

# THE ELECTION NIGHT SURPRISE

Maurice Pinard

McGill University political-sociologist Maurice Pinard examines the gap between late polls forecasting a dead heat in the election and the June 28 results, which gave the Liberals a relatively comfortable seven-point victory and a plurality of 135 seats to the Conservatives' 99. What happened? "The answer is astonishingly simple," writes Pinard. "Voting intentions changed at the very end of the campaign." Not in the West or the Atlantic so much as in Ontario and Quebec, where the election was determined. In Ontario, the voters' irritation over tax hikes in the provincial Liberal government budget eventually wore off and at the end of the campaign voting intention returned to where it had been in the beginning. In Quebec, where the federalist vote is always underpolled, enough federalists returned to the Liberal fold in the final days that they exceeded polling expectations by a solid five points.

Politologue et sociologue à l'Université McGill, Maurice Pinard examine l'écart entre les derniers sondages de la campagne électorale, qui prévoyaient un résultat très serré, et la victoire relativement aisée des libéraux le 28 juin, avec une avance de sept points et un total de 135 sièges contre 99 pour les conservateurs. Que s'est-il passé ? La réponse est fort simple, dit l'auteur : les intentions de vote ont changé en toute fin de campagne. Moins dans les provinces de l'Ouest ou de l'Atlantique, cependant, qu'en Ontario et au Québec où s'est jouée l'élection. En Ontario, les électeurs irrités par les hausses d'impôt du budget des libéraux provinciaux en ont finalement pris leur parti, renouant in extremis avec leurs intentions initiales. Au Québec, où le vote fédéraliste est toujours sous-estimé, ils ont réintégré le giron fédéral en nombre suffisant pour dépasser les attentes de cinq bons points.

**O**n election night, few people were more surprised by the final tally than the political experts and pundits. The final five national media polls, conducted during the penultimate week of the campaign, and completed at least three days before the vote, were all quite consistent and pointed to a very close outcome. Four of them showed the Liberals leading by only one percentage point over the new Conservatives. As the first section of Table 1 indicates, these five polls predicted, on the average, that the Liberals would obtain 33 percent of the vote and the Conservatives, 32 percent. Actually the respective figures were 37 percent and 30 percent. A predicted gap of only one percentage point had become one of seven points, enough to have a major impact on the results.

Two pollsters and one academic who, on the basis of these polls, ventured to forecast the distribution of seats in the new Parliament all accurately foresaw a minority government. But in two cases they predicted a minority Conservative government, with about 116 seats, followed by the Liberals, with about 105 seats. Only in one case was there a prediction of a minority Liberal government. That

forecast called for 117 Liberal seats — only eight more than the Conservatives. In fact the Liberals reaped 135 seats and the Conservatives only 99.

How can such forecasting errors be explained? The answer is astonishingly simple: Voting intentions changed at the very end of the campaign. The recently published results of the Canadian Election Study, conducted by university professors, indicated that, at least outside Quebec, an important surge in support for the Liberals occurred during the last few days of the campaign, especially during the days after the media's pollsters had left the field. This coincided with a corresponding decline of both Conservative and NDP support. These results were consistent with those of a COMPAS poll carried out the day of the election and released the same night. Despite its recognized shortcomings, the vote results obtained in that poll were within one percentage point of the actual results for each of the parties. More importantly, that poll found that 22 percent declared to have reached their final vote decision only on that day, and another 5 percent the day before. Finally Ipsos-Reid reported later net shifts to the

Liberals in Ontario the night before the vote, according to its then on-going omnibus polling.

The results of the Canadian Election Study also revealed that there was a decline in Conservative support outside Quebec and possibly some Liberal gains, even before the closing days, which started around June 10. These results are also consistent with those of the national media polls, in particular those of SES Research.

To explain the late campaign changes, and implicitly the earlier ones, the authors of the Canadian Election Study, after analyzing the results, rejected many popular theories. For example, they concluded that the changes outside Quebec could not be explained by the English leaders debate, by changes in the image of the Conservative Party and of its leader, by late strategic voting among some NDP supporters or by decreasing anger over the sponsorship scandal. They found however that there was a late surge in Liberal support among those who were only somewhat angry over that scandal. But why?

In order to press further for an explanation of the mid-campaign and last-minute changes in voting intentions, it is important to identify the provinces or regions in which they occurred, something to which not enough attention has been paid.

In table 1, the average levels of party support in the last five media polls of the campaign are presented and compared to the actual results of the vote for six provinces or regions. For this analysis, the media polls are particularly useful, given that the regional averages computed ultimately rest on a combined total of almost 13,000 interviews.

The first thing to be noted is that the closeness of the voting intentions for the two main parties was hiding large differences in every province and region. The regional and linguistic cleavages of our party system continued to prevail, with the polls (and actual results) showing that the Liberals were leading in Ontario and the Atlantic provinces, while the Conservatives were

leading in all of Western Canada and the Bloc Québécois, in Quebec.

The most striking finding, however, is the relative accuracy of the averaged results in all the provinces or regions of Western and Atlantic Canada. In British Columbia, Alberta, the Prairies and Atlantic Canada, the final polls estimated on the average the support of all parties quite accurately. All differences with the actual results were two percent or less. This is an excellent poll performance by any standard. This suggests that there were no important last-minute net shifts in favour of, or against any one

party in these provinces. They were therefore not responsible for the surprising election night results.

Conversely, the significant poll misestimations were all located in Ontario and Quebec. In each case, there were on the average serious underestimations of Liberal support, by five and six percentage points, respectively. In these provinces, all other parties were overestimated, although each less than the underestimations of the Liberals. Separately, each of the five final polls consistently underestimated Liberal support in Ontario and four of the five did

TABLE 1. FINAL ESTIMATES OF VOTING INTENTIONS IN MEDIA POLLS COMPARED TO ACTUAL VOTE RESULTS, CANADA AND PROVINCES/REGIONS (%)

	Liberal	Conservative	NDP	BQ	Others
<b>Canada</b>					
Average – last 5 polls	33	32	18	12	5
Actual results	37	30	16	12	5
<i>Difference</i>	+4	-2	-2	-	-
<b>Ontario</b>					
Average – last 5 polls	40	34	21	-	6
Actual results	45	31	18	-	6
<i>Difference</i>	+5	-3	-3	-	-
<b>Quebec</b>					
Average – last 5 polls	28	11	6	51	4
Actual results	34	9	5	49	4
<i>Difference</i>	+6	-2	-1	-2	-
<b>British Columbia</b>					
Average – last 5 polls	27	38	27	-	7
Actual results	29	36	27	-	8
<i>Difference</i>	+2	-2	-	-	+1
<b>Alberta</b>					
Average – last 5 polls	22	60	11	-	7
Actual results	22	62	10	-	7
<i>Difference</i>	-	+2	-1	-	-
<b>Atlantic Provinces</b>					
Average – last 5 polls	43	29	25	-	3
Actual results	44	30	23	-	4
<i>Difference</i>	+1	+1	-2	-	+1
<b>Manitoba/ Saskatchewan</b>					
Average – last 5 polls	32	38	25	-	5
Actual results	30	40	23	-	6
<i>Difference</i>	-2	+2	-2	-	+1

Source: The five final media poll results averaged, their fieldwork dates and the size of their national samples are: Ipsos-Reid, June 21-23, N= 2000; COMPAS, June 22-23, N= 810; SES Research, June 22-24, N= 1,200, for Canada and June 20-24, N= 1,600 for provinces/regions; EKOS, June 21-24, N= 5,254; Léger Marketing, June 21-24, N= 3,101. The averages are unweighted. The percentage row totals may not be equal to 100 because of rounding.

the same in Quebec.

To explain the last minute surge of Liberal support, it is imperative to consider these two provinces separately rather than Canada or Canada outside Quebec as a whole. Notice that these two provinces turned out to be the only ones where the Liberals did less well in 2004 than in 2000. Each had therefore a large pool of former Liberal supporters who may have felt pressures to return to the fold at the last minute.

It is important to examine developments in Ontario and Quebec starting at the beginning of 2004. As the year began, the members of the Progressive Conservative Party and Canadian Alliance had approved a merger of their two parties and the country had a new prime minister, Paul Martin.

Consider Ontario first. As table 2 indicates, at the turn of the year, the Liberals enjoyed the very comfortable support of close to 60 percent of the voters in that province. But they soon faced a first setback with the release of the auditor general's report on the sponsorship scandal. As it did throughout Canada, support for the Liberals in Ontario slipped immediately by more than 10 percentage points. It then remained at 46 to 47 percent for more than three months. The deserters went about equally to the new Conservatives and to the NDP.

**B**ut contrary to what happened elsewhere at the time, a second important slippage in Liberal support occurred following the presentation in mid-May of the Ontario budget by the governing provincial Liberals. The substantial new taxes it contained, contrary to a campaign promise of no tax increases, greatly irritated the voters of that province. Many decided to vent their anger against the federal Liberals, who again lost more than 10 percentage points, recuperated mostly by the Conservatives. For a month, this left the Liberals neck and neck with the Conservatives in Ontario, with their support averaging 35 percent and 36 percent, respectively. This early phase of the official campaign turned out to be, for the Liberals, their worst overall.

The data suggest that such irrational reactions finally gave way to more sober considerations, and support for the Ontario Liberals started to rise again. It increased by five percent during the following week and, finally, by an additional and unforeseen five percent on voting day. This occurred equally at the expense of the Conservatives and of the NDP.

It is quite important to realize that the Liberals' recovery simply brought all parties in Ontario back to

roughly the same levels of support as those that prevailed for more than three months before the provincial budget. Without the budget controversy, Ontarians' voting intentions might well have remained at the level at which they were before the budget throughout the campaign.

It is worth pointing out that this would have possibly led to relatively accurate vote forecasts in Ontario, as they were in most other provinces. However, it remains to be seen

TABLE 2. EVOLUTION OF INTENTION TO VOTE FOR THE MAIN PARTIES, ONTARIO (%)

Averages	Liberal	Conservative	NDP	(Number of polls)
December 2003 and January 2004	58	21	13	(2)
After report of the auditor general — February 10				
February and March	46	28	19	(5)
April to Mid-May	47	27	18	(5)
After Ontario Liberal government budget — May 18				
End of May to Mid-June	35	36	22	(11)
End of June	40	34	20	(7)
<i>Actual results</i>	45	31	18	—

Source: The results of the first three rows are based on Ipsos-Reid polls only. Those of the next two rows are based on polls of all firms; the averages from the latter are practically the same as those from Ipsos-Reid only. Mid-May: polls completed before May 18; mid-June: polls completed before June 18; end of June: polls completed before June 25.

TABLE 3. EVOLUTION OF INTENTION TO VOTE FOR THE MAIN PARTIES, QUEBEC (%)

Averages	Liberal	BQ	Conservative	NDP	(Number of polls)
January	48	36	4	8	(2)
After report of the auditor general — February 10					
February and March	34	45	9	9	(10)
April and May	34	46	9	8	(16)
Early June	28	47	13	8	(7)
After leaders' debate in French — June 14					
Mid-June	26	51	11	8	(8)
End of June	29	51	11	6	(6)
<i>Actual results</i>	34	49	9	5	—

Source: Results based on all media polls (see table 1). Early June: polls completed before June 14; mid-June: polls completed before June 23; end of June: polls completed before June 26. The end of June averages take into account a Léger Marketing poll not included in table 1.

whether the return of some waverers to more rational considerations may have been facilitated by their opposition to the social conservatism of Harper's party and the blunders on social issues by some of his candidates during the campaign, if these blunders caught their attention at all. The Liberals did not pull their punches on

vote. But this time the lost points went largely to the Conservatives.

Then came the leaders debate in French, which, according to the polls, Gilles Duceppe won hands down. The authors of the Canadian Election Study reported that this was the decisive moment in the Quebec campaign, with the Bloc support then jumping by about

What presumably best explains the Quebec case is political ambivalence, which exists mainly toward the sovereigntist option and the Parti Québécois, but also to some extent toward the Bloc Québécois.

these issues. All in all, this could account for the fact that some of those who were only somewhat angered by the sponsorship scandal returned to the Liberals, as mentioned before.

**A**s in Ontario, the Liberals started the year in Quebec with a comfortable lead over their opponents, although their lead in Quebec was less pronounced than in Ontario. Yet close to half the voters supported them on the average, while their main opponent, the Bloc Québécois, was getting the support of barely more than a third of the voters. Indeed many thought that the Bloc was in serious trouble only a few months before the election. But as table 3 indicates, the auditor general's report also had devastating effects on the Liberals in Quebec. Their plunge of about 15 percentage points was even larger than that suffered in Ontario at the time. Two-thirds of those points went to the Bloc Québécois. This produced a complete reversal, the Bloc now replacing the Liberals as the leading party in Quebec. Very much like in Ontario, the new division of the vote then remained stable for no less than four months.

As the election campaign stepped up in early June, the Liberals however managed to suddenly lose another six points, possibly as a result of the increased salience of the sponsorship scandal. It left them in a disastrous situation, with the support of barely more than a quarter of the Quebec

10 percentage points. To be sure, the data of table 3 also show gains by the party after the debate, but the gains, at four points on the average, do not appear to be as pronounced as in the Canadian Election Study. Moreover the gains by the Bloc, according to the data of table 3, were not made solely at the Liberals' expense. Indeed, as we have seen, the important losses by the Liberals at that time preceded the debate.

**F**rom there on, the Bloc Québécois maintained its position for the rest of the polling period. But in the week preceding the vote, Liberal fortunes turned for the better. As in Ontario again, they started then to regain some of their lost support, a process that continued after the last media polls until election day. They ultimately took a third of the vote, leaving the Bloc Québécois just under half the vote. As in Ontario once more, these results brought the parties back to about the same levels of support as those they had obtained from February to March.

To explain the Liberal gains in late June and during the last days of the campaign in Quebec, a different hypothesis than that suggested for the Ontario situation seems warranted. To be sure, as has been suggested, the underrepresentation of non-Francophones in polls in Quebec, which most polls did not correct, may have contributed to the five percent underestimation of Liberal support in the last media polls of the campaign. But if this were the main

explanation, one should have observed an equal overestimation of Bloc support, which is not the case. The overestimation was only two points.

What presumably best explains the Quebec case is political ambivalence, which exists mainly toward the sovereigntist option and the Parti Québécois, but also to some extent toward the Bloc Québécois. This ambivalence stems from opposing forces that pull voters between attraction to these parties and reservations about Quebec sovereignty. At the very end of election campaigns, this often leads some to back off from supporting the sovereigntists or even minor parties. For example, since 1970, support for the Parti Québécois has been greatly overestimated in polls when the party was very attractive, while support for the provincial Liberals has always been underestimated, whether the Parti Québécois was attractive or not.

While understandably the Bloc Québécois does not arouse as much reticence, as it cannot achieve sovereignty, such an ambivalent situation did indeed prevail, for instance, with the major sweep of that party in the 1993 federal election in Quebec. Again last June, in order to contain what appeared to be another major Bloc sweep, some marginal supporters, dissatisfied with the Liberals, but favorable to federalism, presumably felt compelled, toward the end of the campaign, to vote Liberal anyway. This occurred not only at the expense of the Bloc, but also of the Conservatives and the NDP, thus reinforcing a two-party polarization in Quebec and the underestimation of Liberal support in the final days.

An ambivalent electorate is all too often an unpredictable one.

*Maurice Pinard is a professor emeritus in the Department of Sociology at McGill University and a research associate at the Centre for Research and Information on Canada. maurice.pinard@mcgill.ca*