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Search search Advanced Options

- ◊ SUBSCRIPTIONS
- ◊ ADVERTISING
- ◊ ABOUT HT
- ◊ CONTACT
- ◊ CAREERS
- PUBLIC SECTION

- Cover Stories
- Policy Briefings
- Letters
- Classifieds
- Vacation
- Links
- Home Page

MEMBERS SECTION

- Login
- Weekly PDFs
- Archives
- Surveys
- Lists
- FAQ

NEWS

- News Stories
- Heard on the Hill
- Legislative Column
- Hill Climbers
- Civil Circles

OPINIONS

- Editorial
- Op-eds
- Letters

COLUMNISTS

- Andrew Cardozo
- Richard Cl  roux
- Jenefer Curtis
- Aaron Freeman
- Philippe Gagnon
- Chantal H  bert
- David Jones
- Joe Jordan
- Warren Kinsella
- Tom Korski
- Brad Lavigne
- Don Lenihan
- Denis Massicotte
- Arthur Milnes
- Angelo Persichilli
- Tim Powers
- Ken Rubin
- Mike Storchaw
- Leslie Swartman
- James Travers

FEATURES

- Policy Briefings
- Spin Doctors
- Parliamentary Calendar

The Hill Times, September 22nd, 2008
NEWS STORY
 By Bea Vongdouangchanh

House seat projections 'voodoo science': pollsters

Political pollsters say it's difficult to get resources to do seat projections well.

Despite changes in technology causing challenges to polling methods, political public opinion surveys are still accurate snapshots of voters' intentions, say leading polling experts, who are also conflicted about producing "voodoo science" House seat projections.

"Unless you're able to carve the country up into 30 or 40 different regions and have separate regional results, [seat projections] can't possibly be accurate. They've never been accurate. Basically it's voodoo science," said Pollara pollster Michael Marzolini. "I think people should put a lot of faith in polls as a good approximation of where things are going during the campaign. In terms of seat projections, they shouldn't even bother looking at them. They're absolute nonsense."

Innovative Research Group pollster Greg Lyle told *The Hill Times* he's "not a big fan" of seat projections because each race "varies dramatically." He said most models use historical data to determine how many seats each party will win across the country which is not as accurate as actually polling for the data.

"I think you can project seats if you're willing to spend the money to build up the sample areas that are likely to be moved, that allow you to reflect what's going on now," Mr. Lyle said.

Making accurate Commons seat projections requires a large sample, close to 4,500 nationally. The problems lie in using numbers in surveys of 1,200 people with only 80 per cent of decided votes, said Mr. Marzolini, who also polls for the Liberal Party.

"I've never seen anybody's seat projections being accurate because you'll have the odd professor who'll look at a *Globe and Mail* survey or a *National Post* survey in the media and figure let's plug the numbers into whatever model he has on his spreadsheet without taking into account there's a huge rural-urban difference in the provinces," he told *The Hill Times* recently.

"The provinces themselves are different. A lot of the pollsters report Saskatchewan and Manitoba together because they're only four per cent of the population each and as a result it's very difficult to tell that maybe these provinces actually vote differently and they do."

Seat projections can be accurate if they're "carefully constructed" ideally "based on huge samples," but they are difficult to do, said Carleton University political science professor Scott Bennett, who specializes in quantitative research methods. "They are a bit like complex, expensive simulations if done well, but it is difficult to get the resources to do them well and to faithfully represent the complexities of a multi-party Parliamentary system," Prof. Bennett said.

After polling 2,848 decided voters between Sept. 13-15, Ekos Research Associates was the first firm to make seat projections during this campaign. It projected a majority government for the Conservatives, with 161 seats, 65 for the Liberals, 38 for the NDP and

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44 for the Bloc Québécois. Polling numbers by Ekos showed the Conservatives at 38 per cent, the Liberals at 23 per cent, the NDP at 19 per cent, the Greens at 11 per cent and the Bloc at nine per cent, with a margin of error of plus or minus 1.8 per cent.

Paul Adams, a former CBC reporter who teaches journalism at Carleton University and manages political polling for Ekos, defended seat projections. He told *The Hill Times* that while he believes that projecting seats was not as accurate as polls estimating public opinion, all pollsters do it implicitly if not explicitly. "When I was a journalist, I used to take a different view," he said. "My concern was, does it give people the wrong impression and would it somehow mislead people?"

Mr. Adams said his view has "evolved over time" and that seat projections are fair now because of new technologies that make it easy for people to see hypothetically where parties would end up in the House of Commons. "We're in a different age. We're in an age of transparency and openness. We're in an age where people don't have only one poll a week, where they have all kinds of polls and where they have the capacity to go to websites that can make projections," he said. "Furthermore, I think if you go back and see the comments that other pollsters have made, there isn't one who hasn't said something like, 'The Tories are getting near majority territory,' or 'They're short of majority territory.' That's an implicit projection. How do they know that? They know that because they're doing something they're not telling you. They're going through and running the numbers through a seat projection model."

Mr. Lyle said that one "seat projection" to watch is the polling by the Strategic Counsel in *The Globe and Mail*, which is measuring the "battlegrounds" in Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia. "They're doing 450 surveys a night in 45 ridings. Over 10 nights they have 100 interviews in each of those ridings. By the end of the campaign, they'll have 300 interviews in each of those ridings. Well that gets interesting," he said. "It still won't be perfect, because older interviews aren't going to be as good as newer interviews in predicting what's really going on in the seats, but it should give a basic ranking and you should be able to get a sense."

Wilfrid Laurier University political science professor Barry Kay, who produces seat projections through the university's Institute for the Study of Public Opinion, told *The Hill Times* recently that accurate polling results are more difficult to come by because of lower response rates. He said the number is now only 20 per cent and "getting worse because of the rise of cellphones."

Prof. Bennett said that while the one in five response rate is accurate, it doesn't necessarily mean a less accurate polling result. The Market Research and Intelligence Association, the polling industry's national association, is studying the issue, as well a variety of polling firms, Prof. Bennett said, but the studies out there show that the low response rates have had no major impact on survey outcomes. "These are very good studies that compare estimates of similar variables based on surveys with different response rates," he said. "Personally, I believe there is more work to be done, but it looks as though the most basic estimates have not been dramatically affected by low response rates."

Pollsters simply have to make more of an effort to reach people, Mr. Marzolini said. "You make call backs if somebody doesn't answer their phone. It may be because they're a shift worker or they work a lot, they're having a party, so you call them back later," he said, adding that Pollara calls households who don't answer their phone up to six times a day. When they do answer, the interviewer will work to get a completion rate, he said. "We even had a case when it was during the World Series where we provided scores during the course of the interview. It's a case of making people feel good about it."

Mr. Adams also noted the drop in people participating in telephone surveys, pointing out that 20 years ago, at least half of Canadians answered their phone. He agreed that the industry is still "getting pretty good results." Mr. Adams said the rise in cellphone-only users with no landlines is "a more serious issue" as it will become a growing trend and an even bigger issue in the near future. Only a few years ago, he said, many people had cellphones as a supplementary means of communication and pollsters could still reach them on their landlines.

"I don't think this is clearly established, but there may well be reason to think that cellphone-only users are systematically different than people with landlines. I mean, at the most obvious level, they skew younger. Then the question becomes are they different in any other respect?" he said. "It could be that cellphone-only folks are quite different politically but we can't just assume that. There's no reason to assume that, but there's reason to wonder."

This is one reason pollsters have moved to other methods, using technology such as internet panels and interactive voice recognition, Mr. Adams said. "Increasingly people are using internet panels and typically cellphone-only people seem to be internet-connected, so you can pick up some of them that way, but there's also some problems with internet polling too," he said, noting Ekos, which has started to use IVR, has moved to a "hybrid"

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system of phone and internet polling for the same survey. "All of which to say is that I think we are in a stage of methodological struggle with all these things."

The cellphone-only users tend to be 18 to 24-year-olds, Mr. Marzolini said, adding that some studies have shown those people are also similar to those in the same age group with landlines. He said the age group makes up six per cent of the electorate and are not likely to vote.

"The turnout is less than half of the over 55 group. We figure that we probably lose one and a quarter per cent in terms of the sample. That doesn't mean your poll is one-and-a-quarter points away from reality. It's just those people are not within the sample," he said, adding that conventional phone surveys are "the most accurate" for political polling. "I've spent about \$3-million building an online operation and I won't use it for political work because you have to get the people that you set out to get. That may mean making six phone calls and doing everything you can to get the response rate up.... It's very important to have a good preamble, to let people know how important a survey like this is and to do the interview."

Democracy Watch coordinator Duff Conacher criticized pollsters' accuracy and the media for "misleading" readers, viewers and listeners for not reporting the "undecided" vote. "Two elections ago, polls on the Friday before voting day were inaccurate, so how can pollsters now claim what's going to happen with undecided voters four weeks from now?" he said, noting that there have been approximately 150 polls since the 2006 election which have been "wasted space" in media reports.

"None of the parties have gone up or down more than three or five per cent in any of the surveys since the last election, but in none of those surveys, none of the media have report the percentage of undecided voters and that's negligence. It gives a false picture as to what's happening. Usually right up to about one week to an election vote, 20 to 25 per cent of people surveyed say they're undecided," Mr. Conacher said. "When you report a headline in a story that says here are the totals and you add them up to 100 when in fact, it only adds up to 75 per cent because 25 per cent said, 'I don't know, I haven't decided,' that's just misleading. That's blatant violation of the fundamental journalistic principle of accuracy. So the media should be required by law to report all numbers in a survey, and if they don't report them all, they can't report any one of them."

In response, Mr. Lyle said pollsters "don't pretend that polls are predictive" but rather "snapshots" of a particular time. "We're not saying that because today people have this attitude, they will have that attitude on election day," he said. "But that said, the people that are most likely to vote ... already have a pretty good sense of who they're going to vote for."

Prof. Bennett agreed that "ultimately, many undecideds will simply not vote," but said pollsters who lump the non-voters with those who actually decide on election day is "risky business" in close elections. "In the current federal election, for example, will crowding on the left inspire more people to turn out and vote, or will it lead to the parties on the left competing for the same set of left-oriented voters who always turnout?" he said. "The better analysts try to come up with ways of separating the non-voters from the late deciders who will likely vote. If this is done well, then one can come up with some pretty accurate predictions of overall percentages. The problem is that even those organizations that do sophisticated modeling of which undecided will likely vote do not release that kind of information in their basic press releases. So, for the member of the public looking at the undecided column, it is a bit of an unknown."

Mr. Adams acknowledged the mistakes of the 2004 election when many pollsters "got it wrong quite visibly" because they stopped polling and publishing the results too early. "There was actually a lot of movement in that election in the electorate in the last 48 hours," he said. "I think if you went to people like David Herle who was polling for the Liberals in the last election and was continuing to poll in the last two days, he'd say, 'Well yeah, what happened was you guys,' meaning the public pollsters, 'all stopped phoning too early. The result is you missed the turn.' What I'm saying is that was absolutely a mistake by polling companies. Because polling companies make mistakes like that, it's reasonable for members of the public to retain a degree of skepticism about polls because how are you supposed to know when I'm making a mistake?"

Although pollsters have these challenges, Mr. Adams said the proof is in the pudding when it comes to accuracy. "People have a tendency to notice when the polls are wrong ... [but] they're right much, much, much more often than they're wrong," he said.

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