Reporting of Public Opinion Polls:

Results of Local Polling published in the *Windsor Star*

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Abstract

There remains debate on whether polls published in the media during election campaigns impacts on voter choice. Researchers have found limited evidence of a bandwagon, i.e., voters who shift allegiances to support the party perceived as being in the lead, and even less evidence that polls help the underdog. Problems with these studies have been methodological as they often try to measure conversions (which are relatively rare) or that they only look at the exit polls and do not measure campaign dynamics. This study focuses instead on whether polls can affect the learning component of public opinion and in so doing, whether it changes people's perceptions of the who might win a local race. Windsor area residents were surveyed during the 2004 federal election campaign in part to test whether local poll results during the campaign reported in the *Windsor Star* changed the public's perception of the front runner. We found mixed support for the hypothesis and confirm previous research that polls are one type of information that the public receive during the campaign, but that pre-existing beliefs and other evidence contributes to perception of the front-runner.

The academic community has a negative response to election polls. The traditional argument is that polls increase the horse-race coverage to the exclusion of important information such as policy discussion. In general, horse-race coverage is frowned upon because it is seen to reduce the election to a mere sporting event as the "poll beat" is pursued by the press (de Vreese and Semetko 2002, 372). More problematic is that election polls take away from issue coverage thereby reducing the public's ability to judge the candidates on the

things that matter such as policy positions (Iyengar and Simon 2000, 154). At the same time that scholars deride the horse-race poll, they also note that the public pays little attention to elections and have little knowledge about specific candidates and their positions. If the polls have effects they are said to be negative as they either encourage a band-wagon effect or produce an underdog effect (Daschmann 2000). The assumption is that if people are voting based on the polls then they are making their decisions on the wrong things. This by definition is bad for democracy. Yet, Brewer and Sigelman observe that while academics deride the horse-race coverage, when they are asked to comment in news programs, they nonetheless succumb to the same type of analysis. As they note, "political scientists are by no means immune to the drama and fun that the game frame offers" (Brewer and Sigelman 2002, 25). Outside of who is to blame for the emphasis on the horse-race, most agree that this news frame is easy to assess, relevant to the race, and here to stay.

The negative perception of polls has been so intense that in some countries there are restrictions ranging from no polls during the campaign to restrictions in the last few days of the campaign. In a study of 66 countries regarding poll restrictions more than half had no restrictions at all. From 1996-2002, while nine countries increased their embargoes, 15 countries, including Canada, have reduced their

embargo restrictions (Spangenberg 2003, 1). Canada allows no *new* polls published 24 hours prior to, or on, election day (*Canada Elections Act* 2000, 328.1). Despite the concerns of countries that restrict polls there remain 27 western democracies with no embargoes or restrictions on the publication of polls including the United Kingdom and the United States (Spangenberg 2003, 6).

The problem banning or restricting polls is that there is little evidence to support the conclusion that published polls influence voter choice, or reduce voter turnout. Xinshu Zhao and Glen Bleske (1998) show that there is no zero-sum game in election coverage and that the horse-race does not take away from issue attention. They argue that by having the election presented as a sport that it increases the public's attention and that they may become more attentive to the election than they otherwise would be in the absence of polling. Few studies have been able to show that the polls have influenced the outcome of an election. After all, the public is sophisticated in its use of polls and is quite knowledgeable about the problems of public opinion polling such as sample sizes, margins of errors as well as skeptical about those who pay for the polls (Herbst 1993, 450). This paper will argue that polls are only one of the many types of information that the public is exposed to during an election campaign. In addition, the media tend to report polls throughout the campaigns,

and in the case of the 2004 election news organizations such as CBC reported on the poll trends rather than commission their own. In addition, Global News utilized political scientist Barry Kay's seat projection model of published polls. It is counterintuitive to think that polls influence people's ultimate choice in who they will vote for. But instead, polls may influence who the public *perceive* to have a chance of winning. In other words, it shows that the public can learn new information about an election campaign based on polling data reported in the media. However, it is furthered argued that if the poll does not confirm to previously held beliefs it cannot alone change either opinion or the perception of front-runner. Before examining the data, we review the literature on poll effects and provide the methodology for this study.

Polling Effects

Polls are seen to affect the election campaign in two general ways: producing either the bandwagon or the underdog effect on the voter; or influencing voter turnout. The bandwagon and the underdog effects represent the direct effects model of the media and there is much difficulty in gathering conclusive evidence to support these models. In short, the bandwagon effect argues that the public, especially the undecided voters, tend to want to back winners. If they see that the rest of the public endorses one candidate over another

they will switch their vote to that front runner so that they can back the winner. Early experimental studies in the area that examined registered voters in American elections, who saw early poll results, did not switch their candidate preferences and did not change their intentions on voting or not. As Robert Navazio remarks in summarizing this research, "these findings do indicate that broadcasts of early returns on election day had little impact on presidential election results" (Navazio 1977, 217). Part of the reason is methodological. By only examining vote intentions on election day one misses important shifts in the campaign and that the last days of the election typically see the smallest of changes in voter choice. Voter decision making is a process that by election day becomes more stable and so is less susceptible to persuasive messages (Mendelsohn and Crespi 1970, 179; Ceci and Kain 1982, 229). In addition, if one only looks at conversions, there are limited numbers of individuals who switch their vote on election day (Weaver 1996, 36). As Weaver argues (1996) elections are a process of giving information to the public. Given this understanding it would be difficult to measure such a strong effect with only one type of information. Moreover, if one only looks at the end of an election campaign to measure the bandwagon or underdog effects, then effectively the process of the decision making is not measured. This does not apply just to election polls, but to media

coverage in general. For example, a study comparing media content with voter choice in the 1997 federal election found that negative or positive coverage "moved voting intentions among a fraction of the electorate during the course of the 1997 Canadian election campaign but they appear to have had no direct impact on the final vote" (Dobrzynska etal. 2003, 39). Nonetheless conversions are possible as McAllister and Studlar (1991) did find a small bandwagon effect using exit poll data.

The research on voter turnout is equally contradictory. Initial studies on the effects of election broadcasts on voter turnout or vote switching examined early East coast reports such as the Johnson-Humphrey victory in 1964 effect on West coast voting (Mendelsohn 1966; Fuchs 1966). Some have indicated that in American presidential elections the calling of the vote result before the polls have close turned voters away from Carter in 1976 (Kenney and Rice 1993, 927). Others attribute the exit poll fiasco of 2000 as being the reason why Bush supporters did not cast their ballots in Florida (Iyengar 2004). It is difficult to apply these studies to the Canadian context because in the past all election polls were banned on election day. Further Canadian election law has never allowed exit polls. In the past the Canadian *Elections Act* prohibited the publication of *any* public opinion poll "from midnight the Friday before an election day until the close of

all polling stations" (*Canada Elections Act* 1985, 322.2). This part of the *Elections Act* was struck down in a 5-3 Supreme Court decision (*Thomson v. Canada* 1998). The new Act relaxed the ban by prohibiting any new polls being published 24 hours before election day until all polling booths were closed (*Canada Elections Act* 2000, 328.1).

Polls as Learning Tools

While the polls may have limited effect in changing behaviour that does not mean that they do not influence the election in other ways. One of the poll effects is that of "projection." In other words, people will confirm to what they think the opinion of reference groups important to them might be (Mendelsohn and Crespi 1970, 22-24; McAllister and Studlar 1991, 736). This is a variation of the spiral of silence thesis developed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann whereby she argued,

> Observations made in one context spread to another and encouraged people either to proclaim their views or to swallow them and keep quiet until, in a spiraling process, the one view dominated the public scene and the other disappeared from public awareness as its adherents became mute. This is the process that can be called a 'spiral of silence'. (Noelle-Neumann 1984, 5).

Polls can be tools the public use to help them learn about the election campaign. The horse-race fits into a predetermined news frame that helps people better understand and remember issues and

events of the campaign (Zhao and Bleske 16). The thing about election polls, especially those sponsored by news organization, is that they are prominently placed in the news agenda (Patterson 1980, 82). This in turn tends to have the potential for a stronger impact on the public's agenda. "Stories with greater prominence – front-page news, newspaper stories accompanied by photographs, or lead stories in television newscasts – tend to be particularly influential" (Iyengar 2004, 251). With regards to polls, they can often act as a reinforcer of information which means the information presented by the polls is consistent with existing beliefs. In addition, the polls can also crystallize public opinion whereby learning takes place in the form of "sharpening" of attitudes and providing a teaching of new information (Weaver 1996, 36).

While some studies have examined poll effects in terms of learning about issues (Zhao and Blesk 1998; McLeod et al. 1996) few have examined whether the message of the poll gets through to the electorate. In other words, does the public pay attention to the race as presented in the poll and does that influence their perception of candidate chances? Moreover as Marsh (1984) asserts that there are few studies that control for voters' expectation about the election outcome. She "hypothesizes that surprising poll information (i.e.,

information that disconfirms expectations) may have the most impact" (as cited in Morwitz and Pluzinski 1996, 54).

This line of inquiry builds on the priming literature that indicates the public is influenced by the media by which issues are highlighted and which are ignored. True, polls highlight the horse-race, but they also can influence which party is projected to be in the lead and which is projected to be declining. Priming is useful for this purpose because much of the evidence that supports it indicates that the media have the most powerful influence on short-term events. As Matthew Mendelsohn points out, "many studies have confirmed that the media can prime; that is, they can provoke opinion or behavior change not because individuals alter their beliefs or evaluations of objects, but because they alter the relative weight they give to various considerations that make up the ultimate evaluation (Mendelsohn 1996, 113). In this study we test the priming effect of public opinion polls on the perception of who is likely to win in individual ridings in the Windsor-Essex region. This study is unique in that it combines the literature on priming with that of the reporting of public opinion polls.

Because voting is complex as is the formation of opinions on election choices and outcomes we do not expect to see dramatic effects here. What we do expect to see is some indication that polls are part of the overall information received by the public and that its

effect is in having people change their perception of who has a chance of winning rather than changing or influencing directly who they will vote for.

Methodology

There have been many different ways measuring bandwagon effects. Early attempts used exit polls to measure bandwagon failed to demonstrate either the bandwagon or underdog effect (Fuchs 1966; Mendelsohn 1966; Tuchman and Coffin 1971; Mendelsohn and Crespi 1970; Roshwalb and Resnicoff 1971; McAllister and Studlar 1991). Some have found little evidence of the bandwagon and underground effect in a small experiment design (Fleitas 1971; de Bock 1976; Navazio 1977; Ceci and Kain 1982). Panel studies have shown some small bandwagon effect for the leading candidates in one-sided elections (Glynn and McLeod 1984; Skalaban 1988). Kenney and Rice (1994) used panel data to show the contagion effect explaining the Bush bandwagon in the 1988 election. While panel studies seem to be the most successful in explaining and showing a bandwagon effect, their generalizability is somewhat limited due to the nature of the panel interview. When examining the campaign effects, using panel data could be problematic because the repeated interviews could increase interest in the election thereby conflating the results on the attention to the campaign (McAllister and Studlar 1991, 728). In this

study part of the underlying theory is that the public has sporadic interest in the campaign. The interest peaks as certain points such as the weekly publication of a local poll. Even if we had panel data, it is not clear whether it could capture the change in the aggregate public opinion, or reflect greater interest on the part of the individual taking the poll.

Election Background

To deal with campaign dynamics, we take our lead from the Canadian Election Study (CES) which conducts a rolling cross sectional poll throughout the campaign. Our study examines three local races during the 2004 federal election campaign. This methodology helps alleviate the problems with referent publics discussed by Mendelsohn and Crespi. What is instructive for our purposes is the notion that the public are not necessarily susceptible to national polls, but to information and projections of their own local races. This makes a lot of intuitive sense in a parliamentary democracy with the first-past-the-post electoral system as Canada enjoys. Pollsters during election campaigns are careful to note that their national poll results are difficult to translate to seat projections. Canadians are aptly aware that a national poll putting the Conservatives in a dead heat with the Liberals does not mean that the Conservatives will get the same number of seats as the Liberals. Pollsters try to ameliorate the

problems by giving regional results, but there too, one cannot predict the election results for an entire province any better in a national poll. For our purposes, having a public opinion poll focused on only three ridings allows us to better test these theories of bandwagon and underdog effects because we deal with the issue of referent publics. The distinctiveness of the polls was that it focused exclusively on the three Windsor area ridings and that results were broken down by the riding level. This type of poll data is unique in the study of national Canadian elections, which tend to focus on national or regional results.

This study uses a poll conducted by the author during the 2004 Federal election campaign. The questions were based in part on the Canadian Election Study Questionnaire (CES) developed prior to the 2004 campaign. The questionnaire was shortened to focus on issues of local interest and two questions were added to capture information from the local media and local candidates. We employed a rolling cross-section of a random sample. We interviewed on average 40 different respondents on each of the first 33 days of the official campaign. The first day of interview was May 23 and the last was June 23. This was three days prior to the election date. Overall, 1365 individuals were interviewed.

The rolling cross-section data were provided to the local daily newspaper in the area on four consecutive Saturday editions of the

Windsor Star. In each case, the Saturday paper featured the poll results broken down by riding on the front page of the paper. The publicatio of the poll results during the campaign in the *Windsor Star* offers opportunity to conduct a natural experiment.

The ridings represented two urban seats, Windsor-West held by NDP MP Brian Masse and Windsor-Tecumseh held also by NDP MP Joe Comartin. Brian Masse was elected recently in the 2002 by-election with 42.7 % of the vote after long-time Liberal cabinet Minister Herb Grey had retired. Herb Gray had held the riding since 1962 and had never been defeated. Joe Comartin had held his seat in Windsor-Tecumseh since the 2000 General election. In previous elections that seat had been Liberal from 1968 to 1980 and from 1993 to 2000. It had been a Liberal riding in 1984 and 1988. The rural riding was Essex and it was held by Liberal Susan Whelan. During the Mulroney years, it was an NDP riding, but since 1993 Susan Whelan had held the seat and it had been considered a "safe" Liberal seat insomuch that Whelan's father Eugene Whelan had held the seat from 1968 to 1984 .

The *Star* had provided some funding for the survey for exclusive access. The study was a work in progress as the poll results provided a five day moving average for the first report, and then 7 day moving averages for the subsequent reports. The methodology was explained

in each of the stories published in the *Star* and charts were provided for each riding.

Measurement

To see how the poll influenced the perception of the victor we first examine the breakdown of opinion regarding the question, "Who do you think has the best chance of winning in your local riding." Subsequently we conduct a logistic regression technique using this question as the dependent variable. The dependent variable was recoded into a dummy variable, scored zero or one. The independent variables were recoded into dichotomous variables, coded as zero or one. When three values were used, the middle value was recoded as a .5. "Media use" was measured on whether the individual had read the *Windsor Star* on the previous day – reading the *Windsor Star* was coded as a one, all other responses were coded zero. Some might question why we did not compare television versus newspaper effects given the research on the influence of television news on political matters. The answer is two-fold. First, because this study focused on the local race in the federal election, the newspaper coverage simply had the most attention to the local candidates in addition to the publication of the poll. In addition, several studies have shown that when a person's self-reported use of newspapers is correlated with knowledge, it demonstrates that newspaper readers have more

knowledge than television viewers (for review of this literature see Chaffee and Frank 1996, 52). Since this study ultimately seeks to see what information is learned, newspaper readers of the *Windsor Star* is the most valid measure.

"Time" was another independent variable. As Lang and Lang argue, poll effects are dependent on when in the campaign the poll is released. "Early polls have potentially greater impact because people are less familiar with the issue or candidate; opinions have not yet firmed" (Lang and Lang 1984, 135; Scheufel and Moy 2000, 11). In general, people will start to acquire information about campaign issues and candidates, the closer to an election day (Dutwin 2000, 23). For our purposes, we measure time in terms of the date or week that the polls were released (whether it was before the polls were released).

The "partisan" variable used the question regarding which part the person thought they were closer to. For "voter choice", we combined the questions on who they intended to vote for with the follow up question on who they were leaning towards. For "media use" we examined the question on which media the person was exposed to the previous day. These variable examine pre-existing beliefs as well as the media consumption. The three socio-demographic variables – "union membership", "certain to vote" and "education" – tap into other factors that may play a role in the vote. Since Windsor is strongly

associated with the auto sector and unionism, it was considered an important independent variable. Question woding for these variables can be found in Appendix B.

Results

Previous research indicates that voters tend to over-estimate the chance of their candidate winning. If a person favours a candidate they will be more likely to expect that candidate to prevail (Morwitz and Pluzinski 1996, 59). This certainly occurred in the Windsor ridings in 2004. As can be seen in table 1, voters in Essex who intended to vote for Whelan were significantly more likely to predict that Whelan would win the election 79.6% of the time. Similarly, those Essex voters who intended to vote for Watson were more likely to predict that Watson would in the riding 61.1% of the time. NDP voters were the least likely to predict that Tremblay would win the riding, but still 42.3% thought that he would.

<div align="center">[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]</div>

The same held for the two Windsor ridings. In Windsor-West, 64 percent of Liberal supporters thought that Pollock would win the riding. Fifty-five percent of NDP voters in Windsor-West thought that Masse had the best chance at victory. Only Conservative voters thought that their candidate had the least likely chance of victory (25.9 %).

In Windsor-Tecumseh, once again Liberal voters thought that Rick Limoge had the best chance of victory (61.4%), while 87.6 percent of NDP voters thought that Joe Comartin would win. Conservative voters in Windsor-Tecumseh also thought that Comartin would take the riding (37.8 %) compared to Conservatives who thought Fuschi had the best chance at victory (32.2%).

All these findings are highly statistically significant with relatively strong *tau-b* measures. The highest being Windsor-Tecumseh (.465). In other words, knowing which party a person would vote for gives you a 46.5% predictive accuracy about who they think will win in the riding. For Windsor-West the *tau-b* was .449 and in Essex .391.

On face value simply looking at the perceptions of the public on who was likely to vote prior to the publication of the polls and after the publication of the polls indicates that there was some spiral of silence effect evident in voter perceptions during the campaign. One could see how pre-conceived notions about the front runner could suppress opinion on other candidates and their chances of victory. In all three ridings the perception of who was going to win reflected either knowledge of the incumbents, or of the view that this election would not change who was going to win in this race. Nonetheless, table 1 does not show the dynamic of the election. To demonstrate the opposite of the spiral of silence we need to examine the changes over

time. As can be seen in tables 2 through 4, the poll published in the *Windsor Star* did seem to have some impact on voter perceptions of victory, thereby limiting the supposition of a spiral of silence effect.

Essex

The riding that appears to have been most influenced from the poll was Essex. During the first two weeks of the campaign when no local poll had been reported the majority of the respondents indicated that they thought the Liberals had the best chance of victory in the riding (54.6%). Only 19.5 percent of the respondents thought that the Conservatives could win the riding (table 2).

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

As can be seen in figure 1, the first poll published in the *Windsor Star* reporting on the local race showed that the Conservatives had 42.5% of popular support followed by the Liberals with 18.4%. When we examine the public perception of victory a week later we see that the perception of Conservative victory increase to 40%. This was nearly a 21 percentage point increase in the perception of Conservative chances to win the riding in one week. In contrast, the perception that the Liberals would win the riding fell to 36.5% a drop of 18 percentage points. As the *Windsor Star* reported the race tightening between the Conservatives and the Liberals, public perception of victory of the candidates also seemed to tighten. For

example, by the final report in the *Star* showed the Conservatives in the lead with 36.1 percent followed by the Liberals with 22.9 % the perception of the public was that it was a tied race. In other words, the public was of the view that both parties had an equal chance of victory.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

While the perception of victory does not mirror exactly the *Windsor Star* report, it does suggest that the public used the information within it. In addition, the key question by the final days was what was going to happen to the undecided vote. The poll reported in the *Star* did illustrate that there remained a high percentage of undecided voters. Of the three ridings, Essex stood alone in that not only did the publication of the poll seem to affect the perception of victory for the Conservatives, but it was statistically significant ($p < .003$). The final result in Essex was a narrow victory by Watson over Whelan. Watson received 36.56% of the vote, while Whelan received 34.95%. In this instance, the referent public of Essex voters could have reduced the spiral of silence effect for the Conservative supporters.

Windsor-West

For the first installment of the poll in Windsor-West the *Star* indicated that the Conservatives were in the lead with 34.3% of

popular support followed by the NDP with 31.5% (figure 2). The

Conservative lead was in error. The poll published neglected to provide

the final rolling sample for that date and overestimated the

Conservative support. This error was corrected in the Monday version,

but in either case, the overall impression was that the Conservatives

were in a tied position with the NDP. Prior to the publication of this

poll, the plurality of Windsor-West 42.7% of respondents thought that

the NDP had the best change for success for the riding (table 3).

Nearly one-third of the riding thought that the Liberals had a chance of

success. Only 5 % of the public thought that the Conservative

candidate had the best chance of success.

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Apart from the first wave of the polls showing the Conservatives

in the lead, the *Windsor Star* reported in subsequent reports that the

NDP were in the lead. While the perception of the Conservative victory

moved upwards somewhat in the wake of the reports (from 5.3 in the

first week to 13.8 by the second week down to 8.4 in week 3 and 8.7

in week 4), overall they were consistently seen as not have a high

chance of winning the riding. Moreover, the public never faltered from

the view that the NDP had the best chance of winning the riding. So

much so that by the last week of the campaign the majority of

respondents were of the view that the NDP had the best chance of

taking the riding (52.2%). The change in perception was slight in the first week and shows that the poll did little to change views. It might, however, have confirmed already held views by the end of the campaign. As we can see in table 3, there really was no effect of the time on the perception of victory for the NDP as whatever small differences in perception over time were not statistically significant.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

As was expected, Brian Masse won the election with 45.62% of the popular support, with Liberal Richard Pollock receiving 32.32%. Conservative Jordan Katz came in third with 18.9% of the vote share. In this instance, we can clearly see that polls that seem out of sync with general preferences are simply ignored by the public and therefore have little impact on perception.

Windsor-Tecumseh

In Windsor-Tecumseh, both the published poll and public opinion indicated that the NDP was in the lead and was most likely to win. The *Windsor Star* poll reported it as a tight race, with the Liberals gaining momentum in the final weeks. The three-way race portrayed by the *Windsor Star* poll did not seem to influence the public's perception of the NDP as the front runner (figure 3). The plurality of the public maintained that the NDP had the best chance of winning the riding. As can be seen in table 4, starting with 44 percent in the first week (pre-

publication) to 43.4 percent in the second week, followed by 43.5 % in the third week. By the final week of the campaign the perception dropped slightly to 39.7% when the *Windsor Star* as well as other news agencies reported that the Liberals were gaining ground nationally. As was the case in Windsor-West, the small changes in perception were not statistically significant. This, however, is consistent with the theory that the poll reinforced existing beliefs so that no change in opinion should be obsered. It would be remarkable if the public perception of the front runner contradicted previously held beliefs and the poll itself.

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Both the Liberal increase in support in the poll and the perception of Liberal victory in the riding show the campaign dynamics. On a national level the Liberals had shifted their popular support. This was reflected in the local race. It was also reflected the perception for victory for the NDP. Nonetheless, in the end, Joe Comartin won the election with 41.86% popular vote followed by the Liberal Rick Limoges with 33.88% and in third was the Conservative Rick Fuschi with 20.53%.

[INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Measuring the Effect

While on face value it appears that the publication of poll results indicating a Conservative surge in support in Essex changed the public perception of front runner in that riding, and that the NDP perception of victory in the Windsor ridings was also firm, this is not evidence to support the view that the publication of the poll a factor in changing this view. As the literature aptly demonstrates, voters are not always paying attention to political matters, even in election campaigns. When they do pay attention it is during major campaign events and issues. One could argue that the weekly local poll results could magnify attention to the issues. We have to remember that many individuals were critical of the poll and were skeptical of the results. Other influences of voter choice and views include partisanship, whether they have already made up their minds on who they were going to vote for, as well as whether they were going to vote altogether. To better gauge whether the perception of the victor was a consequence of the poll or these other factors a regression analysis was conducted. In this regression analysis we examine only the front runners in each race. Since the Windsor ridings both had NDP front runners and the challenger was the Liberals, we coded the variable as a dichotomous variable asking whether the Liberals had a chance at victory (Kenney and Rice 1994, 933). For the Essex riding, we created the model to

examine the Liberal chance at victory over the Conservatives. table 5 summarizes those results.

[INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

In Essex, the poll seems to have had a greater effect on the perception of the front runner in the election than in Windsor-West and Windsor-Tecumseh. However, as can be seen in table 5, the variable with the best fit to matching the poll results was that of vote choice The value was .448 and was highly statistically significant (p <.001). This confirms the findings found in table 1 which indicates that one's party preference colours their perception of front-runner. Individuals who wanted the Conservatives to win were most likely to indicate that they would win in the riding. This did not correspond with partisanship. Whether one typically saw themselves as being closer to one party over another did not seem to independently impact on their perception of the front-runner. As time progressed this also solidified their predictions. The variable date or time was less of a factor in the perception of front runner at .100 but nonetheless it was statistically significant (p < .05). The third most influential variable was whether the individual was a *Windsor Star* reader which explained .091 of the perception of front runner (p <.05). The media variable, that is, individuals who indicated that they were *Windsor Star* readers also indicated that they thought the Conservatives would prevail in the

riding. Belonging to a union, general feelings towards the Conservatives (partisan) and education had no independent effect on whether the individual would predict a Conservative victory in the riding. However, it is interesting to note, that while not statistically significant, union membership is negatively correlated with support for the view that the Conservatives would win the riding.

There were somewhat different results in the two Windsor ridings. In both cases, the media polls indicated that there would be an NDP victory. In this model we replace the Conservatives with the Liberals. We find, that as was found in Essex, vote choice had the strongest independent predictive power in the person's assessment of an NDP victory .052 (p <.001). However, the effect was smaller than in Essex. This is consistent with the events that occurred in the Windsor ridings. Vote intentions played a role as well. The more certain a person was to vote, the more likely they were to predict NDP victory. The media variable did not seem to play a role in the assessments of victory in the Windsor ridings. In addition, time, or the release date of the poll, had no effect on the perception of victory of the NDP in the Windsor ridings. This too is consistent with the overall findings that the poll really did not change public perceptions of NDP victory in the two Windsor ridings.

Overall, however, it is clear that our model has relatively low predictive accuracy with a R^2 value of .223 in Essex and even smaller in the Windsor ridings with an adjusted R^2 value of .190.

Discussion

The data in this paper show that the reporting of polls can be a factor in the learning process of the public. While it may not influence the way a person ultimately votes, it does help encourage and solidify the views of referent groups in a community who previously did not expect their party to win. This study reaffirms the research that individuals are selective in their media exposure and in their retention of information (Morwitz and Pluzinski 1996). If the poll results supports your candidate, you are more likely to pay attention to and retain that information. If, on the other hand, the poll shows your candidate lagging behind, you will either not pay attention to the poll, or disregard the information (Morwitz and Pluzinski 1996, 64) This goes for all information, not just polls, in an election campaign or even in a referendum, (Iyengar and Simon 2000, 158; LeDuc 2002, 727; de Vreese and Semetko 2002, 367; Zaller 1992). As Lang and Lang argue, "Where the real opinion lies may be less important than the change in perception of the climate of opinion. A definitive poll finding can destroy the premise that underlies the justification for behavior clearly at variance with professed ideals" (Lang and Lang 1984, 141).

What was interesting in this study was the fact that time had less of an impact on the change in perception of the front runner than other variables. This corresponds with research on referenda (de Vreese and Semetko 2002, 383) which indicates that as more polls are released, the more skeptical the public is of the "role of polls in the campaign."

During the 2004 local candidates and opinion leaders were quick to downplay the results of the poll if it indicated that their candidate was not in the lead. The first poll result indicated a Conservative surge in Windsor-West and in Essex received criticism and disbelief. In a story reported in the *London Free Press*, the headline said it all, "Get your umbrellas; pigs may fly" (Martin 2004). In other words, regardless of what the poll indicated, immediate reaction illustrated that many individuals had their own ideas of who was likely to win and the poll itself was considered flawed if it did not confirm to those pre-conceived notions. In these communities there were NDP incumbents who were generally considered popular and effective. As the poll results in subsequent weeks also showed that the NDP had the best chance of success in the two ridings, the public perception was in tune with the poll results. If we look at the two Windsor ridings separately, we see that there are no independent effects of the poll on the perception of the NDP victory.

The picture is somewhat different in the riding of Essex. Throughout the campaign, the *Windsor Star* poll showed that the Conservatives were in the lead and that the Liberal seat was in jeopardy. Despite the fact that the Conservative lead softened in the last week of the campaign, the public perception changed from believing a Liberal victory was inevitable to the perception that the Conservatives could take the riding. In the mind of the Liberal candidate the support for the Conservatives was attributed to the poll. Susan Whelan went so far as to try discredit the poll, the pollster, and the *Windsor Star* as being biased against her. In her press conference on June 23, 5 days before the vote she wanted the "voters to understand that they need to have all the information in front of them, and it disturbs me when I see the only newspaper putting forward a questionable poll and putting it forward and not disclosing the bias of the people that are conducting the poll" (Williamson 2004, A8).

While Whelan thought that the poll was moving support away from her campaign, it allowed Conservatives in the riding to think that their candidate had a chance in the race. This did not change Conservative opinions of which candidate they would ultimately choose, and indeed, it did not influence Liberals to switch their votes. What it may have done was help mobilize the Conservative vote so that they would ultimately turn out to vote.

Conclusion

      This paper has taken a different approach to the traditional research on media reports of polls during an election campaign. Rather than try to test for a bandwagon or underdog effect, it instead looks at how the poll changes public perception of the victor in local races during a Canadian federal election campaign. The study is also unique in that it examines three local ridings to see how a local poll can be seen as a local referent population. The study did find some effects of changing public perceptions in one riding (Essex), while it showed no such change in two ridings (Windsor-West and Windsor-Tecumseh). The reasons for the influence in the one riding and not in the other has to do with the perception of credibility of the poll, as well as the general level of support for the candidates. In the Essex riding we can see that there were many people who wanted to support the Conservative candidate but were otherwise unknown to the general public. In the past the riding had been considered a safe Liberal seat so conventional wisdom had it that it would remain a Liberal seat. When the poll showed there was support for the Conservative candidate, the public – some of whom were Conservative supporters – could express their hope for the Conservative victory. In the Windsor ridings, by contrast, the pre-existing belief that the NDP would take the riding was confirmed by the poll itself. Any time that the poll

indicated that either the Conservatives or the Liberals had a chance in that riding, it was simply disregarded by the plurality of voters who had already made up their minds for the NDP.

What this demonstrates is that the public is sophisticated in its use of polls and in campaign information in general. The fears that the public can be easily swayed by media reports, at least of the polls, should be put to rest. During an election campaign there are all sorts of competing sources of information, as well as a plethora of poll data. The public seems to be able to distinguish between small changes in the public opinion and their own beliefs on whom they think should represent their interests.

Appendix A

Tables and Figures

Table 1			
PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO EXPECTED EACH PARTY TO WIN THE ELECTION			
Intended Party	**Essex**		
	Liberal	Conservative	NDP
Liberal (Whelan n = 93)	<u>79.6</u>	16.1	4.3
Conservative (Watson n = 157)	35.0	<u>61.1</u>	3.8
NDP (Tremblay n = 78)	34.6	23.1	<u>42.3</u>

tau-b .391 p <.000

	Windsor-West		
	Liberal	Conservative	NDP
Liberal (Pollock n = 89)	<u>64.0</u>	10.1	25.8
Conservative (Katz n = 85)	25.9	25.9	<u>48.2</u>
NDP (Masse n = 115)	15.7	1.7	<u>55.0</u>

tau-b .449 p <.000

	Windsor-Tecumseh		
	Liberal	Conservative	NDP
Liberal (Limoges n = 101)	<u>61.4</u>	7.9	30.7
Conservative (Fuschi n = 90)	30.0	32.2	<u>37.8</u>
NDP (Comartin n = 105)	10.5	1.9	<u>87.6</u>

tau-b .465 p <.000

Table 2

Percentage of respondents that expected party to win in the riding by Poll publication date

Essex

	June 5	June 12	June 19	June 26	Total
Liberal	54.6	36.5	37.6	33.8	43.4
Conservative	19.5	40.4	39.6	34.7	31.0
NDP	11.9	8.7	7.9	13.3	10.5
Don't know	14.1	14.4	14.9	18.7	15.1
Total n	185	104	101	77	465

χ^2 = 25.331 df = 9 p < .003

Table 3

Percentage of respondents that expected party to win in the riding by Poll publication date

Windsor-West

	June 5	June 12	June 19	June 26	Total
Liberal	31.6	21.1	25.3	20.3	25.9
Conservative	5.3	13.8	8.4	8.7	8.6
NDP	42.7	47.7	37.3	52.2	44.4
Don't know	20.5	17.4	28.9	18.8	21.1
Total n	171	109	83	69	432

χ^2 = 15.111 df = 9 p < .088

Table 4

Percentage of respondents that expected party to win in the riding by Poll publication date

Windsor-Tecumseh

	June 5	June 12	June 19	June 26	Total
Liberal	27.7	22.2	30.6	35.3	28.2
Conservative	9.6	13.1	8.2	5.9	9.6
NDP	44.1	43.4	43.5	39.7	43.1
Don't know	18.6	21.2	17.6	19.1	19.1
Total n	177	99	85	68	429

χ^2 = 5.667 df = 9 p < .773

Table 5

Logistic Model of Determinants of Poll Knowledge				
	Essex (CPC)	**SE**	**Windsor (NDP)**	**SE**
Constant	-.18	.106	.223	.089
Media	.091	.045[b]	.080	.040
Date	.100	.020 [b]	.063	.040
Vote Choice	.448	.059 [a]	.369	.052 [a]
Partisan	.033	.062	.052	.050
Union	-.044	.050	.018	.042
Certain to Vote	.011	.061	.090	.050 [b]
Education	.012	.085	.000	.070
Adjusted R^2	.223		.190	
	N = 375		N = 489	

[a] $p<.001$
[b] $p <.05$

Figure 1
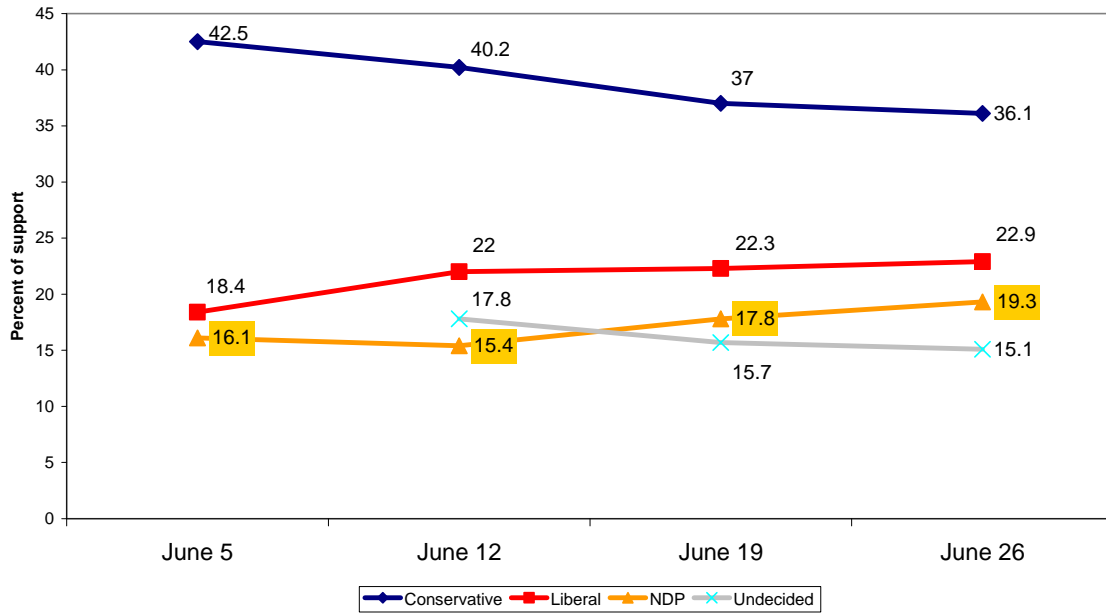**Moving Average Reported in Windsor Star (2004)**
Essex

Figure 2
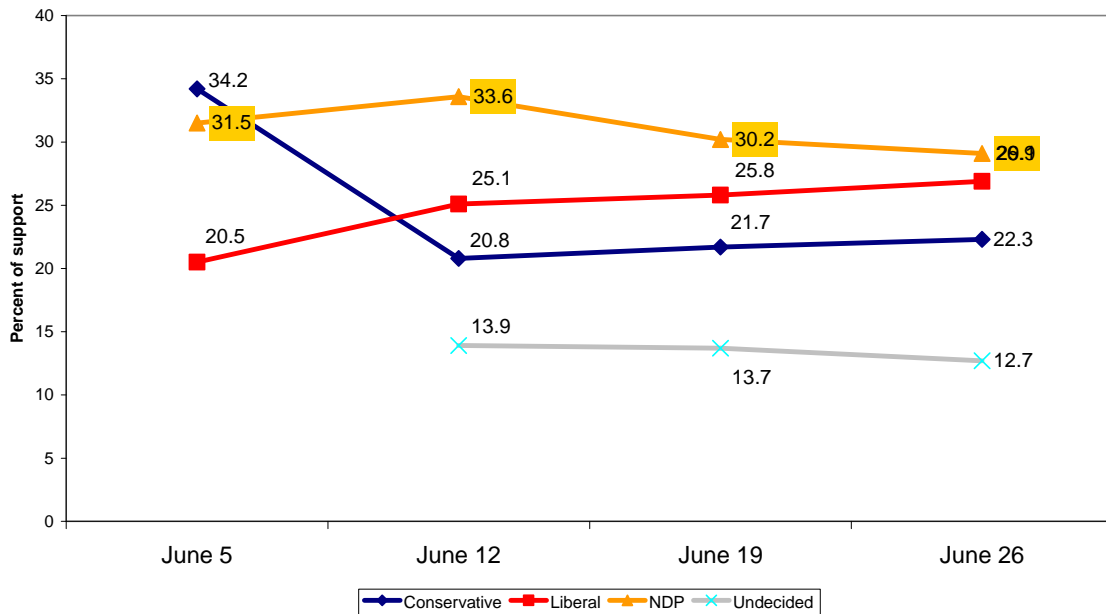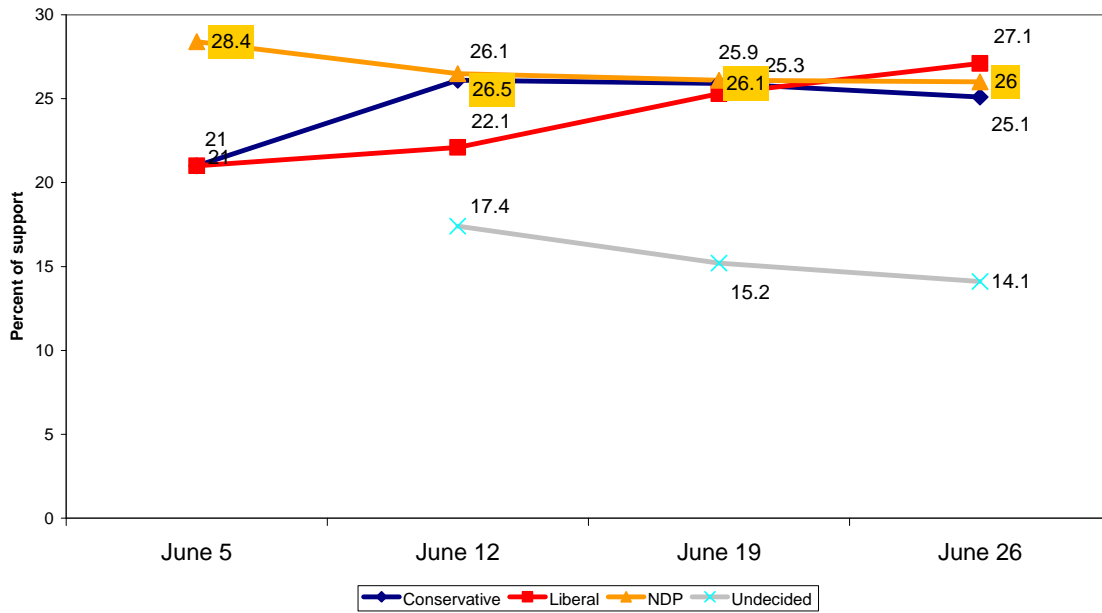**Moving Average Reported in Windsor Star (2004)**
Windsor West

Figure 3
Moving Average Reported in Windsor Star (2004)
Windsor Tecumseh

Appendix B

Measures Used in the Survey Instruments

Dependent Variable

Poll knowledge

Now let's talk about your own local riding. Which party do you think has a chance of winning the election in your local riding?

Independent variables

Media use

Thinking about what you heard or read YESTERDAY about the Federal election what media did you watch, listen to or read? (Open ended all responses noted).

Date

May 23 to June 5 – prior to first poll result

June 6 to June 23- after polls release

Vote choice

Which party do you think you will vote for in this election? The NDP (the New Democratic Party). The Conservatives, the Liberals or another party? [rotate]

If no or undecided, Is there a party you are leaning towards?

> 1 Yes

> 2 No

If yes, which party is that?

The responses to voter choice and leaning were combined.

Partisan

In federal politics, do you usually think of yourself as a: Liberal, Conservative, NDP or something else?

Union

Do you belong to a union?

Certain to vote

On election day are you certain to vote, likely to vote. Unlikely to vote, or certain not to vote?

Education

What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

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