Phony Populism: The Misuse of Opinion Polls in the National Post

Jonah Butovsky
Brock University

Abstract: This paper describes how the National Post regularly excludes polling details that are essential to an accurate reading of the data. It then looks at how business and labour issues are covered in the paper and shows that opinion polls are manipulated to confer popular legitimacy upon the economic conservatism of the Post’s editors. It concludes by arguing that while polls may be presented as a form of direct democracy, they are more aptly regarded as promoting a phony populism: the use of popular idioms to mask an elite project. Although opinion-poll results are presented as the unfiltered expressions of popular sentiment, they are in fact regularly manipulated by media outlets. I find that rather than giving voice to the general population, polls in the National Post are routinely used to “manufacture consent” for the viewpoints of the corporate and political elite, while misrepresenting popular opinion.

Résumé : Cet article analyse la façon dont, régulièrement, le National Post met à l’écart certaines informations liées aux sondages qui s’avèrent essentielles pour la bonne compréhension des données. De plus, il examine le type de couverture accordée aux sujets d’affaires et de travail dans le journal et démontre que les sondages d’opinion sont manipulés afin de conférer une légitimité populiste au conservatisme économique des éditeurs du Post. Il conclut en démontrant que bien que les sondages soient présentés comme une forme de démocratie directe, ils servent plutôt à faire la promotion d’un populisme factice par l’utilisation d’idiomes populaires qui masquent un projet élitiste. Alors que les résultats de sondages d’opinion sont présentés comme les expressions non filtrées de sentiments populaires, ils sont en fait bien souvent manipulés par les médias. Plutôt que de donner une voix à la population générale, j’observe que les sondages dans le National Post sont très fréquemment utilisés afin de “fabriquer un consentement” pour les points de vue de l’élite politique et financière, tout en offrant une représentation faussée de l’opinion populaire.

Keywords: Political communication; Research methods

We should be sceptical about the media’s reliance on opinion polls as a measure of what people really think. As Brown and Delodder’s research on polls (2003) has
shown us, pollsters’ questions can be intentionally or unintentionally misleading; media outlets tend to report opinion polls uncritically or inaccurately; and the public may lack the numeracy to digest the results. The implication drawn by Brown & Delodder is that the credibility of the polling industry and the media outlets they use is at stake.

Brown & Delodder’s critique of the polling industry is based on their analysis of a single poll published in the *National Post* on the eve of the 2000 Canadian federal election. This survey of Canadian opinion addressed competing explanations of the origin of humanity. The paper reported that about half the population preferred creationism to evolution. The political effect of this poll, Brown & Delodder argue, was to make the views of Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day seem mainstream to reinforce the notion that the right-wing Canadian Alliance was a reasonable alternative to the Liberals.

Brown & Delodder make a convincing case that this poll overestimated support for creationism as compared with the results of academic studies and their own transparently worded survey administered to a group of first-year political science students. However, critics might wonder whether their analysis of the *National Post*, based on a single issue, is sufficient evidence to indict the polling industry and the media’s use of polls. To substantiate Brown & Deloder’s case I analyzed a full year of the *National Post* to evaluate its use of public-opinion polls. If anything, Brown & Delodder may have been generous in their evaluation of the *Post*. In the following pages I describe how the *National Post* regularly excludes polling details that are essential to an accurate reading of the data. I then focus on how business and labour issues are covered in the paper. Here I argue that opinion polls are manipulated to confer popular legitimacy upon the economic conservatism of the *Post*’s editors.

I conclude by arguing that while polls may be presented as a form of direct democracy, they are more aptly regarded as promoting a phony populism: the use of popular idioms to mask an elite project. Although opinion-poll results are presented as unfiltered expressions of popular sentiment, they are in fact regularly manipulated by media outlets. I find that rather than giving voice to the general population, polls in the *National Post* are routinely used to “manufacture consent” for the viewpoints of the corporate and political elite, while misrepresenting popular opinion (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

**The case of the National Post**

Why examine the *National Post*? The *Post*, one of two national newspapers and the paper with the fifth-highest circulation in Canada, was chosen because it is particularly visible and influential. Patriquin (2004) makes the case that the *Post*’s incessant focus on the dangers of high taxes prompted the federal Liberals to introduce regressive tax cuts in 2000. The *Post* “dumps” papers on university campuses and in hotels, and it is often read by people due to happenstance, rather than because of an active choice. CanWest Global, the company that owns the *Post*, also benefited from the attenuation of CRTC regulations that had previously prevented corporations from owning newspapers and television stations in the same markets. Consequently, *Post* headlines are routinely promoted on Global newscasts and the Global-owned website Canada.com.
The *Post* is promoted as a purveyor of unbiased, hard news. The *National Post* under the Conrad Black regime was widely seen as a partisan organ of Canada’s right wing. But by 2003, Black was already two years removed from ownership, having been replaced by the Asper family, which holds strong Liberal ties. David and Leonard Asper, who took over CanWest after the death of Izzy Asper in 2003, hold a beneficent view of an “objective press.” Speaking to the Canadian Newspaper Association in 2004, Leonard Asper said that “Canadians value newspapers as a terrain where provocative ideas and solid journalism can inform and enlighten. . . CanWest cuts through the enormous amounts of information—and attempts by others to spin stories, or hide stories to suit their needs—to give readers a clearer understanding of what is going on” (CanWest Global, 2004). The analysis presented here suggests that this claim that CanWest provides a “clearer understanding of what is going on” is false.

A total of 372 articles published in the *National Post* in 2003 were examined. I looked for articles that included an opinion poll of Canadian or American respondents. I examined articles that showcased the results of a particular poll, as well as those that used polls for evidence or illustration. American-based polls (13% of the total) were included since they are given a high degree of coverage in the *Post*. The *Post* tends to support greater Canada–U.S. integration and is not always clear about whether the polls are based on Canadian or American responses. Many of the American polls documented significant support for the war in Iraq, suggesting that Canada is out of step with its neighbours. On the Canadian side, there were polls on Toronto’s mayoral race, the campaign to lead the Canadian Alliance, SARS, gay marriage, and Aboriginal land claims, among other issues. The sheer mass of opinion polls makes it clear that polls are a key source of news for this paper.

**Who produces the poll?**

The methodology of a poll and the presentation of the results depend heavily on who is behind the poll. Several types of organizations produce polls (Lewis, 2001). Companies such as COMPAS, Environics, and SES conduct polls as a matter of public record but make money from market research or foundation support. Such private polling companies also poll for clients (like the Liberal Party of Canada) who may or may not release their results to the public. Academic institutions such as the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan or York University’s Institute for Social Research also produce polls. Academic polls tend to be superior to private polls for a couple of reasons. First, academic polls use larger sample sizes, which produce results that are more accurate than private polls. Second, the results of academic polls are typically published in peer-reviewed journals, which encourages transparency and the production of high-quality data. Private polling companies are self-regulated, profit-oriented, and open to advocacy polling.

A first look at the polling organizations used by the *National Post* shows a heavy use of COMPAS (84 articles). Conrad Winn, COMPAS president, has written reports for the Fraser Institute, published papers opposing economic help for Canadian immigrants and employment equity, and documented the CBC’s purported left-wing bias (Winn, 1985; 2002). Winn has sculpted his survey questions to elicit the desired responses. In his *Inventing Tax Rage*, Patriquin provides evidence that Winn designed polls to help fabricate the middle-class tax revolt of the 1990s through the
use of leading questions such as “Do you think that taxes are creeping up?” (2004, p. 40). Winn bases his conclusions about bias in the CBC on the share of people agreeing with the following statement, which is loaded with prejudicial suppositions: “CBC Television’s news bias today leads to its giving far too much attention to street demonstrations and to radicals hostile to international trade and globalization and not enough to objective observers” (Winn, 2002, p. 47). The persistent use of a right-leaning pollster does not, on its own, confirm that the Post presents a biased view of popular opinion, but it is consistent with the remainder of the evidence below. Logically, the heavy use of one polling company may increase the likelihood of bias. It is also important to note that most Post poll articles (348 out of 372) did not provide the actual survey questions and therefore did not allow readers to judge whether the questions were straightforward and appropriate.

In addition to COMPAS, Ipsos-Reid (30), Environics (28), and Leger (21) were also drawn on regularly for polls. About two dozen other polling companies were used from time to time. Many of the polls covered in the Post were commissioned by business-oriented organizations (for example, Corporate Research Associates, Investors Intelligence, Investors Group, TD Bank, and the Canadian Federation of Independent Business). It is well known that the organization paying for a poll influences the wording of questions, and this in turn helps to shape the results (Asher, 2004).

Academic surveys were drawn on very infrequently. Of the 372 polls reported on, only four were conducted by universities or by academics affiliated with universities. Government polls were also used infrequently. None of the stories concerned poll results produced by a “left-progressive” think-tank such as the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Canadian Centre for Public Policy, or the Caledon Institute. Only one poll commissioned by a labour union was included in the Post in 2003 (a study done for the Ontario College and University Faculty Association), but many polls on public attitudes toward unions were reported.

About one quarter of the polling data used in the Post was not accompanied by any information about the source of the poll. This indicates that although polling data were used as a source of “objective” information, the Post did not fully inform its readers as to the source of this data.

**Sketchy details and dubious interpretations**

Sixty-eight percent of the articles using the results of opinion polls did not report the sample size and 78% did not include the margin of error (see Table 1). Margins of error are included in polling data to enhance the credibility of the results. On the assumption that survey data present estimates of the views of a population, the margin of error tells us how accurate the estimates may be. In the absence of information about the margin of error, the reported results of a poll may imply a degree of accuracy that does not exist. This is something about which we should be particularly wary, since there were cases in which confidence intervals overlapped, even when the sample size was reported in Post articles.

Only 16% of the 372 poll-related articles appearing in the National Post in 2003 reported a survey’s margin of error and interpreted it accurately (see Table 2). An analysis of the 22% of articles that did report the margin of error found that 25% of these articles (fully 20 out of 80) made statements in the body of the article that
were not supported by the data. For example, an article reporting on the mayoral race in Toronto on October 28, 2003, claimed that “[David] Miller is in the lead with 31% of those surveyed.” The article went on to note that Barbara Hall had 27% support and John Tory 25%. But factoring in the 4.5% margin of error, the article should have concluded that the race was a “dead heat” or “going down to the wire,” since any one of the three might have been in the lead. In this case, the mistake favoured the left-leaning candidate. An article on “burnout” among doctors published on August 20, 2003, claimed that “female doctors were more likely to report burnout,” even though the difference was well within the margin of error of 2.1%. The potential result of this was to convey the impression that women lack the mettle of men to handle a stressful job.

Despite the existence of a section of the 2000 *Canada Elections Act* that requires the disclosure of polling details in polls published during an election campaign, Ferguson and de Clercy (2005) found spotty compliance with the law during the 2004 federal election. Furthermore, the authors found insufficient enforcement of the *Elections Act* provisions. No regulations exist on the provision of methodological details for poll reports outside election campaign periods. It is therefore unsurprising that the inclusion of polling details was even sparser in 2003, a non-election year.

Newspapers take advantage of the widespread innumeracy of the general public (Gigerenzer, 2002). Since many people do not really understand what is meant by “margin of error” (or “19 times out of 20”), they may not notice if it is missing or is misreported. Yet providing quantitative data is indispensable to establishing the legitimacy of a public-opinion survey, given the popular reverence for scientific precision. Reliance on numbers is consistent with the growing economization of politics and the reliance on technocratic expertise in governance.

**“Business leader” polls**

Thus far I have shown that the *Post* is sloppy with its presentation of polling data, regularly implying greater scientific precision than is warranted. As I will show, there is some evidence that these misrepresentations tend to favour business viewpoints. The following section discusses the *Post*’s use of poll results in its treatment of the corporate elite as compared with its treatment of organized labour.
In 2003 the National Post frequently reported on the opinions of business leaders, gathered from online polls of members of the “business community.” The use of these polls elevated the corporate elite to the status of authoritative voices or community elders. Conrad Winn of COMPAS, the compiler of these polls, reports that only about 150 people are chosen to participate in these polls, yet the results are presented as though the respondents were randomly selected from a defined population. In fact, Winn claimed that the margin of error for these polls would likely be smaller than that of the general population, since “the business community” is a relatively homogenous segment of the population. While I do not doubt that corporate leaders are united on many issues (see Ornstein & Stevenson, 1999), it is inappropriate to apply the conventions of inferential statistics to a non-random sample. If we were to accept the margin of error of these polls as legitimate, we would still be faced with unwarranted claims of statistical significance, since the small sample size results in margins of error of 8% or 9%.

The prevailing views expressed by these business-leader polls were not presented as partisan positions, but as the judicious and measured views of the stewards of the Canadian economy—of those who know what is best for Canada as a whole. In many cases the headlines failed to specify that the reported polls reflected the views of business leaders. In fact, only 9 out of the 17 headlines noted that the polls sampled the opinions of business leaders only (see Table 3). In the first case listed in the table, “Loyalty decline no surprise,” which referred to a decline in the loyalty of young workers, the perceived “decline” was simply the view of business leaders, rather than an empirical measure. Moreover, there was no suggestion in the report that a decline in the loyalty of young workers might be a result of the decline in the “loyalty” of big business toward them. Another headline noted that “sovereignist culture [is a] drag on Quebec.” This statement may reflect the view of corporate elites that independentism contributes to political and economic instability, but it presents this view in such a way as to delegitimize québécois nationalism.

Several of the CEO-poll results were simply misleading. In the text of an article titled “Firms taking SARS precautions,” we find out that just one third of the companies surveyed were taking precautions. “Most firms do not increase SARS precautions” would have been a more appropriate headline. The headline “One in four CEOs favour public auto insurance,” although accurate, might have been better expressed as “three in four CEOs oppose public auto insurance.”

The Post prints these polls of business leaders regularly, using a questionable application of statistical principles to give legitimacy to their findings. It is misleading to use the perceived objectivity of scientific polling to present the partisan views of 150 hand-picked business leaders.

The presentation of polls on organized labour
Whereas business leaders were allowed to speak for themselves on the issues of the day in the Post, the evaluation of the role and efficacy of labour unions was left to the general public. The National Post used the occasion of Labour Day 2003 to publish a series of polls on labour issues. The presentation of the results of these polls offered an extremely negative view of the role of labour unions. Critical depictions of unions are common in the mainstream press (e.g., Martin, 2004; Parenti, 1992), and those in the Post were no exception. The Post described unions as undemocra-
tic, top-heavy, and anachronistic. Derogatory terms such as “union bosses” and “union bigwigs” were regularly used to describe labour leaders. Summarizing the results of the polls in his front-page commentary, Terence Corcoran wrote that

After decades of mythical struggles based on slogans of class warfare, worker oppression and exploitation, the entire union movement shows up in the poll as an ideological sham. Self-portrayed as the champion of downtrodden masses of working men and women, the union movement emerges today as the iron protector of a privileged minority. (Corcoran, 2003, p. A1).

It is true that election surveys conducted by academics find that Canadians, overall, have only a lukewarm attitude toward unions. For instance, 55% of respon-
Students to the 2004 Canadian Election Study felt that unions should have the same amount of power or more than they do now, while 45% said that they should have less power. However, analysis of the question wording (when provided) indicates that leading or misleading questions were often used, creating a far more negative portrayal of public attitudes toward unions in Canada than was justified.

The Labour Day polls were commissioned by Labour Watch, an organization of employment lawyers and industry associations (mostly from “open shop” construction companies and food and beverage associations) that describes its mission as one of “restoring balance” to a labour-relations framework it sees as skewed in favour of organized labour. According to its website,

Employees who want to become or remain unionized are assisted by unions that are funded by a mandatory dues regime. Some employees may not want to become or remain unionized, while other employees may not be as interested as the employee advocates. We are concerned with the latter two groups, who are without the same level of resources as those employees who want to become or remain unionized. (Labour Watch, n.d.)

Of course, this statement neglects to mention that it is in the interest of the companies that run this website to minimize the influence of unions in their workplaces.

A look at the headlines of the National Post’s labour articles (Table 4) reveals that six of nine suggested a negative view of labour unions, while the other three were neutral. In several cases the information conveyed by the headlines was the result of faulty polling methods. For instance, one article (“Union members don’t want dues going to politics”) suggested that union leaders support political causes that are at odds with the interests of their members. The fact that union members may often decide democratically to support certain causes was ignored. The survey question, “Should unions be permitted to contribute member dues to political and other causes outside their members’ needs?” is clearly a leading one. But when another question asked whether unions should support political parties supported by their members, the share that agreed jumped from 12% to over 43%. Yet the headline for the article was based on the responses to the first question.

In “Unionized workers less happy at work,” the finding that non-union workers were more satisfied with their jobs than unionized workers might have had more to do with the jobs themselves, rather than union status. Unionized and non-unionized workers tend to do different work. To look at the relationship between job satisfaction and unionization, we would have to compare workers doing the same job in unionized and non-unionized settings. Here the Post used a poorly chosen comparison group to suggest that unions cause workers to be less happy at work.

Some of the poll findings were not surprising or new, and yet they were presented as evidence of an additional decline in labour’s relevance. For example, the vast majority of union members said they were happy to be members, while the vast majority of non-unionized workers indicated no desire to join. Some of the questions probed issues that the general public may not know much about. Sixty-six percent of respondents “completely agree” that a secret-ballot vote should be required when forming or removing a union from a workplace. In fact, in Ontario, British Columbia, and several other provinces, this is already required.

Overall, the articles aimed to discredit labour unions and present organized
labour as far more powerful than it has become after more than 20 years of stagnation and retreat. The Post’s critical view of unions relies on a crude caricature: the bloated, heavy-handed union bureaucrat. Although not without flaws, Canadian unions today are actually more inclusive and democratic than most other organizations of comparable size. For instance, union members elect their local representatives and then decide democratically whether they want to donate to a political party and, if so, to which one. When corporations donate to political causes, the decisions are made unilaterally by senior management.

**Phony populism, polling, and the National Post**

Populism has both left-wing and right-wing versions, but in all cases it implies a politics appealing to “grass-roots” sentiment. According to Sinclair, populist movements “stress the worth of the common people and advocate their political supremacy and reject intermediate associations between mass and leaders” (cited in Harrison, 1995, p. 5). The farmers’ movement in the 1930s Canadian West and that of the Zapatistas in Mexico are two examples of populist movements. The Reform Party of Canada had elements of populism (representing Western alienation, anti-elite sentiment, and calls for more direct democracy), but it was predominantly a corporate-funded project to attack the Canadian “welfare state” and québécois nationalism (Harrison, 1995). Writing about Preston Manning, Ralph Klein, and Mike Harris, Laird writes, “[T]here’s very little vox populi in tax cuts that largely benefit economic elites, austerity campaigns that target the poor and vulnerable, and job creation plans that ignore local economic control” (Laird, 1998, p. 172). The use
of popular idioms to mask an elite project constitutes what I call “phony populism.”

The *National Post*’s reporting of public-opinion polls amounts to phony populism. Polls are presented as reliable representations of the “voices of the people,” even though the “public opinion” to which they give expression is decisively mediated by a framing of the issues by pollsters, journalists, and editors. George Gallup called opinion polling a proxy for the town hall meeting that had been eclipsed by urbanization and population growth. Polls were purportedly the “pulse of democracy” (Gallup & Rae, 1940). But the polling that was intended as a democratizing agent was actually used to target specific segments of the middle-class buying public and mobilize consent for Canada’s involvement in World War II (Robinson, 1999). Today we see the *National Post*, cloaked by the “objectivity” of polls, creating a partial and distorted view of public opinion.

With public-opinion polls, we get a slice or a partial view of the political world dependent on a number of factors: the questions asked, the people chosen to be sampled, the interpretation of the questions, and so on. This process has been increasingly driven by “for-profit” organizations (polling companies) that produce polls on behalf of other “for-profit” companies (the newspapers owned by media conglomerates). The details of polls are typically obscured, which reduces our ability to judge whether opinion polls are reflecting something genuine. The intricacies of opinion polls, as well as the fact that they are “pollster-driven” creations, are concealed by the *Post*’s use of seemingly straightforward headlines.

The media’s regular use of public-opinion polls is the epitome of the so-called professionalization of journalism and the elimination of bias. Writing about the U.S. media, McChesney notes that nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century newspapers were overtly partisan, making no claims to objectivity (McChesney, 2004). In the 1920s, the newspaper business made objectivity a goal in order to pre-empt government regulation of the industry (McChesney, 2004). “Scientific” opinion polls represent objective journalism *par excellence*. Opinion polls remove the point of view of the reporter and present a supposedly transparent image of what people think. They borrow the legitimacy of statistics to bolster their claim of unbiased reporting. Using statistical methods can give a false impression of accuracy, since there are layers of measurement error in the data-gathering process. Widespread math phobia combined with gaps in the presentation of polling details cause the public to accept newspaper reports based on poll results at face value (see Paulos, 1990).

The *National Post* regularly misrepresents the results of public-opinion polls. In this sense I have found support for Brown & Delodder’s claim that the *Post*’s article on creationism is indicative of the misuse of opinion polls more broadly. Actually, when Brown & Delodder write that “media outlets routinely report sampling frames, sample sizes, and confidence intervals but are inconsistent in providing actual question wordings” (2003, p. 117), they downplay the problem. The *Post* regularly omits sampling frames, sample sizes, and confidence intervals, and it very rarely provides the survey questions. My findings are consistent with Andersen (2000), who found a low standard in the reporting of technical details in his study of media coverage of the polls leading up to the 1997 Canadian federal election. Similarly, Welsh (2002) concluded that the media did not provide the minimal necessary technical information on the polls done during the 2000 U.S. presidential election.
Some of the National Post’s omissions and misrepresentations seem to be deliberate attempts to manufacture public support for its editorial positions, as in the case of the business and labour polls discussed. More frequently, however, the misrepresentations are not related to the paper’s ideological orientation. The errors and omissions in the presentation of opinion polls are the result of sloppiness, innumeracy, or an aesthetic dislike for disrupting an article’s flow with a series of technical details. But even these more unintentional obfuscations damage the ability of readers to understand the world and then to act within it effectively.

Acknowledgments
I would like to thank Eric Starrs for his work in gathering the data for this article. Thanks also to Amanda Glasbeek, Murray Smith, and Dennis Soron for their excellent suggestions for revisions. Finally, Kim Sawchuk is a gifted editor, and I thank her for applying her editorial skills to this paper.

Note
1. Confidence intervals provide a range of values that we can be reasonably sure includes the value we would get if we asked everyone in the population the question. Overlapping confidence intervals suggest a statistical tie.

References
Labour Watch. (n.d.) Home page. URL: http://www.labourwatch.com [February 17, 2006].


