The Roles of Public Opinion Research in Canadian Government. 

As I sit to write this review, the front page of this morning’s *Globe and Mail* has a bold front page headline announcing a new poll that shows Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has general support among the population for his government’s work thus far. While the news is fairly good for Harper, one might wonder just what effect a poll like this has upon the policies of a sitting government. According to Carleton University’s Christopher Page in his thorough and well-documented book *The Roles of Public Opinion Research in Canadian Government*, not as much as one might think.

Page challenges long-standing assertions made by Gallup and Rae in their 1940 work *The Pulse of Democracy* that opinion polling would lead to a true “government by the people” and demonstrates how the contemporary relationship between polling and governing is not nearly so direct (p. 10). As the author observes, despite several decades since the birth of modern polling techniques, there remains little systematic knowledge on how polling research is actually used by governments (pp. 33). Through extensive research, thoughtful analysis, and illuminating interviews with key players (including former finance ministers Michael Wilson and Marc Lalonde, as well as important political insiders like Hugh Segal and Thomas Axworthy, Page brings polling analysis into the new century. This book, which began as a doctoral thesis, is a valuable addition to the libraries of communication scholars, Canadian historians, political scientists, and others who have an interest in clarifying the swampy waters which surround the policy creation process.

There is no universal approach to the use of polling data—note the plural of “role” in the book title. As Page is quick to point out, the Canadian example does not neatly fall in line with its American counterparts (p. 23). Bill Clinton was a famous devotee of the polling process and Page allows that polling did appear to have an effect on matters of policy and public image in the Clinton White House; particularly in significant policy such as health care reform as the November 2006 election approached and, infamously, to initially deny any sexual improprieties with Monica Lewinsky (pp. 26-27). Page argues that the Canadian government is generally less responsive to polling for three key reasons: Parliament has less influence on the executive than Congress; party discipline keeps individual members in check, reducing their susceptibility to polling results (p. 29); and finally the public funding of polls in Canada (much more common than in the United States) means it is subject to Access to Information legislation, which has produced a “climate of fear” in Ottawa and led to more cautious use of polling (p. 175).

The book’s premise that polling does not play a prominent role in Canadian policy development is supported by convincing case studies. Individual chapters of this book would prove valuable for scholars examining the constitutional agreement of 1981, the implementation of the GST, or the gun control debate under the Chretien Liberals. The strength of Page’s position is reinforced by giving the reader access to the actual polling research in question, included in the appendix of the book.

In the case of the GST, important decisions such as when to introduce the tax and whether the new tax should be set at nine or seven per cent were largely the product of economic factors and active public opinion, including interest groups and parliamentary committees, not public opinion research. Michael Wilson, Finance Minister at the time, is quoted as saying: “I was never one to start with the polls” (p. 116). Only during the ensuing policy implementation period did the Conservatives utilize polling research as a basis
Page believes improved use of polling data might have lessened, though not eliminated, the public resistance to the GST and perhaps saved the Conservatives from some of the colossal damage of the 1993 federal election.

Polling was employed for both sides of the debate in the Liberal’s volatile gun-control initiative of 1995 and in the process revealed some of the inherent weaknesses of public opinion research. Page clearly demonstrates how the Coalition for Gun Control worded key questions in a poll they commissioned in such a way as to induce respondents “to take a position in favour of gun control” (p. 136). A poll commissioned by the government of Alberta, which opposed the initiative, had the unexpected result of showing most Albertans were in favour of gun control. Page describes this result as “a rare instance of opinion research not producing the results its sponsor wanted and expected” (p. 138).

As in his analysis of the GST, Page does not really follow the story through to its conclusion. The GST was a contributing factor to one of the great electoral defeats in Canadian history; the gun control bill proved another brick in the electoral wall that still stands between the Liberals and much of Western Canada—would better use of public opinion research have made a difference? Page does not offer political advice. He spends very little time on speculating whether it would be wise for Canadian governments to use polling more in policy formation.

An overarching point to Page’s study is that opinion research, including polling and focus groups, has a much greater impact at the communications level of Canadian government—after policy has been decided—than in the development process (p. 184). Both the GST and gun control cases lend credence to this theory. The communications branches of government are not integrated into the policy-making process but are left with the job of promotion where opinion research is required.

It is Page’s position that this lack of polling in policy development is not the affront to responsive democracy as Gallup and Rae might have argued in the 1940s. While stopping well short of dismissing it outright, Page convincingly outlines clear limitations in the value of opinion research. *The Roles of Public Opinion Research in Canadian Government* is a much needed window into this corner of the policy process in Canada.

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