

Sunday June 2, 2013

Why polls can't get it right anymore

By Jim Taylor

The credibility of opinion polling has taken a beating recently. Last April, polls forecast that the far-right Wildrose Party would win the Alberta election. This May, it predicted that the left-leaning NDP would win in B.C.

Both predictions were way off the mark.

Pundits have analyzed what went wrong, and how it can be fixed. I suggest that it can't be fixed, and it's going to get worse.

Consider elections. If every eligible voter – 100 per cent – cast a ballot, you would have a true opinion poll.

If only half of those eligible voters actually vote, you would still have a relatively accurate indication of the public's mood. We treat that result as if it represented the will of all the people, but it doesn't – only the will of those who actually made the effort to vote. And when voting drops to around 20 per cent, as in some municipal elections, the outcome can be clearly skewed by an organized minority.

Here's a rule – the smaller the sample, the less likely it is to reflect the whole.

Daniel Kahneman, in his best-selling book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, noted that the highest incidence of liver cancer in the U.S. is in a small rural county in Mississippi. You might reason, then, that liver cancer might have something to do with limited social services, minimal education, a redneck lifestyle, and a diet of catfish and fried possum.

And you'd be wrong! Because another equally small rural county in Mississippi happens to have the lowest rate of liver cancer in the U.S.

Therein lies the problem with political opinion polls. They try to extrapolate from a small sample to a larger trend. And because polling costs money, polling companies try to make the sample as small and as inexpensive as possible.

Polling practices

The only truly accurate poll would survey 100 per cent of the populace. But not even Statistics Canada can do that. So we accept lesser proportions, both in elections and in polling samples.

How small can you go? The typical sample size for a Gallup poll, apparently, is 1,000 randomly chosen adults. That will yield a margin of error of plus or minus four percentage points. Larger sample groups rarely increase the accuracy by much more than a percentage point.

The usual caveat, "19 times out of 20," is an admission that with very small samples, slight variations can seriously skew the results. The 20th survey could be as out-of-sync as the cancer figures in those two Mississippi counties.

Ideally, polling organizations can weed out surveys that don't fall within accepted variances. That's why they ask personal questions about your age, sex, income, and education. A poll should correspond reasonably accurately with known demographic data. If the poll is overloaded with a single demographic – such as women, youth, or university professors -- it's not considered reliable.

Making the census meaningless

Tragically, Canada no longer has a reliable demographic base to measure results against. Because Stephen Harper – who values ideology over research -- cancelled the mandatory long-form census. The mandatory form

asked questions that might – just might – have invaded some people’s sense of privacy. But it also ensured that no minorities – of age, gender, origin, or religion – got overlooked

Yes, Harper sent out more census forms than ever before. Yes, he got more responses sent back in. But these are now self-selecting respondents.

Self-selection introduces a host of potential distortions. Minority groups – especially ethnic and aboriginal ones – have learned to keep their heads down, to avoid drawing attention to themselves. They’re less willing to provide information than the more self-confident mainstream population. Inevitably, they’re under-represented.

Also, psychologists have run thousands of experiments to determine the emotions that motivate people. Fear of loss – psychologists call it “risk aversion” – is about five times stronger a motivation than hope of gain. And both are far stronger than complacency.

So people with an axe to grind or a grudge to settle are far more likely to respond to self-selecting surveys than people who are content with the status quo. By their eagerness to have their views included, they over-represent themselves.

No base for comparison

As long as we had reliable national census figures, polling organizations could compare their respondents against a dependable base. Did results come from a disproportionate number of elderly persons? Unemployed persons? Immigrants? Most surveys include a few questions about respondents’ age, income, sex, etc. They enable the polling organization to determine how genuinely representative this particular sample is.

If it fails to measure up, they can reject the results, or supplement them, or weight them.

That is, they could. But now they can’t. They now lack an unbiased base against which to evaluate the validity of their surveys.

That’s why I believe political polling will become increasingly inaccurate.

By making the long-form census voluntary, Harper made it useless.

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YOUR TURN

Writers who used to be editors aren’t supposed to let mistakes slip through. But I did, last week. My title said “Weighlessness” not Weightlessness.” Christa Bedwin wrote that she preferred the faulty version to what it should have been.

Ray Shaver noted, “The interesting part of the gravity story is that physicists are still attempting to determine the gravity factor, i.e., what causes gravity.”

Isobel McGregor wrote, “As a sporadically active ‘elder’ this encourages me to be more consistent with my exercising endeavors.”

And Isobel Gibson coined one of the best puns of the year, when she related my fall to earth (also Chris Hadfield’s) to “Tillich talked about God as ‘the ground of our being’. This week’s musings could be taken as seeing gravity as ‘the ground of our being’ in another sense.

“Do you suppose we disregard God in the same way -- and for the same reason -- that we disregard gravity? We hardly notice it until it’s gone -- and maybe we really notice when it comes (roaring) back!”

Rachel Prichard responded to Judyth Mermelstein's letter about Internet privacy (or the absence of it) these days, by sending me a link about cell phone use, which I will pass on:

<http://m.facebook.com/l.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DDN2vARzvWxwY&h=SAQERuBzw&s=1>

Frieda Hogg also picked up on a theme from a previous column. In his letter, Steve Roney had said that for Catholics, Christ is truly present in the elements of Mass. Frieda replied that she remembered "a book by Rudy Wiebe that I read quite some time ago of the accomplishments and struggles of the Mennonites. During the Inquisition a Mennonite woman went to her death declaring 'God is not baked!'"

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at the address above. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca. Similarly, you can un-subscribe at sharpedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca.

You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
