**Get picky with polls.** Craig Worden. National Post
09-21-2015
Section: Issues & Ideas

With every election, an increasing number of polls dominate the headlines, distracting public attention farther from the substantive issues with excited talk about the horse race. And yet, every campaign also sees articles trotting out the "polling industry in crisis" media narrative of recent years. With a notable dose of schadenfreude, these articles dwell on the so-called election polling failures in Alberta in 2008 and B.C. in 2013, while misrepresenting the challenges facing the research industry. Two such pieces have already been published this election cycle.

As a public opinion researcher at Pollara Strategic Insights, a leading Canadian research firm, I am frustrated by these articles. They ignore our industry's numerous successes, such as the more recent examples of Ontario in 2014 and Alberta in 2015. In a glaring omission, they also overlook party pollsters, who are highly respected for their spot-on voter analyses and forecasts - based upon more in-depth and methodologically-sound surveys than the cheap five-question polls that litter today's election coverage.
As a rebuttal, I could discuss Pollara's lengthy track record of accurate election calls for political parties and media partners. I could explain the strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and ultimate reliability of properlyconducted online and live-person telephone surveys. And, I could provide ample evidence of the reliability of our science and techniques by discussing studies from institutions such as Pew.

I could also demonstrate the inaccuracy of blanket statements that question the reliability and future of our industry. Given the low engagement, low turnout levels, and lastminute decision-making of today's voters, election polling is likely the most difficult thing we do. And, our respected pollsters do it very well. But it's also a tiny fraction of what we do. On a daily basis, our industry delivers reliable research, insights, and advice to hundreds of clients across every sector.

However, rebuttals will not retire the "crisis" narrative. Only a fundamental change in how the media and poll purveyors frame, use, and report on election polls will accomplish that. I have three suggestions that I hope will get us closer to that change:

First, both the media and pollsters need to change their expectations and framing of election polls. Both parties need to recognize the necessity of nuance in election polling analysis. We analyse people, not numbers. Polls are snapshots, but the real people behind the numbers are not static. Thus, we have to stop scoring the final polls purely on the horse race numbers. The final poll may not be a prediction. In a tight race, high vote choice or turnout uncertainty may lead us to caution how results could differ at the ballot box. That's not chickening out. That is a wise analysis of electoral dynamics. Not taking such nuances into account when judging pollsters is unfair. Not providing it, as a pollster, is a failure.

Second, the media need to demand longer, more in-depth surveys, so that they can provide insights into the driving undercurrents of the campaign rather than just reporting the horse race. Such polls might not be free, but you get what you pay for.

Finally, the media need to become more knowledgeable about polling as well as more discerning and demanding of poll suppliers. All polls and pollsters are not created equal. Survey design, sample size, methodology, weighting, sponsorship and pollster credentials must be fully investigated, and quality standards must be met before publication.

Recent years have seen an evergrowing crowd of free polls knocking at the media's door. Some polls are from respected firms using reliable methodologies. Increasingly, they are not. It is incumbent upon the media to be responsible gatekeepers. Let all the polls in, and they'll trash your credibility - and the research industry's reputation. Even worse, they'll trash Canada's democracy.

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**Citation for your reference:**

Worden, Craig. "Get picky with polls." *National Post*. 21 Sep. 2015: A10. *eLibrary*. Web. 19 Oct. 2015.