

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE 'DEAD HEAT'?

Public opinion says the pollsters blew it

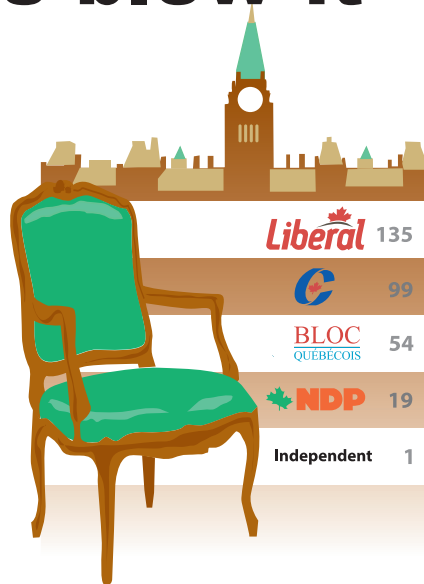
PETER JAWORSKI

If you based your election predictions on polling numbers preceding the election, you might be feeling a bit stupid right now. Day after day Canadians were assaulted with poll after poll—in the papers, on the news—right up till the eve of the vote. And still none of them seemed to call the outcome accurately.

The final tally of seats (135 for the Liberals, 99 for the Conservatives) and share of total vote (36.7 per cent and 29.6 per cent, respectively) differed dramatically from most polling predictions. Ipsos-Reid pegged Liberal support as high as 34 per cent (first on June 5 and then again just prior to the election), and as low as 31 per cent (June 20) during the campaign. The pollster had Tory support going from 30 per cent (June 5) to 32 per cent (June 20), and then down to 29 per cent just prior to the election. SES Research's daily tracking polling showed not a national consensus, but a volatile electorate that put the Tories in the lead from June 6-11 and from June 15-17, with the Grits leading on other days. Compas Inc., meanwhile, had Stephen Harper's Conservatives showing 34 per cent support, with Paul Martin's Liberals at 35 per cent—a statistical tie—as late as June 25.

Chalk it up to Canadians saying one thing and doing another. It happens all the time, which is why economists tend to prefer revealed preference over expressed preference—studying people's behaviour to see whether they put their money where their mouth is. But even with money on the line, the predictions didn't come out much better. A daily tradable market in electoral outcomes set up by a Toronto bond-trading firm, Shorcan Index, had, by the time the market closed for good, predicted a 31.9 per cent share of the vote for the Grits and 31.6 per cent for the Tories.

The only poll to have pegged the results exactly was the SES Research poll—but that was way back on June 1. The poll showed electoral intentions at 37 per cent



for the Liberals, 29 for the Conservatives. But, says Michael Marzolini, chairman of one-time Liberal polling firm Pollara Inc., "if you release 35 or 40 polls during the course of the campaign, there is going to be at least one that is going to be right."

Still, most pollsters stand by the accuracy of their craft. "We've done this now for 27 years, and in the last ten we've come within 1.8 per cent of the final outcome," said John Wright, senior vice-president of public affairs at Ipsos-Reid—interviewed before the election. Nikita Nanos, president of SES Research agrees that polling is reliable. "If you do it right, it's dead accurate," he says.

Doing it right means three fundamental things, says Nanos: a "fair and unbiased questionnaire," a "pure random sample," and ensuring that your final sample group is representative of the voting population. "If you have those three things," says Nanos, "then you're going to come out with a statistically accurate view of public opinion."

Also important is the quality of the call centre. Pollsters must be persistent with calling back numbers where there was no answer, and there has to be strict oversight of the callers' script. "You don't want interviewers changing the wording of

anything, or adding comments to any answer the respondent might give," says Marzolini. "It has to be very scientific and clinical in terms of collecting the data."

But if all the pollsters seem to agree on the epistemology, then how did they get it so wrong? The blame for this, some say, belongs squarely on the shoulders of the media, who spin stories, ignore substantive issues and engage in nebulous seat projections based on scant evidence. "The media use polls like a drunken man uses a lamppost—more for support than for any illumination," says Marzolini.

The trouble, he says, is that the media see polls as a horse race, and rarely try to get behind what's driving the numbers up or down. Dr. Steven Brown, director of the Laurier Institute for the Study of Public Opinion and Policy, agrees, adding that poll-watching has become the main event in Canadian elections. "It distracts voters from the substance of the choice they are being asked to make," says Brown.

One of the most visible examples of this sort of poll abuse was on display on June 22, when the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post* both ran poll results as the lead item on their front page. The headline in the *Globe*: "Liberals take six-point lead." In the *Post*: "Harper widens seat lead."

"Technically," says Nanos, "both of those stories were correct. This is where editorial judgments are made on what the headlines are." So, why the difference? According to Nanos and Marzolini, the trouble was that the *Post* used seat projections. "They have always been a voodoo, mystic type of guesswork," says Marzolini of seat projections. Nanos says his firm doesn't even attempt them.

Ultimately, says Marzolini, he wouldn't put much stock in pollsters, generally. "I'm not a big defender of my industry; I think some of them are nothing better than charlatans," he says. Many firms cut corners on things like sample sizes, he says, but the media are all too ready to lap up any poll on offer.

And that includes everyone. Our own *Western Standard/JMCK* poll, released on March 29, predicted a minority victory for Stephen Harper. But that was before the election was even officially called and four months before voting day. At least that's a better excuse than most. ■