

The Vector Poll™

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Why vote when you can poll for less?

By Marc Zwelling
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Ontario NDP leader Andrea Horwath wants a referendum on the Liberal government's plan to sell 60 per cent of Hydro One to private investors.

Putting big political decisions in the hands of the voters could nudge more citizens to get engaged with politics.

But a referendum is expensive. Holding a referendum the same time as a general election is cheaper. But it postpones decisions until election day, which sometimes is years away. Citizens won't get engaged in government when it means waiting years to vote.

Here's a better idea. A poll costs a tiny fraction of a referendum. Governments should use polls to decide contentious issues.

Can you trust poll results? Skeptics say polls were wrong in some elections. But that's like blaming your scale if you don't lose weight. Polls are measuring devices, not oracles.

Polls found the most persuasive messages for anti-smoking campaigns and the best strategies to curtail drunk driving. Surveys flawlessly forecast the size of the market for stuff we buy. The truth is polls have a solid track record.

For example, in 2011 Ipsos interviewed 1,100 people about the British Columbia referendum on abolishing the HST. The poll found 54 per cent intended to vote to scrap the HST, 46 per cent to keep it. Three months later, more than 1.6 million voted, 54.7 per cent to scrap the HST, 45.3 per cent to keep it.

This year the Angus Reid Forum asked 950 Vancouver residents how they would vote in the referendum on a sales tax increase to expand public transit. The poll found 62 per cent would vote no, 38 per cent yes. Three months later, after counting the nearly 760,000 mail-in ballots, the result was 62 per cent no, 38 per cent yes.

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The poll also nailed the turnout: 61 per cent.

The British Columbia government spent nearly \$5.8 million to run the Vancouver referendum. To drum up support for a yes vote, Vancouver region mayors spent another \$5.8 million (largely from the public transit system).

At around \$5,000 for a poll, the government could have saved taxpayers millions using the poll results and foregoing the referendum.

Think of some recent controversial issues Toronto City Council decided. To refurbish — not tear down — the Gardiner Expressway. To expand gambling at the Woodbine Racetrack. Did councillors vote the way the residents would? Why not poll the voters to let the people decide?

But don't we elect politicians to make these decisions? Polls edify politicians; polls don't replace them. It's up to political leaders to identify issues, debate the costs, get the public's ideas, and lay out choices for the voters.

A poll is as democratic as an election. However, unlike an election or referendum, a poll is the voice of all the voters not just those who turn out. A poll of 1,000 citizens who are selected randomly — meaning every voter has an equal chance of being asked — is a miniature replica of the entire voters' list.

Last year 61 per cent of eligible Toronto voters voted in the municipal election. In 2010, 51 per cent turned out; in 2006, just 39 per cent. Because a scientific survey speaks for all the voters it's a more authentic voice of the people than an election or referendum, where millions don't voice an opinion at all.

Should we demolish the Gardiner Expressway? Expand Billy Bishop Airport to accommodate passenger jets?

Let's poll on it.

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Marc Zwelling is the founder of the Vector Poll™ (www.vectorresearch.com) and author of *Public Opinion and Polling For Dummies*, published by Wiley (2012).