“Political polling and the bandwagon effect”.*Toronto Sun,* October 25th, 2015

We now find ourselves “between elections".

Our own national event happened inside of 78 days: a long time for Canada, but mercifully short compared to the two-and-a-half-year extravaganza held by our neighbours to the south.

One of the key areas of concern, in both countries, but especially in the U.S., is attempts made to sway voters and scare off others in order to control the result.

Stories of intimidation, hoax robo-calls, falsified addresses of polling stations, heavy police presence and the unreasonable curtailing of polling station hours radiate from the U.S. with grim regularity.

Black and Latino people, it seems, are a great threat to the establishment, and rather than seek to embrace their voices, some politicians play voter-suppression games, ostensibly in the name of democracy and preventing electoral fraud.

Stories of electoral vandalism in Canada are rarer, but still happen.

In both countries, this type of undue influence over the democratic process is generally viewed with scorn.

Indeed, electoral fraud by individual voters is far less significant than electoral fraud perpetrated by public officials, as the U.S. experience has clearly shown.

But there is, in my view, another form of improper voter influence that seems to slip past the radar of public outrage: polls.

Polls have been used for decades as a means of reflecting voter sentiment, but to what end?

What effect does a poll have during an election other than to manipulate the undecided voter?

Statistically a poll need only sample a group of 1,000 to 1,500 people to deliver an accurate summary of the feelings of millions of potential voters within a defined margin of error.

At least that’s what the pollsters tell us and, while most got the popular vote in our just-completed federal election right, that certainly hasn’t been the case with other elections in the recent past.

Accurate or inaccurate, when a poll is released, it is done under the guise of informing the public, and it gives the media something to chew on.

But no poll can call itself a truly neutral report.

I see it as a provocation that often pushes undecided voters into specific actions based not on their personal political convictions, but on the innate desire to be part of a group, often the winning group.

Few want to back a loser and even fewer want to be seen as backing a loser.

That is why, on election day, we zealously guard the privacy of the polling booth and the secrecy of the ballot box.

Every voter should be free to choose without pressure to back the eventual winners and losers.

To me, polls are pressure. They reinforce the bandwagon effect.

Their implicit message favours the political party found to be in the lead: “If you cannot make up your own mind, then join us, we’re winning.”

Besides, who pays for polls?

Often those with a vested interest in the outcome of an election, or how public policy will be formed on an issue, hire pollsters to conduct polls and publicize the results, which to me is like putting the fox in charge of the henhouse.

Even if a polling company is essentially neutral, and doing the polling on its own dime, media outlets that choose to give them attention enjoy the same potential for political leverage.

I think it’s unlikely there would have been a resounding Liberal majority in the just completed federal election in the absence of polls.

It is even more unlikely the NDP would have fared so poorly.

The Liberals would still have won, certainly, but without the influence of polls, perhaps without a majority of the seats.

Indeed, we’ll never know how many of those who chose to exercise their democratic right last Monday would have been more inclined to vote with their conscience, rather than in reaction to somebody else’s numbers, in the absence of polls.

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