



Polls, Lewinsky aside, are the sex and cigars of politics

Polls to skulking backroomers like us are beautiful, shiny things: lavish attention and love

By TIM POWERS and WARREN KINSELLA

Kinsella: I just returned from a CBC Radio taping, and the question was: "Do polls really matter?"

My answer: "Do they matter? To political hacks like us? They matter only in the way that heroin matters to heroin addicts!" Clumsy attempt at humour, sure, but it's the truth, just the same: polls—to skulking backroomers like Powers and me—are beautiful, shiny things, upon which we lavish much attention and love. To us, they matter. To us, they count. To us, polls—overnights, tracking, attitudinal, dial groups, qualitative and quantitative stuff—are wonderful. We cannot get enough of them.

University professors, of course, sneer at polls. They think their points of view should matter more than the points of view of the lumpenproletariat.

We've all heard the criticisms: namely, that campaigns are utterly irrelevant to the lives of real people—you know, the folks who sneer, or head to the kitchen for a glass of milk, when a political spot is broadcast. If campaigns are designed to inform voters about the choices available to them—if they highlight differences, and if they motivate voters to express themselves on the basis of those differences—then campaigns do what they are supposed to do. Political campaigns may not be the prettiest of dialectical exercises, but they seem to meet the two basic requirements: information and motivation.



Where the boys are: Kinsella's advice to Conservatives and to Deputy Conservative Leader Peter MacKay, in particular, pictured, left, with incumbent Conservatives Lee Richardson and Jim Prentice, last week on the Hill, in this campaign: stop the Nervous Nellism. Focus on the long game. Fire the Nervous Nellies.

And polls, which measure a person's interest—or lack thereof—in a campaign and a campaign's issues and candidates are a real and useful way to measure public attitudes, and glean insights into what is important and what will motivate voters. Contrary to what the snobs say, they don't

pervert the public's points of view—they in fact reflect the public's point of view.

Push polls, and the like, are unethical and should be exposed and punished. But the types of quality work done by some of Canada's best polling agencies, like Ipsos Reid and Pollara, provide us with tremendous insight and knowledge. If public polling had been taking place in the last few days of the 2004 campaign, would Stephen Harper have reconsidered his decision to hang out in Alberta? Would the Tories have resisted the temptation to hit back with tough, critical ads of their own? Not on your life.

Now, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that political parties sometimes pay too much attention to polling data, of course.

Whenever a political party dips in the polls, for example, the media will call up anonymous Nervous Nellies to get a quote about the need for an immediate leadership convention. The media do that all the time—and, all the time, it is generally only the Conservative Party's Nervous Nellies who rise to the bait.

My advice in this campaign (and to Peter MacKay in particular): stop the Nervous Nellism. Focus on the long game. You Tories brought the most successful political machine in Western democracy to within one vote—a single vote!—of a humiliating defeat in the House of Commons in the spring of 2005. You forced the Martin Liberals into all sorts of tawdry, backroom deal-making to avoid an election they knew they would lose. And now—yet again—you are all inexplicably committing ritual political suicide in public. My advice: fire the Nervous Nellies, strap on a set of gonads, and fight like your lives depend on it, quit the kvetching in public. And don't let polling data be your only political compass.

That's all for me. I'm off to read Bricker and Wright's latest overnight's for CanWest!

Powers: Well, as Warren and I both have polling divisions in our companies, it is fair to say we think polling is a pretty valuable tool. However, I know better than to speak any further for him so I'll stop myself from doing just that.

Polls, Monica Lewinsky aside, are the sex and cigars of politics. Opinion surveys feed the politico's appetite for information. They serve as a mood barometer and an energy hypodermic. More importantly they gauge public sentiment. As Abraham

Lincoln said "Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. He who moulds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or decisions possible or impossible to execute."

During the last federal election in 2004 we saw just how addicted people were to public perspectives. The SES daily tracking survey was a huge hit with politicians, would-be Members of Parliament, media, political junkies, bloggers and damn it, even the public. Perhaps it is indicative of our reality show era that people want the soap operatic drama to unfold daily.

Good research leads to good strategy. It is vital to look at polls not as singular surveys but in a series over time so as to best determine patterns and glean the pertinent data as to why things are unfolding in a particular way. Individual polls are like one-night stands, either hot-wild romps or of the chew your arm off variety. You can now appreciate better why Conservatives say, "we don't comment on individual polls." We would be betraying our moral rectitude by doing otherwise.

Party volunteers who are vital to all campaigns, especially local ones, see polls as their human resources evaluation form. Apart from the predictable, "we are kicking the shit out of the opponent" propaganda that comes from the always-out-of-touch central office media, sponsored reports give validity to or deflate the hard working field workers' effort. I remember during the 1983 PC campaign how polls were used as motivational tools in the early days to help motivate volunteers to support that unmitigated disaster Kim Campbell. By the end of the campaign they were where they should have been—lining kitty litter boxes throughout the nation.

In a campaign a party's internal polls are like valuable trinkets where very few people get to hold any of them. Part of the reason for that is mystique—playing to that sex and power theme. Part of it is protection—loose lips sink ships. Part of it is an old school motivation technique—never tell anyone they are doing a good job until the job is done. Whatever the rationale internal polls are as mysterious to most people in politics as they are outside of them.

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