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## NEWS

Tue, June 8, 2004

## The politics of polling

[DOUG BEAZLEY, EDMONTON SUN](#)

In politics, it's all about confidence. The candidate who looks like a winner stands a good shot at winning - hit the hustings like you're expecting to get wasted, and you probably will be.

And nothing bursts a candidate's bubble faster than one bad poll. Doug Main remembers the feeling all too well.

"Back in '88, I was running as the Reform candidate in Edmonton-Strathcona," says Main, now national communications adviser for the federal Conservative campaign.

"A poll came out that put us right in the basement, something like 7% support. It turned out to be completely wrong - we had three times that at least. But the phones stopped ringing, the donations dried up. The volunteers started wondering whether it was worth it anymore.

"That's what polls do - they change the way a campaign looks. You get a poll that says you're miles ahead, you may get a little puffed and skip some of the campaigning slog work - and lose. You get a bad poll, you get discouraged - and lose."

In the 2004 election, polling is hitting the public faster and heavier than anyone can remember.

This election saw the debut of Canada's first-ever overnight rolling election poll from SES Research. Commissioned by the CPAC news network, the SES poll delivers fresh daily numbers on the parties' standings, the public's "appetite for change," and the approval ratings of the party leaders.

The experts say modern polling is pretty accurate, at least as far as voting intentions go. But pollsters and political scientists say Canadians may be approaching saturation point - it's getting harder to get them to answer the phone.

"The key challenge for legitimate researchers is that there's a lot of garbage polling going on out there," said Nikita James Nanos, head of SES Research.

"We call it 'sugging' - selling under the guise of research. Someone calls you up claiming to be doing public opinion research, and ends up trying to sell you carpeting.

"And then there are the political parties basically doing canvassing and calling it polling. It's part of the reason why the cost of polling has gone up."

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City senior Alice Tymchuk said she's had three calls from polling companies in as many weeks and questions about her religion - which she sees as irrelevant - left her wanting to hang up.

A staunch Conservative, she also wondered if she'd been the victim of a garbage poll - or Liberal canvassers.

"They started asking me all these questions that were really off the wall and then all of a sudden they just sort of cut me off," said Tymchuk. "Maybe I was too conservative. Maybe that's why they cut me off."

Eight years ago, said Nanos, a pollster might buy seven phone numbers from a research service and expect to get five people answering the call - maybe two of them willing to talk.

These days a pollster has to buy ten numbers to get the same result, a factor that drives up the cost of polling - and of campaigning, since modern political parties won't make a move without polling it first.

Party polls started showing up after the 1962 general election campaign, but only took off in the late 1980s when computer technology became sophisticated enough for auto-diallers and overnight response collation.

Since then, said York University political scientist Robert MacDermid, polling has played an ever-growing role in shaping public impressions of politics. Look at the election headlines from the past two weeks: at least half of them have been party leaders' reactions to their latest poll standings.

"Which brings up the whole question of whether people vote in reaction to polls," he said. "A small percentage of the population always votes strategically - to keep one candidate from winning, instead of in support of another candidate."

"Problem is, under our system we vote locally, not nationally. What the polls say is happening nationally might not be happening in your riding."

Gary Mauser of Simon Fraser University studies political marketing. He says the biggest impact of intensive election polling isn't on the public - it's on the politicians trying desperately to carve their political profiles into something voters will support.

"The 'bandwagon' effect - where people pile on to vote for whatever candidate looks to be winning - is a myth," he said. "But the polls do have an effect on the candidate's behaviour - Martin looks nervous, Gilles Duceppe looks emboldened - and that has an effect on their financial support."

"That image-shifting does contribute to public cynicism about politics, I think."



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