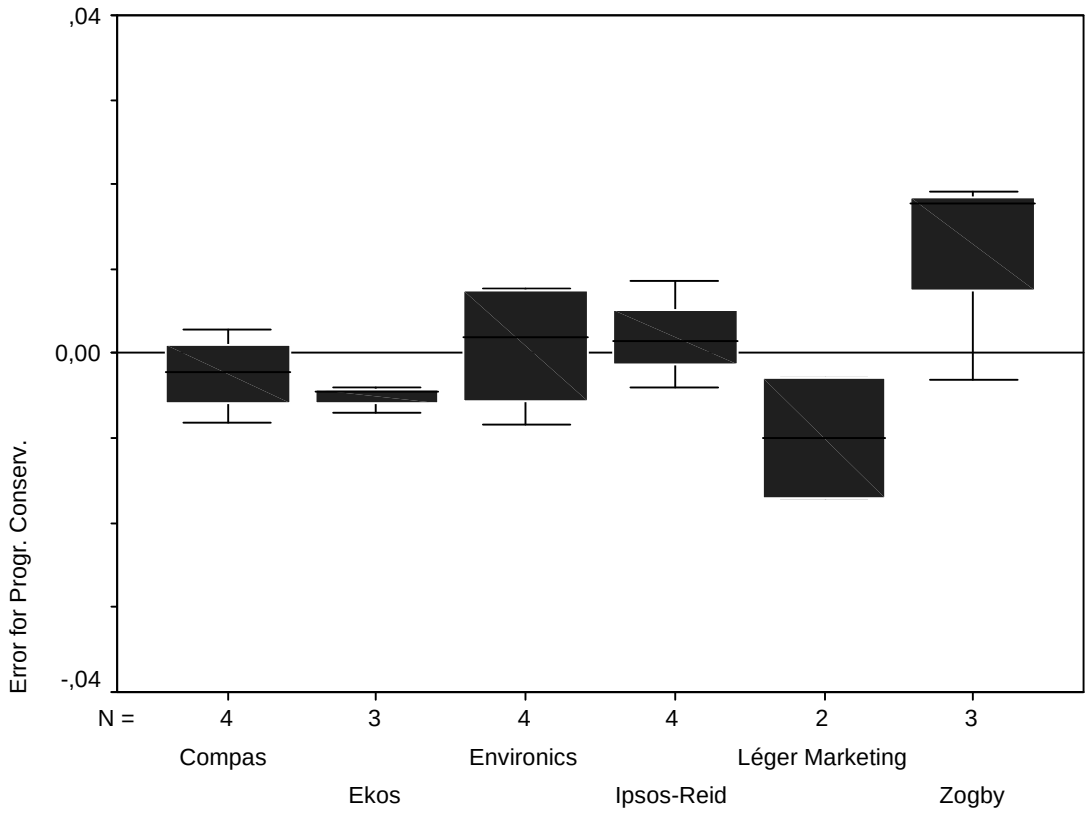

Figure 1d. Error for PC by firm - Canada

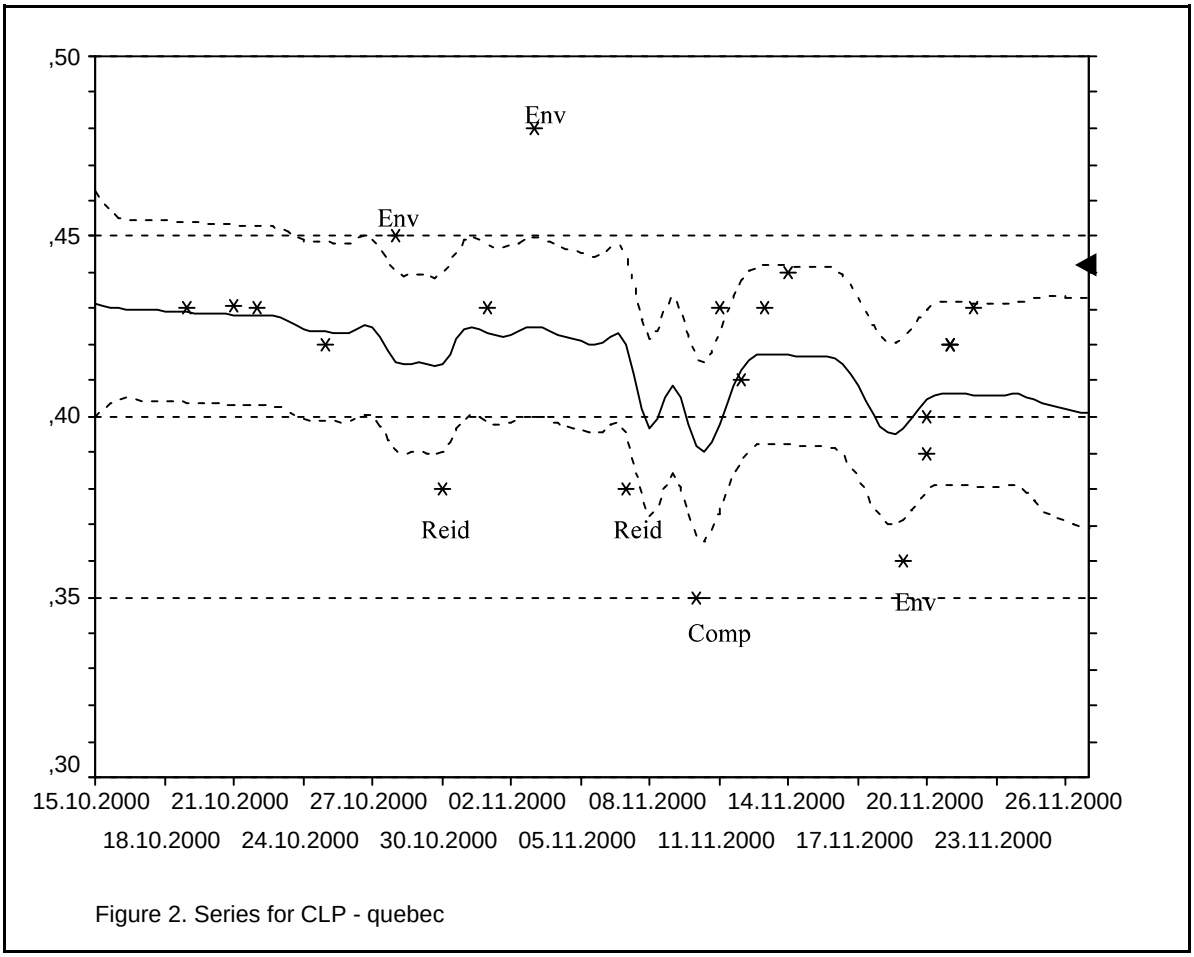

Figure 2. Series for CLP - quebec

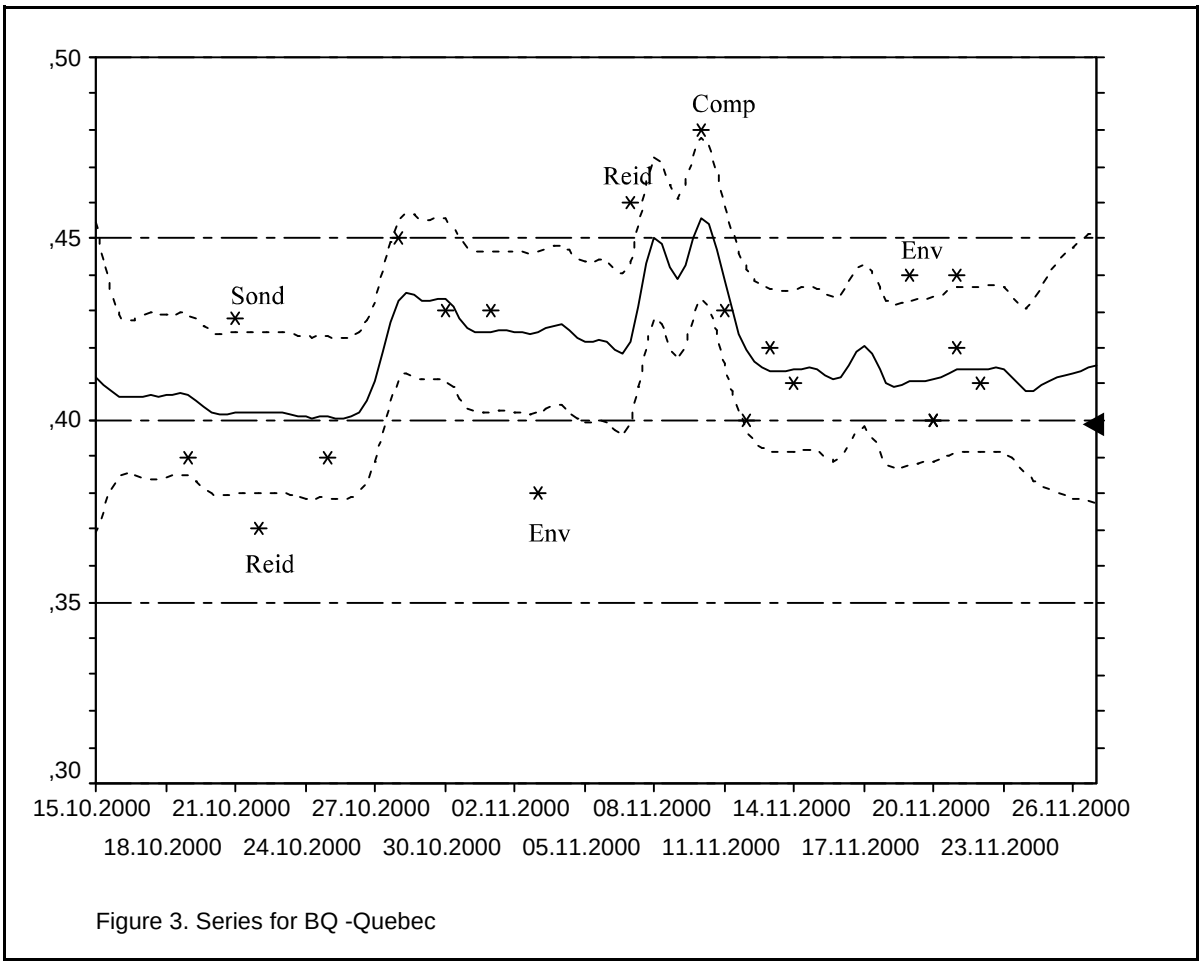

Figure 3. Series for BQ -Quebec

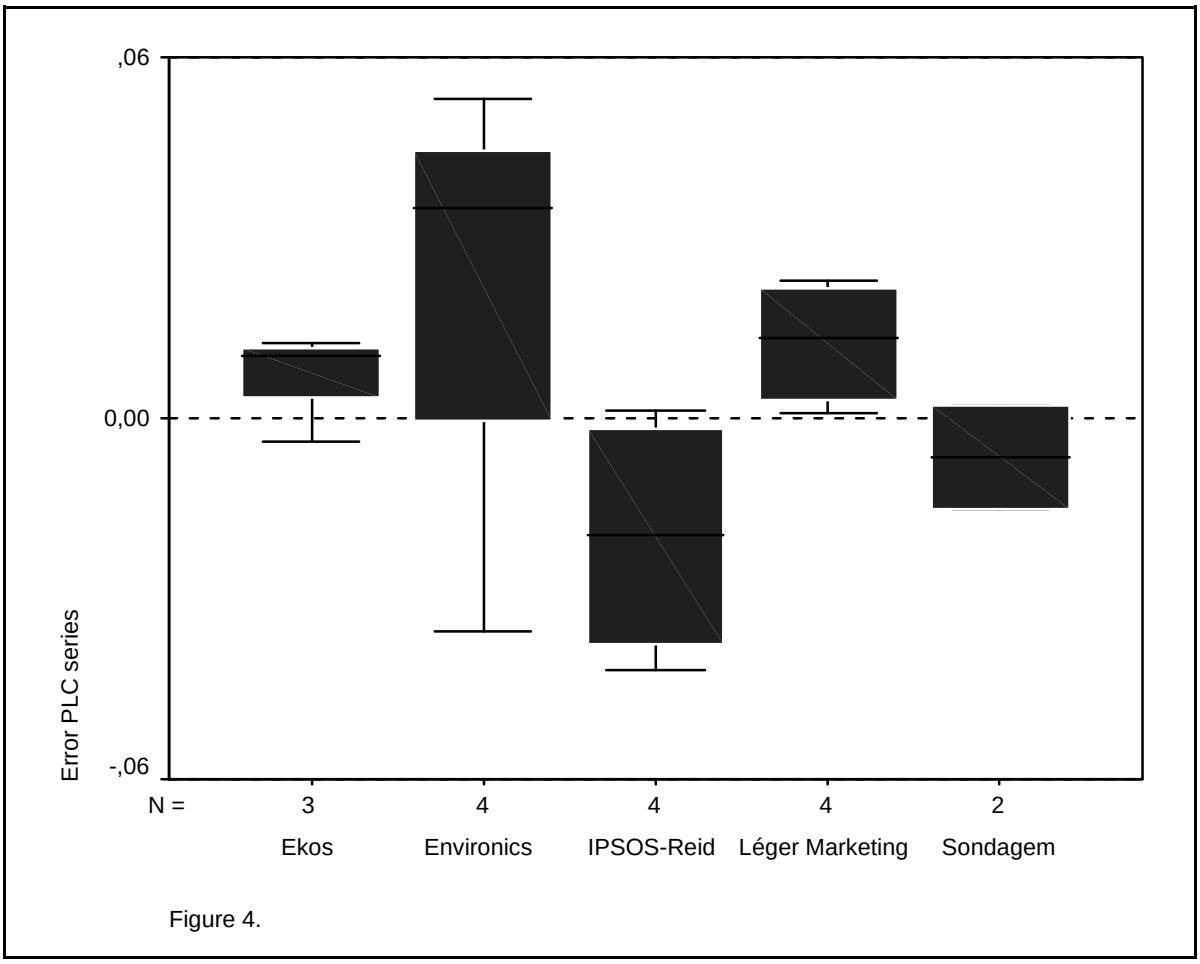
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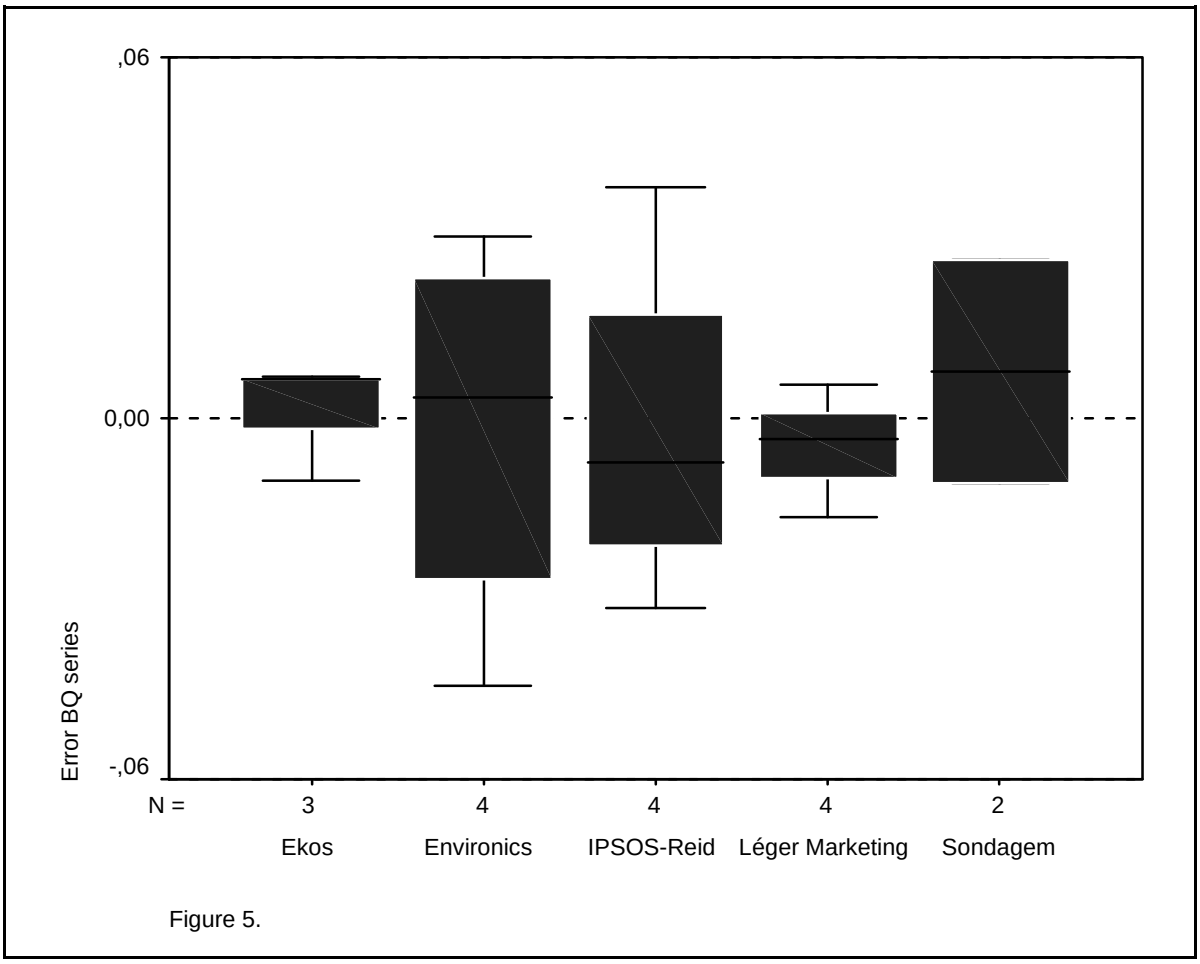
Figure 4.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