

Election pollsters modern prophets

Bruce Gates Believers swear by them. Cynics swear at them. And while politicians may publicly downplay their importance, they seldom ignore them. For whether they like it or not, opinion polls are now as much a part of our political culture as patronage and the secret ballot.

With a few well-chosen questions here and a random sampling there, pollsters have managed to develop the art of interviewing into a science that, when done properly, can yield astonishingly accurate results: In the past 21 federal elections in

themselves. "Government by Gallup" becomes a distinct possibility.

But Canadian politicians, by and large, are not as sensitive to national polls as American politicians are, explains Tom Atkinson, research associate with York's unique Institute for Behavioural Research:

"You have to remember that there is a major difference between Canada and the United States," he says. "The American voter gets to express himself in a number of different ways—he gets to vote on one ballot for the House of Representatives, on

difference in the polls right now will tend to get smaller as the election approaches, and the Conservatives will not do as poorly in terms of the number of seats as people expect. I don't think they're going to win or anything like that. I just don't think it is going to be the wipeout the polls would lead you to believe."

He says there are two reasons for this: "First of all, traditionally, the polls seem to under-represent the Conservatives, usually by three or four percentage points.

"The second reason is that the Liberals have this enormous strength in Quebec, and national polls will always place them in very good shape. So the Liberals are going to win their seats in Quebec just like they did in the last election. The Conservatives are going to be very strong out west, probably with the Liberals picking a little bit of strength out there. And in the final analysis, it's probably going to come down to southern Ontario—which is of course what everyone else is saying too."

Atkinson and the IBR were working on a major study of voters in the Metro Toronto area when the current election was called, so they went back to survey 650 of the respondents to

Atkinson also feels that as a result of a backlash against both of the traditional parties, the NDP will increase its popular support. "I would almost bet anything that nationally, and in Toronto, the NDP will get a higher proportion

how much you reduce the uncertainty, or how much you reduce the possible error as the numbers get bigger. So a statistical formula will tell you that it's 2.5 per cent or it's 5 per cent or it's 1.5 per cent, or

'Polls gave the press...the power of the source.'

Earl Shorris "Market Democracy" *Harper's*, November 1978

of the votes than they received the last time," he says.

Does this mean there will be either a Tory or Liberal minority?

"There are only two alternatives at this point," Atkinson predicts. "It's going to be either a minority Liberal or a majority Liberal. It is not going to be a minority Conservative government. I don't think there is any way that can happen."

Predictions like this often come from a random sampling of 1,000 or so Canadians which is usually accurate to within a few percentage points. Impossible? Not if your questions aren't misleading and you have a truly representative sample.

"If you went into a Toronto shopping centre and talked to people, that is not a random sample," Atkinson says. "They

something like that.

"So when a poll like the Gallup Poll comes along and tells you it's got a thousand people across Canada, that means it is going to give you a fairly good idea of what the national breakdown in the vote is going to be."

But he cautions against trying to use results from a national poll to predict local trends, since the margin of error goes up with a decrease in the number of people surveyed (Ontario, for example, may make up only 350 of the 1000 people in the sample, and therefore the chance for error is no longer 2.5 or 3 per cent but much greater.)

The most accurate type of sampling is the face-to-face interview, followed closely by telephone polls. Farther down the list are polls by mail, and at the bottom are those done by magazines whose sample is limited to their subscription lists.

"The ability of them to be accurate is dependent on how close they can come to getting a representative sample," Atkinson points out. "The people going into people's homes often use very stringent requirements for sampling." And that is why a face-to-face interview yields the best results.

In four days, we'll know how accurate the pollsters' predictions have been, for the only poll that really counts is on Feb. 18.

'Dogs know what to do with polls.'

Rt. Hon. John Diefenbaker after winning the 1957 election

which they've been conducted, the polls (in this case, Gallup) were right every time except for 1957, when they predicted a Liberal minority instead of the Tory minority that took office.

But who's to quarrel with 95 per cent accuracy? Certainly not the political parties, whose strategists and organizers religiously listen to these soothsayers of the public mood. As a result, political polling is rapidly becoming a new religion in this high-tech post-industrial world of ours. And the pollster is becoming its high priest. Among these modern prophets are names like Goldfarb, Gallup, Harris and Regenstreif. They and their disciples have built a strong following in the media, as major newspapers, magazines and networks regularly publish opinion samples on everything from the quality of life to who would make the best prime minister. This process has become a way for the media to create news, with the polls becoming media events in

another for the Senate and on a third for the President. And in certain states you have a number of propositions. So what you have is a lot more decisions being voiced by the voter.

"But in Canada, you get one vote. You're voting for your local representative, and you're voting for the political party you want to control parliament, and all in the same spot. Now one of the things that does, is it reduces the need for politicians to be sensitive to the polls."

Canadian politicians, he says, are more likely to be concerned about voting trends in their own ridings. In the current election campaign, the Tories have been publicly downplaying the fact they're far behind in the national polls—perhaps not so much because they are more interested in local results as because they hope the gap between them and the Liberals will narrow as election day approaches.

Predicts Atkinson: "One of the things that I think is going to happen for sure is that the

'There's been little effort to demystify the polling process.'

Murray Goldblatt, School of Journalism, Carleton, 1980

find out their attitude on the coming election.

"I don't want to go into too much detail, because the study hasn't been completed yet," he says, "but it seems to verify what the polls in general have shown, which is that in the Toronto area, there is a large swing away from the Conservatives."

have to be selected according to very stringent criteria."

Then the Law of Large Numbers takes over. "The larger the number of people you have, the better your estimate is going to be," he explains. "We're talking about only a very small proportion of the population. The statistics in it simply tell you

THANKS

The G.A.A. would like to thank all of the members of the York Community who have been so supportive of us in our recent labour dispute with the University Administration. As many of you know, your support added considerably to our strength and morale. We feel that we have won a major victory, and that it would not have been possible without your support. We thank you for it.

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