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## Making sense of the barrage of poll numbers

**Pollsters are busier than ever this election, but what impact do they have on the voter?**

Oct 04, 2008 04:30 AM

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**LINDA DIEBEL**  
 NATIONAL AFFAIRS WRITER

Pollsters are working in Campaign '08 as never before, coming up with enough tracking, weekly and mega-polls to make even a political junkie's eyes glaze over.

Who's up? Who's down? Do we really need to know every jig and jag and, more critically, does it help or hurt us as voters?

Even some pollsters think it's too much – "Far too many and they're a dime a dozen," huffed one – but nobody will say that for publication, and the pollster is always talking about somebody else's work, never their own.

Still, a consensus among political organizers views public polling as important, if not more important, than in previous elections. The focal question this time is how the anti-Harper vote – call it the fractured left, if you prefer – will go. Most strategists believe pollsters play a role in that outcome, for better or worse.

John Duffy, author and veteran Liberal strategist (although not formally involved this time), agrees the public is affected by polls. "The most important thing polling will do is guide voting on the centre-left," he says of this election. "That has been a critical battleground since 2004, and it's played a central role in this campaign."

One way it plays out is the potential reaction to the consistent lead of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservatives in all polls. They've put the party somewhere in the 34 to 40 per cent range, with Liberals and the New Democratic party trailing. Voters who fear a Harper majority will use that information and act accordingly.

### Tories lead but voter volatility on the rise

The Conservatives still hold a strong lead but shifting allegiances in Quebec and a sharp upsurge in ABC (Anybody But Conservative) thinking nationally could put a Tory majority victory out of reach, a new poll shows.

The big unanswered question, of course, is what they will do.

Duffy argues polls cost the Liberals in 2006. In that election, polling numbers were lower for the Liberals than the results on election day, with the exception of polling by Nik Nanos. The Liberals took 30.2 per cent of the popular vote, with polls usually putting them in the 26 to 28 per cent rate.

Duffy says public opinion surveys showed "the Liberals were out of contention for government" and people voted accordingly. If about 13,000 NDP votes in 10 ridings had gone Liberal, posits Duffy, it would have been a Paul Martin minority government. "That's how important the public perception of who's ahead can be," he argues.

However, pollsters, speaking on background, disagree with that analysis. They argue polls were off in 2006 because people didn't make up their minds until the final weekend before election day (after final polling had been done).

Angus Reid, who polls for the *Toronto Star*, thinks pollsters affect

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*Pollsters face problems in 2008:*

- **Ditched land-lines:** Twenty-five per cent of 18- to 34-year-olds have cellphones only, making them more elusive. The result is a broader array of polling techniques, from

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the public, but through the intermediary of the media. According to Reid, an example could be current polls showing the Liberals trailing the Conservatives and leader Stéphane Dion having the lowest approval ratings since former Liberal leader John Turner

It becomes a vicious circle, with the media asking Dion why his party is doing so badly, writing and televising reports and analyses and helping to cement the view of a public that responds to new polls.

Polls also have an effect on parties, especially on morale. Operatives can control just about anything in a campaign except bad polls, and we've all seen demoralized politicians trying to rally troops.

The difference between public polling and work done for the political parties can come down to as much as a few million dollars. The former do it for name recognition and post-election business. Campaigns are a chance for them to strut their stuff. The latter do it for the paycheques (anywhere from the high hundred thousands to millions) and, okay, their principles.

Their goals differ as well: Public pollsters try to find out how people will vote, while party people try to identify segments of the population that can be influenced to vote for them.

Naturally, pollsters insist their polling is accurate, whatever methodology they use, whether online or telephone surveys, or a combination of the two.

While we're inundated with polls, they have been remarkably consistent to date, despite differences among the polling companies. The national trend has stayed relatively stable and changes, such as the Bloc Québécois regaining lost support, have been reflected equally. Occasionally, a poll will show the NDP in second and the Liberals in third place, but that's about it for variations.

One exception could be the four-day Nanos poll released yesterday that shows the Conservatives leading the Liberals by only five percentage points, 35 to 30 per cent. It could be a fluke, or the beginning of a shift.

Duffy believes (hopes?) the NDP's positive numbers with leader Jack Layton will bleed as campaign enters its last days. Says Duffy: "It is arguable the NDP is going to come down after all this speculation they can catch up with the Liberals and win the Opposition."

Clearly, ultra-strategist Harper recognizes the threat of the ABC (Anybody But Conservative) vote. If it remains fractured, fine for him.

Angus Reid online surveys to telephone polls, a blend of the two and Interactive Voice Response, which is like being polled by Bell's Emily.

- **"Telemarketed out":** The public is increasingly hostile to being constantly probed. **Brutal pollster politics:** In other words, the other guy's methodology is garbage – and maybe some of it is. There's controversy over the accuracy of all types of polling. One party pollster says 45 per cent of respondents to public pollsters "have no intention of voting," but wouldn't say how he knows.

- **Election fatigue:** We're on our third federal campaign since 2004 and Ontario just had a provincial campaign last year.

Linda Diebel

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Voters who truly fear a Harper majority would have to vote, NDP or Bloc. The Liberals desperate financial situation prevents them from bringing down a Conservative minority. The Liberal debt will be much bigger next time so they will be that much less willing to topple the government.

Posted by Cdnexpat at 8:08 AM Sunday, October 05 2008

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### good article

The Star has been one of the worst offenders on endlessly writing narratives around polls and sometimes the polls they use are outliers. At least this article talks about that media manipulation. Now if the Star could just focus on issues and values and experience/competence in this election.

Posted by CaTe at 8:27 AM Saturday, October 04 2008

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