**Election polls: Can they be improved?**

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Love them or hate them, Canadians are about to be bombarded with federal election polls on a scale we have never before seen.   
  
Already in 2015, nearly two dozen public opinion surveys have been released measuring the ups and downs of the Conservatives, New Democrats and Liberals - and there's lots more coming.   
Over the next four months leading up to the Oct. 29 election, private polling companies are expected to conduct another 25 to 30 surveys forecasting the fates of Stephen Harper, Tom Mulcair and Justin Trudeau.   
  
That means voters had better get used to seeing more headlines like these that appeared in news outlets in the past month alone:   
  
"Harper in 'sweet spot' ahead of election, poll shows"; "Mulcair's New Democrats surging, poll finds"; "Liberals losing steam as election approaches, polls suggest." Confusing? You bet!   
  
Indeed, opinion surveys in recent years have become so controversial - and sometimes so spectacularly wrong in forecasting election winners - that critics are demanding a ban on polls during official campaign periods, more transparency of the results and better reporting by the media.   
  
Voters also want answers to a slew of serious questions: What's the purpose of polls if they aren't scientific? How can polls be accurate if as few as 1 to 2 per cent of those surveyed respond to pollsters' questions? Do polls unduly influence voters? Why does the media take polls so seriously? Is there too much open warfare between polling firms?   
  
At last, though, a small measure of sanity may be coming to election polls with the formation of a national association that hopes to improve the overall quality of polling in Canada.   
  
The Canadian Association of Public Opinion Research, launched with little notice earlier this month, is a broad group of polling company executives, academics and media representatives, that seeks to establish guidelines on accountability, transparency and professionalism for the industry.   
  
It's a brave attempt to impose some self-regulation, by some but not all of the leading players at least, to an industry whose credibility has been largely destroyed by quick-and-dirty pollsters who conduct surveys on the cheap, whose results are suspect and who receive the same - or more - media coverage than polls from more established, reputable firms.   
  
Today, in an effort to drive down costs, pollsters use robocalls or online forums to conduct their surveys. Accuracy for such polls is often suspect. At the same time, response rates have plunged to historic lows because people are fed up with picking up their phone only to hear a computer spew out a message about polls, window washers or a cruise they have won.   
  
The result is that some pollsters are spitting out highly dubious findings without making public their entire raw data.   
  
At the same time, the media often grabs these polls and focuses too heavily on the horse-race aspect of the campaign rather than on substantive policy and leadership issues.   
  
Darrell Bricker, chair of the group and CEO of Ipsos Global Public Affairs, says the move to bring peer oversight to the industry is good for the practice of public opinion in Canada, for the media and for the public.   
  
Bricker, who stresses that polls actually get it right much more often than they get it wrong, said in an interview the group will promote best practices in conducting and interpreting surveys and to advocate for high ethical standards for polls.   
  
Scott Matthews, a political scientist at Memorial University and director of the Canadian Opinion Research Archive at Queen's University, says the association is a step in the right direction when it comes to the conduct of pollsters.   
  
Matthews, who is a board member of the new group, is part of a research program looking into how voters use polling information as they make their voting decisions.   
  
Early research shows polls play a huge role in how newspapers and television cover elections, influencing the amount to time and space journalists give to parties on the rise or in decline.   
  
But the actual influence of polls on voters "is fairly minimal," he says. Instead, it is things like party partisanship and family traditions that are more likely to impact voters' choices.   
  
Research into polls and the industry's own fledgling attempt to govern itself are healthy steps aimed at improving the quality of the polls in coming years.   
  
But these efforts are happening too late to affect the endless stream of polls that we will see during the 2015 election. That's bad news for political leaders, the media - and all voters.   
  
Bob Hepburn's column appears Thursday. bhepburn@thestar.ca   
  
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