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Polling in the 2011 Canadian federal election

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article Type: Commentary *Article History:* Received: *2011-05-19* Revised: *2011-06-15* Accepted: *2011-08-01* *Key Words:* Polling Canada Federal Election Social Media	This commentary discusses the role and importance of polling and opinion measurement in the 2011 Canadian federal election. The author examines how, in an era of tight message control and issue framing, polls and the media are an important bridge between politicians and Canadians. How the Liberal, Conservative and New Democratic parties respectively defined their ballot issues is described as an illustrative case. The author also discusses how polling brings an evidence-based perspective to the messaging and tone of campaigns and how social media is emerging as an influence on polling and campaign strategy.

L ove them or hate them, polls are part of our democratic environment. They give voice to Canadians, help ground media coverage and encourage politicians to acknowledge issues that voters think are important.

In an era of tight message control and issue framing, polls and the media are an important bridge between politicians and Canadians. The most recent 2011 Canadian federal election is a case in point. The published surveys identified issues Canadians wanted to hear about and grounded the media coverage.

Defining the ballot issue is usually one of the key objectives for all the main political contenders. For the Harper Conservatives, their desired ballot box issue related to economic and political stability. Touting their economic stewardship, on the first day of the election, Stephen Harper asked for a stable majority government in the face of a risky Liberal/NDP coalition supported by the separatist Bloc. The Ignatieff Liberals seemed to build their desired ballot box issue on the defeat of the government on the contempt of parliament motion — that the Conservatives had abused their parliamentary power, an action that put Canada's democracy at risk. Both approaches had negative undertones. In

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contrast, the Layton ballot question was comparatively more positive and focused on what the NDP would do to help Canadians.

The Nanos nightly tracking initiative for *CTV News* and the *Globe and Mail* during the campaign not only monitored trends in voter preferences and views of the federal party leaders but also the issues. Each night Nanos asked Canadians to share, unprompted, their number-one national issue of concern. The list was not topped by economic concerns or concerns about parliament but suggested that Canadians wanted to hear about healthcare. With the exception of week two of the campaign, healthcare dominated the issue mindshare of Canadians on every day in the campaign (see fig. 1).
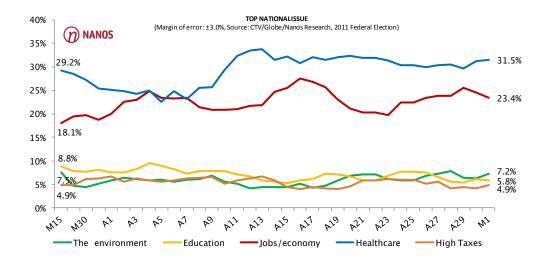

Figure 1: Nanos Issue Tracking

In this particular case, the realization that Canadians wanted to hear about healthcare helped signal the campaign teams to take up the issue. The NDP quickly engaged on healthcare, as did the Liberals, who even went as far as to run ads attacking the Conservatives on their healthcare positions.

The surprise of the campaign was Harper's promise of the six percent funding guarantee for healthcare. For a government more comfortable managing rather than leading on healthcare, the Harper announcement was a tacit acknowledgment that not speaking to an important issue of concern could be politically risky. For Harper, the announcement was likely part of a strategy to inoculate the Tory campaign against risks in the closing days of the campaign.

There are a number of key factors that drive voter behavior. These include the proximity that issues or party positions have to the day-to-day lives of Canadians and perceptions related to the risk of various political choices. Issue

tracking showed that concerns about the contempt of Parliament had little "top of mind" traction among voters. In essence, contempt of Parliament, although serious in terms of our democracy, could be perceived as a victimless crime that did not directly impact Canadians. Rather, both contempt of Parliament and the attacks on Stephen Harper for answering a fixed set of media questions are process issues. In fact, this was the case for many of the key Liberal attacks on the Conservatives: very process-oriented and seemingly distant from the everyday lives of Canadians. They did not significantly change voter preferences.

In terms of the polling, results clearly showed that proximity to the lives of Canada made issues more resonant. Issues such as healthcare, jobs and the economy were of a higher magnitude of importance as unprompted issues of concern. In a sense, the parties that spoke to either the risk of political options (the Conservatives) or practical issues of concern such as healthcare (the New Democrats) fared better in the 2011 election. If one thinks in terms of electoral resonance, those campaigns that were sensitive to the concerns of Canadians were more likely to connect with voters on some level.

Apart from the importance of electoral resonance, the gauging of campaign relevance is usually one of the key functions that the media play in an election. This is a key filtering function where the media observe the political environment and give Canadians cues as to which leaders merit attention. In essence, this filtering or agenda-setting role on the part of the media assists Canadians in optimizing how they spend their time and what they focus on during a campaign. Most Canadians do not read the detailed platforms or closely follow the hourly cut-and-thrust of the campaign — they tune in to learn what is happening and what or who merits further attention.

The most classic case in point is the impact of the federal leaders' debate. The impact usually cascades in two uneven waves. The first and immediate impact is among those Canadians who actually watch all or part of the debate. The second, lagging impact is among those Canadians whose views of the debates are shaped based on the media coverage in the days following the debate. For the second and larger impact on the electorate, the media plays a key role in helping Canadians assess the leaders.

Although there are many forces at play in terms of media coverage, the challenge is in effectively distilling the election for public consumption. Popular metaphors found in media narratives include the "horse race" or the "car crash." The bubble of the leaders' tours is another lens through which the media look to report and analyze the tour for Canadians.

In the 2011 election campaign, the daily tracking was very stable in the first ten days with only minor variations of support for the different federal parties. At the same time, media covering the Ignatieff Liberal tour noted positive turnouts in terms of crowds and strong daily personal performances on the

part of Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff. The anecdotal sense was that the Liberals were doing well, but this was in marked contrast to the polling numbers, which showed only marginal variations in support and a consistent advantage for the Conservatives.
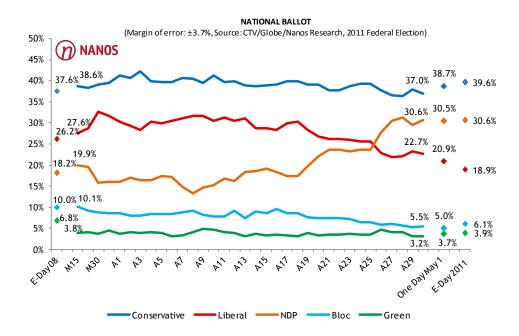

NATIONAL BALLOT
(Margin of error: ±3.7%, Source: CTV/Globe/Nanos Research, 2011 Federal Election)

Figure 2: National Ballot

   In this environment, the Nanos nightly tracking played a key grounding function for the analysis of reporters. They could recognize the performance of Ignatieff but also realize that it was not being converted into popular support. Had public polling data been absent, the media might have been more likely to portray the race as closer than it actually was. They would have based their reporting and analysis solely on what was observed on the Liberal tour, rather than on the broad evidentiary picture of what Canadians were thinking and feeling that polling can provide.

   For the communications professionals who help shape the strategies for the campaigns, publicly released polls play an important triangulation function in terms of checking a party's own internal polling and a communications management function. Polls showing a rise in support help bolster campaign morale and fundraising while poor polling results have the opposite negative effect. In most instances, the party "spinners" see public polling results as elements to manage.

Although some may bemoan the presence of polling in the 2011 federal election and its perceived impact on voters, the reality is that national and provincial polling statistics cannot easily be used to gauge the true impact of public opinion at the local riding level because of Canada's first-past-the-post electoral system. Hence, the influence of polling in terms of broad strategic voting is undermined. The reality is that the national popular support of a front-running party identified by a pollster is not a strong approximation of a possible majority or minority government because it is the distribution of supports that yields the seat outcomes. The most dramatic example is the 1989 provincial election in Newfoundland and Labrador where Liberal Clyde Wells won a majority of the seats in the provincial assembly but lost the popular vote. The lesson is to be very cautious in projecting percentage of popular vote into seats.

The major pollsters, including Nanos, accurately captured the NDP surge in Quebec in the second half of the campaign and the national popular support for the respective parties. Polling clearly made a positive contribution to the democratic process in terms of the issues that Canadians wanted to hear about from their leaders and also in helping to ground and contextualize the media analysis.

Polling will continue to play an important role for the media, our political actors, as well as Canadians in general. In the future, polling will add a new anchor-point role for the growing democratic dialogue in the blogosphere and the Twitterverse. As virtual democratic engagement grows, one can expect that solid public opinion research will not only ground our political leaders and media but also help contextualize the virtual political world.