

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em

Horserace polling in Canadian media and its electoral effects
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Abstract

Questions of how people influence and skew polling outcomes as respondents have long been at the core of methodological debates for empirical political scientists. In the study of public opinion and voting intentions, though, this perspective can only treat one direction of the relationship between respondents and polls. This article intends to highlight the effects of this relationship's converse: the effects of polling on voter-intention. Bandwagon effects, underdog effects, and strategic voting are boiled down to their essences as functions of political expectations and it is argued that the publications of voter-intention polls (horse-race polls) during election periods can influence the expectations and calculations of prospective voters.

1. Introduction

Political news coverage is saturated with numbers. Issue specific polls are released in response to signals of contentious policy on the horizon, discussions of governments are conducted with a mind to popular approval, and, especially during election periods, horse-race polling forms the backbone of political entertainment. In horse-race polls, the public is shown the electoral scoreboard by way of forecasting electoral results. The publications of new voter intention polling results have become anticipated news events and give media personalities foundations on which they can weave narratives about the political fortunes of candidates and parties.

The research to follow is concerned with horse-race polling and whether or not the publishing of public opinion polls can influence voter-intentions during Canadian elections. I will focus on perceptions of candidate and party viability. This narrowing of the discussion on media effects is due to the nature of the information provided by horse-race polls which focus solely on likely political outcomes. The central contention of the

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paper is that Canadian horse-race polls not only measure but form voter-intentions due to their roles in projecting results and establishing political expectations.

After a brief summary of the literature at hand, two questions will need to be answered. The first question is of whether voter-intention polls alter perceptions of party or candidate viability. The second is whether perceptions of viability affect vote choice and if so, how so? The answers to come are, respectively, “Yes,” and “Yes: through bandwagon effects and strategic voting calculations.”

2. Bandwagons, underdogs, and political calculus

Studies to do with expectations of electoral success have been many, varied, and contradictory. Early research proposed the existences of both bandwagon effects, where people vote for the front-runner because of his or her lead (Hodgson and Maloney, 2012; Johnston et al., 1992, Butler, 2007; Evrenk and Sher, 2015; McAllister and Studlar, 1991), and their polar opposites, underdog effects. This latter type of effect supposes that upon forming expectations of election results, voters will tend toward the minority opinion (Gartner, 1976; Straffin, 1977).

While theories proposing underdog effects have largely faded from the literature for want of empirical backing, the bandwagon effect has maintained moderate support. Under the bandwagon moniker, the effect has been studied through successive British elections – an ideal environment given their multiparty system (McAllister and Studlar, 1991; Johnston et al., 1992), and, in America, the concept was tweaked to have vast explanatory power in presidential primaries. An elaboration upon what makes a bandwagon compelling is presented by many American theorists as “momentum,” or the self-enforcing advantages enjoyed by primary candidates who taste victory early. Factors like increased media exposure, fund raising capacities, and name recognition on a ballot are all benefits that campaigns derive from being perceived as likely to win and which reinforce that positive forecast (Bartels, 1988: 111-112; Popkin, 1991: 118-119).

In both British and American scholarships, however, researchers have had difficulty disentangling bandwagon or momentum effects on vote choice from the effects of “strategic voting” (see Alvarez et al., 2006; Evrenk and Sher, 2015; Butler, 2007: 85-91). Strategic voting, in its essence, is the idea that voters weigh their values in voting choices against their likelihoods of

assisting in an electoral victory. To most people, political choices are ordinal – ranked along a spectrum and subject to movement – rather than absolute and immovable. This means that in a multiparty system, if supporters of the third place party understand their prospects to be bleak and believe they can contribute to the election of their second choice – or the defeat of their third choice – they will vote out of line with partisan identification, ideology, and other standard filters through which we parse politics.

The first to discuss this in the Canadian context was Jerome Black. He adopted the expected utility model of rational voter decision-making as crafted by William Riker and Peter Ordeshook (1968) which attempted to create a rational voting calculus and asserted the necessity of voting efficacy: in order to fit the model as rational, a voter must in some way expect that their vote can create or break a stalemate (1978).

This model, however, is too restrictive. Do people only vote strategically when they expect the result to be down to the wire? What cues introduce the information required to buy this level of self-efficacy?

Specifically in the Canadian context, we should be working with a “feasible alternatives” model because it can account for sensitivity to projection information regardless of how spatially relevant it is. Under the expected utility model, strategic politics would only be even nominally conducted based on in depth local knowledge but we know this not to be true. People report their own political behaviours as strategic and accounting for national forecasts when it comes to Canadian federal elections (Johnston et al., 1992). Further study also demonstrates the centrality of strategic voting and poses that if the expected utility model was an apt description of voter behaviour, any third party would be completely incapable of sustaining itself, but as Merolla and Stephenson point out, even when it was impossible to imagine widespread success for Canada's New Democratic Party (NDP) or its predecessor, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the organization had a floor of active support implying that active and calculating voters do not see voting for a loser as a completely pointless exercise (2007).

While it might be true that people vote strategically and do not like to “waste” a vote on an obvious dud (Lanoue and Bowler, 1998; Rickershauser and Aldrich, 2007; Bartels, 1988: 109), the calculation behind choosing between a first and second option is not likely to occur at the margins. Beyond this, expectations can provoke completely irrational vote choices

among casual observers who enter the fray based on a combination of psychological validations associated with pulling for the winner. Bartels likens these voters to Yankees fans who only pay attention if the team is in the playoffs and winning (1988: 112). Expectation effects are complex, many, and potentially, as it seems, contradictory.

3. Do polls affect viability perceptions?

In short: yes. Horse-race polling results can be broken down over time and trends in responses analyzed by pundits but this extremely prevalent element of media dialog surrounding elections centres around one piece of information: where, in terms of popularity, parties stand in relation to one another.

As touched on in the prior discussion of strategic voting literature, this kind of information is presented to voters on many levels. Federal polling results influence political expectations on provincial and riding levels (Johnston et al., 1992: 200) which implies that the consumers of polls and national news either understand that measures of popularity across the country have been reasonably accurate when weighted properly or that they are unable to separate information on federal and local levels in order to make competing predictions.

Cukierman (1991) explains that polls which tend to privilege informed perspectives reinforce themselves because they act as sources of political information. On issue based questions, exposure to media coverage of polling demonstrates a strong pressure on opinions to converge because media and opinion polling are considered to be trusted sources of political information.

In this sense, polls can be seen as extremely influential because even if the information isn't used in a rational strategic voting framework, it is broadly consumed – including by low-information voters. This means it can figure into what Popkin refers to as “low information rationality”: a process in which low-information individuals form opinions and courses of action based on what they perceive to be those of trusted sources of information (1991).

Given that we have seen that consumers of news media generally see public opinion polling as reliable,¹ it is a natural consequence that people generally trust the electoral projections made by pollsters and reported on in the news. Media coverage of polling, then, clearly has the ability to convince

audiences of the odds of each party forming government. Polling affects perceptions of viability.

4. Do people try to vote for a winner?

In my review of the literature, it was made clear that people do try to vote for winners but that the “why” that follows is difficult to break down. In order to assess the Canadian context, I considered studies pertaining to vote choice in competitive single member plurality systems: specifically, I examined the Canadian and British experiences. These cases were chosen because they have the capacities to demonstrate both kinds of viability effects. Bandwagoning should happen in all electoral systems to varying degrees if its underpinning logic is assumed to be true but strategic voting can only be meaningfully observed in scenarios where it is possible and fits a rational calculus. The conditions needed, then, are that there are three or more parties expected to clear some threshold of vote share and that the parties are sufficiently different such that people can build a clear hierarchy of preferences. This last bit is because people will never compromise and take their second choice if they see them as being little better than their third. In this section I will consider each effect in the contexts of Canadian and British elections.

4.1. Jump on the Bandwagon

Bandwagoning is an odd effect and is difficult to grapple with precisely because it is irrational. Understanding that someone will win an election, by all rational calculations, should not spur people to action in order to guarantee that victory. If victory is approaching certainty, even a rational supporter of the first place option would simply sit back and watch the triumph unfold.

The irrational qualities of bandwagon effects are why they do not apply to informed and active voters. People who are involved in the process and have a different and established vote choice have no interests hinging on their swing in support to the front runner (Popkin, 1991). If anything, the rational voter – whose interests will be discussed in the context of strategic voting – has an incentive to vote for the second place candidate if they choose to switch at all.

It's a worthy assumption, then, to say that bandwagon effects, in so far as they exist, occur among voters who:

- A) are low-information voters, and
- B) did not previously demonstrate a different political preference.

These people are typically non-voters or undecided voters. Merolla and Stephenson put forward an interesting analysis of as much in discussing the vote share held by Canada's NDP. The NDP, as a third party, routinely polled better than their turnout on election day and their divergence from predicted outcomes widened when the Liberal party were in second meaning that the instability of the NDPs vote share can be associated with the desire to defeat the Conservatives (2007). The focus for this section, however, is on bandwagon effects and the same study found that the NDP have a floor of support. If the bandwagon effect was truly present and self-enforcing as Bartels suggested in his analysis of presidential primaries (1988), then the NDP would have been squeezed out of existence after a few quick defeats.

This can be chalked up to information levels. Bartels, in forming his study, accepted the primary races are low-information events meaning that delegates approach the vote with only shaky preferences and the field of candidates, in terms of desirability, is relatively flat (1988). He ascribes momentum to the personalization of politics as well as the systemic effects of early strength.

As people with little information are bombarded both with personalizing images of politicians and their families and analysis which frames them as likely to win, they are being persuaded to modify how likable they see the front-runner as being. This occurs both in terms of the characteristics of the politician personally preferred by the voter as well as that voter's social understanding of how those traits should figure into their decision-making process (Popkin, 1991; Bartels, 1988; Butler, 2007; Evrenk and Sher, 2015).

McAllister and Studlar demonstrate this rationale in their study of British general elections. They found evidence of bandwagon effects occurring across three consecutive elections and minor evidence of projection effects (1991). During this period, polls were found to be self-enforcing but the number of people who voted for their second choice was low. This can be explained by a series of strategic considerations such as having no strategically viable alternative to a voter's first choice, having a voter's first choice projected to place second, or having their last choice poised to lose.

This suggests that bandwagon effects largely occur among people who haven't demonstrated a hard preference for any party or who were previously unlikely to vote. Butler (2007: 85) describes this process as mass media persuasion. Through media consumption, low-information voters are convinced to adopt what are framed as dominant ideals, their perception of which is likely to be reasonably accurate (Johnston et al., 1992: 204-205).

There is still a great deal of research to be done on the topic of bandwagon effects but it is safe to move past the question of whether they exist and onto the question of why they exist. Bartels (1988) offers a survey of identified psychological mechanisms which may contribute to our desires to side with the winner but little compelling electoral psychology research has been done on the topic.

4.2. Voting against rather than for

In the Canadian and British contexts, strategic voting offers a much more compelling account of vote instability as prompted by polling. This is because the two Westminster systems feature competitive third parties although in recent years, Britain's traditional third party, the Liberal Democrats, have been in dismal shape.

Evidence of strategic voting in a limited sense, however, is compelling. In British elections, it has been shown that a full half of voters will vote strategically when given the opportunity (Alvarez et al., 2006) and that supporters of third parties will frequently break the expected utility model and vote strategically even if they do not expect their second choice as being capable of overcoming their third (Evrenk and Sher, 2015). This suggests that British voters will frequently focus their strategic concerns against parties or candidates rather than for them – it is less so a half-a-loaf situation and more so a matter of spite.

Lanoue and Bowler support this claim in their findings that Canadian voters will vote strategically even in run-away races favouring their least favourite option (1998). This breaks the expected utility model of strategic voting but fits comfortably within the “feasible alternatives” model put forward by Johnston, Blais, Brady, and Crete (1992). This evidence suggests that tactical voting is common and that people do not fulfill the supposedly necessary condition of having an expectation of efficacy. It is not necessary to bank on making or breaking a tie in order to vote strategically. The race

being close, does, however, contribute to tactical voting's likelihood (Johnston et al. 1992: 200).

As Pease and Brewer discuss, viability influences vote choice in multiple ways and is projected by voters to influence others more deeply than themselves. This means that even when coverage of a political event is taken as bogus by a political spectator, they are still likely to see it as improving the viability of the candidates involved which can frame them as legitimate options (2008).

“Voters can, and do, take account not only of their preferences but also of a candidate's chances of getting nominated, or stopping another candidate” (Popkin, 1991: 126) The evidence above supports Popkin's conclusions, specifically when it comes to stopping undesirable candidates.

5. Conclusions

This essay has been a reading of the process of information gathering as it relates to polling. The publication of horse-race polls, as the first section has suggested, produces trusted sources of information for media consumers and focuses media dialog. The political theatre that plays out on the evening news when discussing the results from the latest voter-intention poll explores many narratives surrounding the rise and fall of parties but the one take-away for most viewers is the poll itself. Polling presents to voters a view of the scoreboard and, as such, the likelihoods of each party winning.

The second section asked whether the perception of a party being likely to win will change the votes of those that hold that perception. The answer was a resounding yes and is well supported through reams of electoral results. This was explained through two mechanisms.

The first is a form of low-information rationality called the bandwagon effect. This is a phenomenon that causes casual observers to support the front runner because the candidate represents a dominant ideal and offers senses of thrill and involvement. Through some mental acrobatics, we find ourselves in the winning camp by virtue of the victory party's likelihood of showing up.

The second explanation was that of strategic voting. Strategic voting has been present in multi-party systems since their inceptions but the ready availability of projection information makes the tactical considerations of the political landscape much more accessible to the low-information voters who

compose the majority of the electorate. The literature and the argument that followed strongly suggested that projections of success are particularly important factors in the election of the Canadian federal government.

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