

“NEARLY TWO CIGARS TO ONE WERE SMOKED IN HIS COMMITTEE ROOMS AS COMPARED WITH THE LIBERALS”: PUBLIC OPINION POLLING

Public opinion polling can be a useful tool for understanding how citizens feel about an issue. However—especially during election campaigns—the focus on polling can sometimes overshadow other issues. Polls are reported on daily and people watch the ups and downs like sports scores. In fact, polling stories are consistently one of the most popular reads on the Canadian political news aggregator National Newswatch. However, public opinion polls are only one way that people attempt to gauge the popularity of political parties and their candidates. Other measures that people commonly use to gauge the level of support include money fundraised, party rally attendance, numbers of lawn signs, and amount of social media followers.

Regardless of the method of measurement, people like to know who is winning or losing in politics. Jon Krosnick, a public opinion polling expert, told *Macleans* that “there’s a natural tendency of humans to want to know about what others do, what they think.... It’s the principle of wisdom of the crowd”²³. In other words, people look to popular opinion to help form their own opinion. This makes polls useful for understanding public feelings about an issue, a party, or a candidate.

What polls cannot do is provide in-depth information about an issue, a party, or a candidate. To make an informed decision, citizens need to understand broader concepts than just the level of public support. Why is the issue now being discussed? What underlies the issue? How will the issue affect the lives of all citizens? To build understandings like these, citizens must look beyond popular opinion polls.

1. Do polls inform voters or influence voters?
2. The more information people have at their disposal, the better able they will be to make an informed decision: polls can be helpful this way. But is time spent looking at polls better-spent exploring issues?

²³ qtd. in Cheadle, Bruce. “How useful are political polls?” *Macleans*, 4 May 2015. www.macleans.ca/politics/how-useful-are-political-polls/