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The Regulation of Poll Reporting in Canada

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La *Loi électorale du Canada*, adoptée en 2000, régit la façon dont les médias doivent divulguer les données techniques concernant les méthodes utilisées pour réaliser des sondages en période électorale. Mais la couverture médiatique des sondages faits hors des périodes électorales, qui n'est pas soumise à ces règles, ne fait l'objet que d'une autorégulation. Dans cet article, nous analysons la couverture faite par trois journaux (*La Presse*, le *Globe and Mail* et le *Calgary Herald*) de ces deux types de sondages. Nos résultats montrent que la façon dont les médias divulguent les données techniques relatives aux sondages est loin de correspondre aux normes reconnues dans l'industrie. Toutefois, ces informations sont au moins aussi complètes dans le cas des sondages non électoraux que dans celui des sondages électoraux. Par ailleurs, on observe que, dans les articles de fond qui traitent de sondages réalisés pour les journaux qui les publient, on retrouve significativement plus de données techniques que dans les courts articles où il est simplement fait mention de sondages non réalisés pour le compte des journaux qui les publient. Nous concluons donc que les normes et les règles qui s'appliquent à la divulgation des méthodes utilisées dans les sondages influencent peu la façon habituelle dont les médias traitent des sondages.

Mots clés : Loi électorale du Canada, données techniques concernant les méthodes utilisées dans les sondages pendant et hors des périodes électorales, journaux canadiens

The *Canada Elections Act* of 2000 regulates how the media must disclose the technical information regarding election polls. But the media coverage of non-election polls remains self-regulated. We examine how the technical information regarding election and non-election polling is reported in stories published by *La Presse*, the *Globe and Mail*, and the *Calgary Herald*. Our results show that, although media disclosure falls well short of the polling industry's standards, the technical information surrounding non-election polls is at least as complete as the information accompanying election polls. Long articles about polls sponsored by the media that publish them provide significantly more methodological information than short articles in which polls sponsored by "outside" organizations are mentioned in passing. These findings indicate that poll-reporting routines are relatively impervious to standards and rules regulating how poll results should be communicated to the public.

Keywords: Canada Elections Act, technical information in election and non-election poll reports, Canadian newspapers

Polls have become an increasingly common element of news reporting in the last few decades. For example, *Time* magazine made use of polls in 46 percent of its cover stories in 1993, up from 15 percent 20 years earlier (Asher 1995). There has also been a notable increase in poll reporting by Canadian newspapers since the 1980s (Bastien 2001; Lachapelle 1991). These trends are welcome news for many. Polls give the public a voice in which to speak directly to policy-makers and also ensure that politicians cannot go against the will of the public for long or claim support that they do not have. As Lavrakas and Traugott (2000) argue, polls bring an extra element to this “virtuous circle” by adding colour to media coverage of policy issues, thereby heightening citizens’ interest in those issues.

Others are more critical of polls and of how they are reported in the media. One frequent criticism is that polls deceive as well as inform. Subtle changes in the order and wording of survey questions or in the sample technique can significantly alter the results (Bishop 2005; Schuman and Presser 1996), and there is virtually no way for the typical uninformed and unprotected consumer of polls to know that the information has been misrepresented. The concern that the public might accept “scientific” survey results without realizing that the questions were loaded or the samples biased is intensified by the use of “oversimplified, cheap and crude opinion polls” by some media (Yankelovich 1991, 22).

To ensure that a minimum amount of information is given to the public, the polling industry devised quality standards and general rules about the methodological information that should accompany poll results. These standards are first and foremost aimed at pollsters but are also relevant to journalists who publish poll results (Miller and Hurd 1982, 244). The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), and the European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research have codified a set of disclosure standards

intended for use as a yardstick by journalists who report poll results and by regulators and scholars who evaluate how these results are publicly disseminated (Hardmeier 1999, 261).

In 2000, formerly self-regulating rules developed by the Canadian Association of Market Research Organizations and the Canadian Advertising Research Foundation, which are very similar to the AAPOR/WAPOR standards, became legal requirements in Canada with the passage of the *Canada Elections Act*. The Act regulates the dissemination of methodological information pertaining to polls about political parties and candidates when the results are first reported in the media. Article 326 states:

The first person who transmits the results of an elections survey . . . must provide the following with the results: the name of the sponsor, the name of the person or organization that conducted the survey [pollster]; . . . the period during which the survey was conducted; the population from which the sample of respondents was drawn; the number of people who were contacted . . . and, if applicable, the margin of error.

Two additional requirements apply to news items published in the printed media: accurate reporting of the wording of the question and where to obtain additional technical information.¹

The *Canada Elections Act* does not require media disclosure of all technical standards. Four important AAPOR standards are left out of the government regulation: the data gathering method (whether respondents were interviewed by telephone, by mail, face-to-face, or online); the response rate (refusals to participate, ineligible respondents); the sampling method (quota vs. random); and the sample size. One research question therefore is whether media stories about polls disclose the regulated standards more frequently than the unregulated ones.

The *Canada Elections Act* applies only to election polls. This leaves media reporting of non-election polls outside of government regulation. Non-election polls are defined here as polls sponsored by governments, interest groups, or media outlets for the purpose of measuring (and possibly mobilizing) public opinion on policy issues between elections. Our second research question therefore asks whether media stories about election polls disclose more standards—more regulated standards in particular—than media stories about non-election polls. Non-election polls are an important source of information about public sentiment for policy-makers and, ultimately, a tool that may influence policy-making (Rothmayr and Hardmeier 2002; Yanovitzky 2002). An alternative view holds that non-election polls are symbolic or strategic tools intended primarily to facilitate government communication (Page 2006). Either way, whether they are used instrumentally to directly affect policy, or symbolically to improve government communication, as non-election polls grow in number and importance, it is increasingly relevant to ask whether their disclosure by the media conform to AAPOR quality standards. While the quality and accuracy of election polls are ultimately validated by citizens on election day, non-election polls by and large escape factual verification, even more so if they are intended for political communication. Thus the argument that poll reporting in the news media should conform to AAPOR standards rings even more true in the case of non-election polls.

There has been no prior Canadian study comparing levels of compliance with AAPOR standards in newspaper stories about polls depending on whether the reported standards are regulated or unregulated and on whether the stories are about election polls or non-election polls. To fill this knowledge gap, we conduct an extensive content analysis of election and non-election poll reports in the health sector. Our study measures how written news complies with AAPOR standards, and then analyzes factors that are statistically correlated with varia-

tion in compliance. The content analysis is supplemented by in-depth interviews with four pollsters and three journalists. The interviews were primarily intended as a guide in developing research hypotheses and in interpreting the results of the content analysis. Although important in their own right, the interviews are not our primary tool of inquiry, and we do not quote our informants in this paper due to space limitations. Our results indicate that media disclosure of methodological information falls well short of the polling industry's standards and government regulation. Regulated standards are enforced more often than unregulated ones, but newspaper stories falling under the law do not disclose more methodological information than stories that fall outside the law.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The manner in which polls are reported in the media has been examined extensively in the United States. Paletz et al. (1980) found that a large majority of media reports by the *New York Times* and American television networks identified the sponsor of a poll. Many, although not all, also reported sample size and field dates. However, the sampling method, margin of error, and question wording were reported rarely (fewer than 10 percent of cases).

Miller and Hurd (1982) examined how the coverage of polls in four American metropolitan dailies between 1972 and 1979 conformed to seven AAPOR standards. They found that reports about in-house polls—that is, polls commissioned by the media outlet itself or by a parent media organization—contained more methodological information than articles about polls commissioned by other sponsors. Salwen (1985) investigated poll stories published in two Detroit dailies between 1968 and 1984 and found that disclosure rates increased over this period for sample size, population, margin of error, sampling method, and response rate, but the record was still far from perfect on these aspects.

Rollberg, Sanders, and Buffalo (1990) sought to replicate Miller and Hurd's analysis using data from the same four newspapers, plus the *Washington Post* and *USA Today*, during the last two months of the 1988 presidential campaign. Sponsorship, sample size, and population were mentioned more than 50 percent of the time; field dates and polling method were reported less frequently, and the margin of error, response rate, and question wording were present in 10 percent or fewer of the reports analyzed. Front-page reports more frequently contained methodological and sponsorship information than stories placed on the inside pages. On average, reports about in-house polls did a better job at reporting methodological information than did other reports. Contrary to expectations, national newspapers did not report more technical information than other papers. The high-brow *Washington Post* did even worse than two state newspapers and the more plebeian *USA Today*. Rollberg, Sanders, and Buffalo's study highlighted differences in conformity rates between media outlets and also found that wording, sampling error, sampling method, and response rate received less coverage in all the papers under review.

Marton and Stephens (2001) examined poll stories published in the *New York Times* between 1989 and 1997. Like Rollberg and her colleagues, they found that question wording, sampling method and frame, and margin of error were least often reported. As in previous studies, they found that stories about in-house polls exhibited higher levels of conformity with AAPOR standards. Weaver and Kim (2002) sampled poll stories from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the evening news programs of three television networks from 1996 to 1998. Once again they found that the question wording, sampling method and frame, and margin of error received limited coverage, but that television reports also failed to provide other information such as sample size and population definition.

Concerning the question of whether election polls have higher levels of conformity than non-election

polls, Miller and Hurd (1982) found that stories about election polls were more likely to report sample size, question wording, population definition, sampling method, sampling error, and field dates than articles featuring non-election polls. Their results also showed that the margin of error was missing in more than one-third of election survey reports and was nearly absent from non-election poll articles. Both the Marton and Stephens (2001) and the Weaver and Kim (2002) studies found that election polls do not enjoy greater rates of disclosure in news stories than non-election polls. Weaver and Kim even showed that, with respect to population definition, sample size, and response rate, non-election reports actually do better. The US evidence on whether compliance in election poll reports is higher than in non-election poll reports is therefore mixed. And as we will see below, there is no evidence on this question in Canada so far.

To date, six scholarly publications have examined whether election poll reports in Canada comply with AAPOR standards. Anderson (2000) studied the quality of poll reporting in the coverage of 11 newspapers and three television news programs during the 1997 Canadian election. The lowest rates of compliance were generally associated with opinion pieces published in newspapers. News reports scored highest, with television newscasts in the middle. Response rate and question wording were frequently omitted. When a poll was the primary focus of a news story, disclosure scores went up for nearly all elements of methodology.

Focusing on the coverage of election polls between 1979 and 1997, Bastien (2001) observed that first-hand accounts of poll results in Quebec's four major dailies most often reported pollster and sponsor names, field dates, sample size, and margin of error. He noted a substantial increase in the amount of technical information provided between the 1979 and 1984 election periods, but little change thereafter. He also found that reports about in-house polls provided more technical information.

Durand (2002) compared poll coverage before and after the passing of the *Canada Elections Act* in 2000. She looked at first-hand polls, reporting only the presence or absence of technical information (a method well-suited to the small number of cases she analyzed). Based on her analysis of pollsters' reports available online, she concluded that part of the variation in conformity was linked with the information disclosed by pollsters, whom journalists rely on for methodological details (Durand 2002, 545). She found very little observable change between 1997 and 2000, and she attributed this to unchanging pollsters' practices.

De Clercy and Ferguson (2003) replicated Durand's study based on articles published in the *Globe and Mail*. Unlike Durand, they found a modest increase in methodological information reporting between 1997 and 2000, which they attributed to the new law. However, in a more recent replication (Ferguson and de Clercy 2005), they found that the quality of poll reporting declined between 2000 and 2004. This result is at variance with Durand's (2005) finding of very high levels of compliance with AAPOR standards in media poll reporting during the 2004 election.² All three studies concur that question wording, the number of people contacted (from which the response rate can be deduced if the sample size is given), and the means to obtain extra information about the poll are the least frequently disclosed information.

THE STUDY

Unlike the studies just reviewed, which examine the degree of compliance with AAPOR standards in media reports about election polls only, this research compares the degree of compliance with AAPOR standards in newspaper articles that cover both election and non-election polls. Our objective is to quantitatively measure the difference in the compliance of reports that are regulated and those that are not, to assess whether this difference is statisti-

cally significant, and to analyze its possible determinants.

Although journalists may be less knowledgeable about the detailed provisions of the *Canada Elections Act* than pollsters, the journalists we interviewed were at least aware that there was a law regulating the reporting of methodological information regarding election polls. We assume that this knowledge prompts journalists to report more AAPOR standards than would be the case otherwise. We therefore hypothesize that media reports about election polls will include more methodological information than reports about non-election polls, other things being the same. However, we need to consider the possibility that the reporting of methodological information is primarily a matter of newsroom choice, in which case journalistic practices and editorial routines, not legislative rules, will determine the degree of compliance with AAPOR standards. Given the uncertainty surrounding the effect of the relevant provisions of the *Elections Act* on compliance by journalists who report on election polls (Durand 2002, 2003, 2005; de Clercy and Ferguson 2003; Ferguson and de Clercy 2005), we should not be surprised to find that journalists devote the same space to methodological information irrespective of whether they report on election or non-election polls.

To find out, we recorded the presence or absence of the eight government-regulated standards in the journalistic reports about health-related polls that appeared in *La Presse*, the *Globe and Mail*, and the *Calgary Herald* from 1 January 2003 to 30 June 2004. The standards are as follows:

- the name of the sponsor of the poll,
- the name of the pollster,
- the period during which the survey was conducted,³
- the population from which the sample was drawn (a simple mention of "Canadians" or "Québécois"

is considered as information about the population),

- the wording of the question,⁴
- the margin of error,
- the number of people who were contacted, and
- the means by which interested readers could obtain more detailed technical information (this standard does not necessarily require that a web link or contact information be made directly available).

We also recorded the presence of four additional AAPOR standards that are not mentioned in the *Canada Elections Act*: the sample size, the data gathering method, the sampling method, and the method used to deal with non-response and weighting. Each report constitutes a case. AAPOR standards are recorded only once per case. To ensure a degree of reliability and to control any bias in the kind of judgmental coding involved here, cases were coded independently by two research assistants; the results were then submitted to one of the authors who acted as arbiter.⁵

The *Globe and Mail* is the national newspaper with the largest circulation across English Canada, and *La Presse* is the most widely circulated newspaper in Quebec. The *Calgary Herald* was selected because we wanted to have a Western Canadian perspective in our sample.⁶ Since we wanted to analyze only one issue in order to keep the issue variable constant, we chose the most important policy issue at the time, the one receiving the highest level of media coverage over the long term. The importance of health care as a policy issue is clearly apparent when we look at the polling activity. Health care consumes by far the largest part of the federal government's public opinion research budget (Government of Canada 2006). It has topped the list of "most important problems" for Canadians with-

out interruption from 1997 to 2006. Health care was also at the top of the agenda during the June 2004 federal election campaigns (Pammett and Dornan 2004). Moreover, health care is the most important provincial policy issue: polls about provincial issues and elections are more likely to involve health care than any other issue over the long term.⁷ Our choice of issue therefore maximizes the chances of encountering media reports of election and non-election polls.

FINDINGS

We counted 120 separate reports about health-related polls in the three newspapers during the 18 months covered by the study: 44 in *La Presse*, 39 in the *Globe*, and 37 in the *Herald*. Twenty-three articles (20 percent) were opinion pieces. Only 13 articles, most of them wire service dispatches, were not written by journalists affiliated with a newspaper. Health-care poll reports are often high-visibility affairs; 36 percent (43) of the reports studied appeared in the first five pages of the newspapers. The firm that conducted most of the polls for which we have pollster information is Ipsos-Reid, with 25 articles (21 percent; the percentage climbs to 32 percent of the articles for which the polling firm is identified). Léger Marketing and CROP are identified as pollsters in 10 (8 percent) and 12 (10 percent) articles, respectively. Compas is identified as the pollster in seven articles. Nineteen of the 25 polls by Ipsos-Reid are reported in the *Globe's* pages, while 11 of the 12 reports of CROP polls are found in *La Presse*. The *Calgary Herald* draws from the most diverse array of pollsters. Fifty of the 120 polls reported in this analysis (42 percent) were provincial or local in scope, but *La Presse* was the only daily that reported more often on provincial or local polls than on national polls.

The number of poll reports, particularly on elections, tends to increase as the election day draws nearer. Thirty-eight of the 120 articles under analysis

(32 percent) were published in the 40 days preceding the June 2004 federal election, that is, during less than 8 percent of the period of study. And 28 of them presented election-related poll results. Prior to the April 2003 election in Quebec, 11 health-related stories were published in *La Presse*. Health-related stories about other provincial elections were much less frequent.

Do stories about election polls comply with more AAPOR standards than stories about non-election polls? Do poll stories comply more with regulated standards (those mentioned in Article 326 of the *Canada Elections Act*) than with unregulated ones? Figure 1 displays the percentage of compliance with each AAPOR standard in decreasing order of average frequency. It can be seen that newspaper stories about election polls have a tendency to display more methodological information than stories about non-election polls. The frequency of mention of the margin of error is 50 percentage points higher in reports about election polls, and the wording of the poll questions is explicitly mentioned almost five times more often in stories about election polls. Most other cases also display higher levels of compliance in election poll stories, although the difference is less dramatic. It is also clear from Figure 1 that poll stories—election poll stories in particular—comply more with regulated standards than with unregulated ones. Three out of four unregulated standards (the method of data gathering, the sampling method, and the method used to deal with non-response) have lower-than-average rates of compliance (the only unregulated standard with a higher-than-average rate of compliance is sample size). On the other hand, five out of six regulated standards have higher-than-average rates of compliance (the two regulated standards with a lower-than-average rate of compliance are where to obtain more information and the number of people contacted).

On average, compliance with the 12 standards is 7.3 percentage points higher in election poll stories than in non-election poll stories. Compliance with the eight regulated standards is 8.2 percentage points

higher in election poll stories (both percentage differences are statistically significant at 90 percent). The data shown in Figure 1 therefore give affirmative answers to our two research questions: election poll stories comply with more standards than non-election poll stories, and regulated standards are better enforced than unregulated ones. This suggests that government regulation is enforced to some extent.

The data of Figure 1 show several “anomalies,” however. First, compliance is not always higher in election poll stories. Non-election poll stories comply equally well with two regulated standards (the population from which the sample was drawn, and where to obtain more information), and they actually comply better than election poll stories with a third regulated standard (the period during which the survey was conducted). Second, three regulated standards that are poorly enforced by non-election poll stories are also poorly enforced by election stories (margin of error, number of people contacted, and where to obtain additional information). Poorly enforced standards are defined here as standards that are reported less than half the time. Third, election poll stories mention sample size—an unregulated standard—more often than many of the regulated standards.

Furthermore, the results of Figure 1 are not entirely reliable: The data could be an artefact of the period of study or of the issue selected for analysis. To assess this, in Table 1 we compare our findings with those of two other Canadian studies that used different issues and time frames: data on election polls in 2000 (de Clercy and Ferguson 2003) and in 2004 (Ferguson and de Clercy 2005). The data in the “our study” column are based on the 30 news stories about non-election health-care polls published in the *Globe and Mail* between January 2003 and June 2004 (nine stories about election polls were deleted to avoid contamination of the data). It is immediately apparent from the table that compliance in reports by the *Globe and Mail* dropped in all categories between the elections of 2000 and

FIGURE 1

Compliance with AAPOR Standards in Election and in Non-Election Stories in Three Canadian Dailies between January 2003 and July 2004

Note: AAPOR = American Association for Public Opinion Research. The eight AAPOR standards regulated by the *Canada Elections Act* are population, sponsor, pollster, period, margin of error, question wording, where to obtain more information, and people contacted.

Source: Authors' compilation.

2004. Of more direct interest here is that the average frequency of methodological reporting in non-election poll news stories by the *Globe and Mail* (55 percent) is comparable with the frequency in news stories about the 2000 election (54 percent) and higher than in news stories about the 2004 election (35 percent). Only the information about the firm that conducted the poll and about question wording is mentioned more often in stories related to election polls in 2004 than in stories about non-election health-care polls. Five of the remaining standards are mentioned substantially less often in election poll stories than in stories covering polls about health care. The comparison, admittedly based on a small number of observations from one newspaper only, strongly suggests nevertheless that

journalists do not pay more attention to technical standards when they write about election polls than when they report about non-election polls. The irony of course is that they are required by law to report technical information about election polls, but not about health-care polls.

So far our results appear contradictory. Figure 1 shows that stories about election polls comply substantially more with AAPOR standards—regulated standards in particular—than do stories about non-election polls, but Table 1 shows that there is no difference between the two types of stories. These results are partial, however; we need to run multivariate regression analyses before we can draw any general conclusions.

TABLE 1
Compliance with Eight Regulated AAPOR Standards in the *Globe and Mail* at Different Dates

	<i>de Clercy and Ferguson (2003) 2000 election</i>	<i>Ferguson and de Clercy (2005) 2004 election</i>	<i>Our Study^a Jan. 2003– June 2004</i>
Number of news reports	22	24	30
Regulated AAPOR standards			
Population	9 (41%)	1 (4%)	26 (87%)
Sponsor	19 (86%)	15 (62%)	23 (77%)
Pollster	22 (100%)	21 (87%)	24 (80%)
Period	14 (64%)	8 (33%)	22 (73%)
Number of people contacted	0	0	0
Margin of error	15 (68%)	14 (58%)	23 (77%)
Question wording	9 (41%)	7 (29%)	5 (17%)
Where to obtain more information	6 (27%)	0 (0%)	8 (27%)
Average	11.8 (54%)	8.3 (35%)	16.4 (55%)

Note: AAPOR = American Association for Public Opinion Research.

^a The 30 articles in this column do not include nine stories related to the 2004 elections that are included in the 24 reported by Ferguson and de Clercy (2005).

Source: Authors' compilation.

The data for the dependent variables are the number of AAPOR standards mentioned by each news story. Figure 2 presents the frequency distribution of compliance with the 12 AAPOR standards. At one end of the distribution, there are five news stories without any reference to standards and four with only one reference. At the other end of the distribution, we see that no stories reported more than ten AAPOR standards. Figure 3 shows the frequency distribution of the eight standards required by the *Canada Elections Act*. None of the newspaper stories under analysis are in full compliance with the eight standards. However, unlike the data of Figure 2, which are symmetric, the data of Figure 3 are skewed in favour of high compliance. No less than 40 stories comply with at least six regulated standards, and only 29 comply with three standards or fewer.

The main explanatory variable is a binary coded one for news stories reporting election poll results and zero for stories reporting non-election poll results. We also test the impact of three additional variables susceptible of influencing compliance with AAPOR standards: the media outlet, the sponsor of the poll, and the health topic covered in the news story. Each variable is theoretically important and deserves some discussion.

Media Outlet

Three newspapers were included in the design to assess whether the observed variation in compliance is affected by differences in Canadian newspapers' editorial policies. There are very few bases on which one can theorize about the effect of media outlets on compliance with AAPOR standards in Canada. To our knowledge, no Canadian newspaper has an

FIGURE 2

Frequency Distribution of Compliance with 12 AAPOR Standards in Three Canadian Dailies

Note: AAPOR = American Association for Public Opinion Research.

Source: Authors' compilation.

FIGURE 3

Frequency Distribution of Compliance with Eight Regulated AAPOR Standards in Three Canadian Dailies

Note: AAPOR = American Association for Public Opinion Research.

Source: Authors' compilation.

official newsroom policy with respect to technical information reporting and none offers specific training on these aspects. Our interviews reveal that journalists do not consider all the methodological information they receive from pollsters to be equally relevant or useful to their readers. The problem is that the content of what is considered relevant and useful varies from one journalist to the other.⁸ These considerations may shed light on the high variance that we observe across newspapers in the frequency of mention of individual AAPOR standards. The margin of error is mentioned less than 20 percent of the time by *La Presse* against 50 percent for the *Globe* and 60 percent for the *Herald*. The sponsor of the poll is identified 90 percent of the time by the *Herald* compared with 70 percent for the *Globe* and *La Presse*. Technical information about data gathering methods is featured significantly more often in the *Herald* (25 percent) than in the *Globe* and *La Presse* (5 percent).

Kosicki and Lavrakas (2000, 157) have speculated that differences between newsroom policies regarding the reporting of technical information are a function of the quality and reputation of the newspaper itself. However, Rollberg, Sanders, and Buffalo (1990) found that stories published in the *Washington Post* reported less technical information than those in the tabloid-style *USA Today* and in two state dailies.⁹ Welch (2002) found equally meager disclosure rates for stories published in national and in smaller, local newspapers in the United States. We do not have hard empirical evidence on differences in the quality of newspapers in Canada.

Durand, Vachon, and Tanguay (1998) note significant differences between Canadian pollsters with respect to methodology as well as their perception of clients' expectations about methodological information. For historical, social, and economic reasons, Quebec pollsters tend to rely more heavily on methodologies that are tested and proven, and to deliver exhaustive methodological reports to their clients. Assuming that journalists rely primarily on pollsters

for the technical information they report,¹⁰ one could speculate that *La Presse* would report more technical information than the *Globe and Mail* and the *Calgary Herald*. However, our data show that *La Presse* reports slightly less technical information overall than the *Globe* and the *Herald*.

Health Issue

It is possible that election poll stories focus on issues that require particularly high levels of compliance while non-election poll stories focus on issues that do not require high compliance, thereby producing a spurious correlation between election polls and compliance. To control for this, we recorded whether the main topic of a poll report on health care was salience, performance, the future of the health-care system, research, or something else.¹¹ "Salience" stories feature poll results about the importance of health care. Most typical are surveys identifying health as receiving "the greatest attention from Canada's leaders" (Ipsos-Reid formulation). "Performance" refers to stories about citizens' satisfaction with the health-care system, including waiting lists, access to health care in general, and the shortage of doctors (perceived or real). News stories about polls revealing that respondents believe that the system is in a state of crisis were also deemed performance-related. "The future of the system" applies to issues of health-care service privatization, a possible two-tier health system, and how much money should be allocated to the health-care system. "Research" refers to stories about the causes of diseases, new treatments, and health issues such as genetically modified food and obesity. "Other topics" include media reports about polls that do not fall within one of the above categories, for example, which political party is most trusted to implement changes in the Canadian health-care system.

Thirty-five articles (29 percent) feature polls about the salience of health care as a policy issue, making salience the most frequent topic, even more so during election campaigns. News pieces about

salience never fail to note that health care tops Canadians' list of concerns. After salience, the most frequently reported topic is the future of the health system (25 percent), most notably the ongoing debate about the privatization of health care. The next items are performance (19 percent) and research (18 percent). The remaining 8 percent fall in the "other topics" category. The three papers give roughly equal exposure to each topic, except for the *Herald's* more extensive coverage of salience (41 percent compared with 23 percent for both the *Globe* and *La Presse*).

It has been suggested that journalists who report on polls about health research should be especially careful to include the methodology of these polls (Gawiser and Witt 1994, 31). We therefore hypothesized that media reports on research polls would have higher levels of compliance than poll reports about other health issues. Interestingly, our data reveal that polls about research are exclusively non-election polls. As a consequence, we expected that the inclusion of the health research variable in the model would diminish the impact of election polls on compliance.

Sponsor

Another variable that could interfere with the expected correlation between regulated stories or standards and compliance is the sponsor of a poll. Sponsors are classified into three groups: medical associations, government institutions, and media organizations. In virtually all the cases, media polls are also in-house polls. Out of the 91 poll stories for which we have sponsorship information, 40 (44 percent) report media-sponsored polls, 18 (20 percent) are about polls sponsored by government actors, and the remaining 33 (36 percent) are about polls commissioned by professional associations or think tanks. The *Herald* features the largest number of reports based on in-house polls, in part because CanWest, the corporation that owns it, is very active in poll sponsorship. The *Globe* comes second in reporting about its own polls, followed by *La Presse*.

The pollsters that we interviewed confirmed that surveys sponsored by professional associations and by the federal government—especially Health Canada—are of higher quality and likely to report more AAPOR standards than media polls. This is due in part to the fact that government polls face less severe time and budget constraints than media polls. Assuming that news media are neutral in reporting poll stories, we should expect reports about in-house polls to have lower levels of compliance than reports about polls sponsored by non-media organizations. However, the news media are not neutral filters. Two journalists that we interviewed told us that they consider polls commissioned by their own organizations to be more salient, deserving larger amounts of technical information reporting than polls sponsored by outside organizations. One rationale for the extra salience of in-house polls appears to be that news organizations sponsor polls to drive up sales. This motive should increase the likelihood that journalists who write about polls sponsored by their own organization will include more technical information in their report in spite of the fact that media-sponsored surveys may include less technical information than non-media surveys to start with. We therefore hypothesized that in-house polls would generate the reporting of more technical information.

There are four additional control variables in the model, each of which is expected to influence conformity to AAPOR standards: whether the news story is an opinion piece (negative impact expected); whether the story appears within the first five pages (positive impact expected); the length of the article¹² (positive impact expected); and whether the poll is the focus of the story (positive impact expected). Seventy-eight articles (65 percent) are centrally focused on discussing poll results, although only half of those are exclusively or mainly concerned with health issues.

The regression results are reported in Table 2. The first model in Table 2 reports the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression results when the dependent variable includes all 12 AAPOR stand-

TABLE 2
Determinants of Compliance with AAPOR Standards in Three Canadian Dailies

<i>Variables</i>	<i>All Standards^a</i>	<i>Regulated Standards^b</i>
Election poll	-.153 (.414)	-.022 (.718)
Media outlet:		
<i>Globe and Mail</i>	-.113 (.349)	-.062 (.643)
<i>La Presse</i>	-.282 (.374)	.197 (.654)
Sponsor:		
In-house poll	1.17*** (.370)	1.928*** (.711)
Government poll	.245 (.407)	-.695 (.659)
Health issue:		
Salience	-.298 (.384)	-1.184 (.807)
Research	.071 (.336)	-.251 (.580)
Poll the main topic	2.553*** (.367)	1.981*** (.626)
Length of article	.608*** (.188)	.425** (.214)
First five pages	-.397 (.333)	.141 (.559)
Opinion piece	-1.632*** (.397)	-1.317** (.651)
Constant	1.373** (.713)	-1.952* (1.010)
Adjusted pseudo <i>R</i> -square	.562	.363

Notes: AAPOR = American Association for Public Opinion Research. Standard errors in parentheses. The reference categories are the *Calgary Herald* for Media Outlet, professional associations for Sponsor, and performance for Health Issue.

^aOLS estimation.

^bBinary logit estimation.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

Source: Authors' compilation.

ards.¹³ Contrary to our main hypothesis, news reports about election polls do not display significantly more technical information than non-election stories (the coefficient is in fact negative). Newspaper readers are provided with technical information significantly more often when a poll is the main topic of an article, when it is an in-house poll, when the article is a news story and not an opinion piece, and when the story is long. All things being equal, it is estimated that a long article about an in-house poll that is the main topic of the story is going to report five more elements of technical information than a short opinion piece that happens to mention a poll

sponsored by another organization. The model predicts that news stories about in-house polls will report one more technical standard on average than news stories about polls sponsored by non-media organizations. The coefficients for the remaining variables do not pass the test of statistical significance. *La Presse* provides less technical information to its readers, and the *Calgary Herald* more, than the *Globe and Mail*, but the difference is not statistically significant. The sign of the coefficient for “research” is positive as hypothesized (in contrast with the sign of the coefficient for “salience”), but it fails to reach statistical significance.

The dependent variable in the second model shown in Table 2 is a binary coded one when a story complies with five or more regulated standards, and zero otherwise. The results are very similar to those in the first model. In other words, the determinants of compliance with government-regulated standards are almost exactly the same as the determinants of compliance with the 12 self-regulated AAPOR standards. Government-regulated standards are reported significantly more often when a poll is the main topic of an article, when it is an in-house poll, when the article is a news story and not an opinion piece, and when a health story is about salience. Most importantly, and again contrary to our hypothesis, the coefficient for election polls is not significant (it is in fact negative). Stories about election polls do not display more regulated standards than non-election stories.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This paper analyzed the extent to which health-care poll reports published in the Canadian press between 1 January 2003 and 30 June 2004 disclosed the technical standards surrounding those polls as required by industry standards and by the *Canada Elections Act*. Our test tried to isolate the effects of the *Canada Elections Act* by comparing the number of times regulated and unregulated standards were mentioned in newspaper stories falling under and outside the law. We find that the disclosure of standards falls short of government regulation and of the industry's standards. A preliminary exploration of the data suggested that the level of compliance with government-regulated standards is higher than with unregulated standards, and that the level of compliance in stories about election polls (the stories that fall under the law) is higher than in stories about non-election polls (that fall outside the law). However, multivariate analyses showed that, when proper controls are put in place, compliance levels are not higher in election poll stories that fall under the law or with standards that are government regulated.

We find no statistical difference in the coverage of methodological information across different newspapers or across issues. The only factors affecting compliance are those associated with the salience of a news story in the eyes of journalists. Long articles about polls that are sponsored by the media that publish them and that are the central topic of the story cover significantly more methodological information than short articles about polls that are sponsored by "outside" organizations and that are not the central topic of the story. Journalists tend to include more methodological details in salient articles than in non-salient ones simply as part of telling a bigger story.

Compliance therefore appears to have more to do with the salience of a news story in the eyes of journalists than with their desire to comply with regulation. Do journalists who do not comply with regulation make a deliberate choice to disregard the law or is their failure to comply due to their ignorance of the law's requirements? The truth for most journalists probably lies somewhere in the middle. Two journalists we interviewed did not know precisely which standards were required by the *Canada Elections Act*, whether non-election polls were regulated by government or not, and what penalties applied in case of non-compliance.¹⁴ From this we can safely speculate that although journalists are aware of the law, they are often too fuzzy about its detailed provisions to disobey deliberately.

The paper leaves open the question of whether pollsters are also responsible for the failure to disclose all the required technical information. Much of our critical attention in this paper has focused on journalists. But this is in part an artefact of our lack of data on pollsters' reports to their clients. We cannot know whether non-compliance is due to journalists who fail to communicate the required technical information available in pollsters' reports (through either ignorance or deliberate choice) or to pollsters who fail to report the required information to their clients. We are in the process of filling

this research gap in a new project aimed at correlating the amount of technical information contained in newspaper articles with that contained in the pollsters' reports to their clients.

Our next research project will also assess the degree of compliance with several "principles of conduct" that are more general than the "technical standards" analyzed here. These principles of conduct are aimed at improving the accuracy and transparency of the poll results that are reported to the public, and at ensuring that the results do not yield to misleading conclusions. Scholars have long argued that the quality of public opinion polls would improve substantially if survey and media organizations provided the type of information that would allow citizens to assess whether survey results are threatened by unequal levels of political knowledge among respondents (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), by variations in their feelings about policy (Gallup and Rae 1940; Price and Neijen 1997), or by biases in the format and in the content of survey questions (Schuman and Presser 1996).¹⁵ Although largely unregulated, these elements seem as crucial as the compliance with technical standards of disclosure for the development and maintenance of an informed and active citizenry in a democratic system.

NOTES

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¹ Canada is not the only country with legal provisions about the information to be published with poll results. According to Spangenberg (2003), the publication of information related to poll methodology is regulated by the government in approximately 20 percent of the countries surveyed, while self-regulation is practised in 80 percent.

² The discrepancy is explained in part by different methodologies. Ferguson and de Clercy (2005) examine the media coverage of all polls, whereas Durand analyzes the coverage only of in-house polls, that is, polls

commissioned by the same newspapers that report them. As we will see below, media stories that report in-house polls are more likely to include technical information than other poll stories.

³ Any mention of a month was taken as presence of the information. However, a reference to the release date was not, because of the unknown period of time that can pass between data collection and the moment the poll is made public.

⁴ Question wording had to be either provided in quotes or made so clear as to be considered the equivalent of a quote.

⁵ The amount of judgment was minimal with precise technical standards such as these. Consequently, there was little disagreement between the coders to start with. Initial agreement reached 95 percent.

⁶ We interviewed one journalist from each newspaper. They were selected from the list of journalists who had written health-related stories during the period of analysis.

⁷ There were ten provincial and territorial elections between January 2003 and July 2004.

⁸ For arguments against media reporting of all the methodological information, see Miller and Hurd (1982, 248).

⁹ Patterson (1997, 446) is one of the strongest proponents of a restricted interpretative role for journalists, arguing that "journalistic values are different from and often at odds with political values." In the opposite corner, Meyer and Jurgensen (1991) argue that journalistic values emphasizing relevance and interest to the audience should prevail in poll results reporting.

¹⁰ See Durand (2002). Hardmeier (1999, 270) also argues that conformity to methodological standards is primarily the responsibility of pollsters. See also Weaver and Kim (2002).

¹¹ The issue topic was coded based on the headlines of each story and, when necessary, on a more careful reading of the content of the article.

¹² When the length of an article is not included in the regression equation, *La Presse* appears to provide significantly less technical information than the other two newspapers. But this is in large part an artefact of the

fact that *La Presse* publishes shorter articles (459 words on average versus 632 for the *Herald* and 692 for the *Globe*).

¹³ There is enough symmetry in the data distribution of the dependent variable to warrant a linear regression.

¹⁴ The law allows newspapers that are found guilty of violation to enter voluntary compliance agreements whereby the party violating the law agrees to comply with the required standards to avoid legal sanctions. Ferguson and de Clercy (2005, 255) provide evidence that non-compliance with the law results more from ignorance of its requirements and penalties than from deliberate choice.

¹⁵ This aspect of poll reporting has not been studied in Canada to this day. Weaver and Kim (2002) have examined whether poll reports from US newspapers and TV networks disclose information about unequal levels of political knowledge and issue salience. They found that overall fewer than one in ten reports contained this information.

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