**Jeremy Klaszus . “We don't need more polls”. *Calgary Herald,* April 30, 2012.**

After the Conservatives' surprise thrashing of the Wildrose last Monday, there has been plenty of fretting about how to accurately predict the future - at least when it comes to election results.

The dubious premise of this discussion is that it's important to know who is "ahead" and who is "be-hind" throughout a campaign. It's not enough to let voters make up their minds based on knowledge of candidates and par-ties, and let things play out as they will. Voters should know who the serious contenders are, who is the so- called front-runner, how far ahead she is and so on. Voters need to know how they are likely to behave on election day, and why. (Presumably, voters wouldn't know what to do with themselves without this speculation.)
Election 2012 illustrated the folly of dwelling on the question of who will win.

We were told Wildrose was "poised" for victory, which seemed credible until the Alberta electorate brazenly broke from the pre- written script and did indeed elect a sweeping majority - for the wrong party.

Yet even now, the horse race remains sacred. Writing in the Herald last week, pollster Marc Henry admit-ted that his industry did a poor job in calling the winner, but suggested that media organizations should in-vest in more polling during the final days of campaigns. This would help them know who's in front and who's behind in the crucial home stretch, and detect any last-minute changes in public opinion.

"It's expensive, but it's worth it," wrote Henry.

This is a terrible idea. More polling makes sense for pollsters, obviously. It perhaps makes sense for political strategists, who want to know where their party or candidate stands. It makes perverse sense for journalists, as polls provide an easy story, helping shape dramatic campaign narratives that are impossible to verify (that of the surging Wildrose and hapless Conservatives, for example).

But how does more polling make sense for voters, exactly? Where is the public value in telling the electorate which way it is leaning and which leader happens to be winning the image game (who is most "likable")?

If there's a strong argument for the value of public opinion polls during election campaigns, I haven't heard it. Like the contrived campaign photo op, which is seemingly irresistible to the media (and is too often treated as an authentic event), polls have become unhealthy distractions.

They are a bad addiction.

It's wiser - and more valuable to voters, I'd argue - for news organizations to investigate the past than guess the future. This requires resources. Digging through archives and doing research to illuminate a candidate's or party's history is relatively inexpensive. It takes time.

Herein lies the seductive appeal of horse race journalism: it requires little effort or knowledge, as the American media critic Jay Rosen has noted.

"Who's-gonna-win is portable, reusable from cycle to cycle, and easily learned by newcomers to the press pack," Rosen has written.

"It 'works' regardless of who the candidates are, or where the nation is in historical time. No expertise is actually needed to operate it. In that sense, it is economical."

But as voters, we benefit more when we have a sense of who our candidates and parties are, and how they have changed over the years. Knowledge of this trajectory (every person and organization has one) is far more valuable than horse race speculation. If you know what a person has done or said in the past, you have a pretty clear idea of what they are likely to do in the future.

If anything, news organizations should devote more resources to this kind of background research, rather than polls. Doing so would give voters more information they can use to make the best possible decisions on election day.

And what about that nagging question of which party will win? It's not as if that information gets lost if people aren't speculating about it. We all learn the answer, with certainty, on election day.

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