

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: Ontario election ? polls

By Stephen Somerville

The next provincial election is scheduled for June 7, 2018; only 6 months from now. Oh, joy!

We are inundated everyday with the results of public opinion polls.

It seems that whenever we turn on the television, listen to the radio or open a newspaper there is a story about polling.

We are canvassed for our thoughts on everything from Canadian tax policy to whether or not we feel that Taylor Swift is a better vocalist than Selena Gomez.

But most of the emphasis in the media is placed on political polling.

I am not sure if it was the first, but the most well-known is the Gallup Poll, named after its inventor, George Gallup. Dr. Gallup founded the American Institute of Public Opinion, the precursor of The Gallup Organization, in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1935.

They have been surveying political opinions ever since.

But why the need for political polling?

Brian Walker, a candidate for the Newmarket ? Aurora federal Conservative nomination in 2005 put it aptly: ?Representative government was born hundreds of years ago when MP's traveled to far off cities, and there, out of touch with their constituencies, made decisions for them. We don't live in such times anymore.?

Politicians continually listen to their constituents. Today's elected officials certainly have the resources: web sites, mail-outs, town hall meetings and other media at their disposal. Included in this arsenal is polling.

Governments, political parties and individual politicians conduct polling primarily for two reasons.

In between campaigns, politicians want to know whether or not the public thinks they are doing a good job or they may desire feedback on a specific issue.

During an actual election campaign, respective national or provincial campaigns use polling to see if a particular strategy that they have employed is working, and if not, why, and what the campaign should be doing differently.

Look at the 2008 U.S. Democratic primary where the Clinton campaign started to make in-roads at the end of the primaries by painting Barack Obama as an elitist, and out of touch with the average voter's concerns.

A few months later during the actual Presidential campaign, John McCain had climbed back into a statistical tie with the presumptive Democratic nominee by painting the Illinois Senator, as inexperienced, a ?celebrity? liberal and a light-weight. The lines of attack were based on polling.

Reliance on polling can also lead to electoral disasters. How else to characterize the faith based initiative launched by the provincial PC Party last in 2007. Obviously, this policy would not have been introduced unless the campaign strategists felt that this was a potential ?wedge? issue that could drive masses of voters into their camp.

Or how can we forget about the axing of 100,000 public service jobs by then provincial leader Tim Hudak back in 2011. His strategists no doubt saw something in the polling or focus group research that they were doing.

Recently, Greg Lyle of Innovative Research Group spoke to an energy conference that I am involved in. He shared with us the combined results from three separate Ontario polling engagements.

Mr. Lyle pointed out that in the 2014 election, Ontario Liberals won with 39% of the vote to PCs 31% with 24% voting NDP. In his latest quarterly tracking the PCs lead with 41% support among decided voters, Liberals are in second at 31%, and the NDP has dropped five points since the election to just 19%.

His major point is that that Liberals will have a hard time raising the Premier's numbers so it will be easier for them to lower Brown's. He expects the campaign to be really nasty from the Liberals.

Closer to home, polling does have its place; reinforcing to the local campaign that the communications strategies being employed are indeed working. However, it is becoming increasingly harder to be heard and also to influence voters at the local level.

Probably ninety percent of the reason that a person votes is based on the Party and the Leader. In some instances, where there is a very high profile person or highly ranked cabinet minister, then the local campaign probably accounts for say, ten to fifteen percent, maximum.

The results of a strong local organization will really matter when the race is extremely tight; every vote counting.

The other point is that most people don't make up their mind until the last days of a campaign, with a good percentage not deciding until they get into the voting booth?

Lots to think about and of course lots more polls to decipher as we get closer to the June 7, 2018 election date!

Stephen can be contacted at stephensomerville@yahoo.com