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Polling has reached the big time – don't you think?

By Glenn Cheater
The Canadian Press

WINNIPEG – Striding restlessly about his 19th-floor suite of tastefully furnished offices, Angus Reid doesn't mourn what might have been.

A dozen years ago, the 43-year-old pollster was a well-paid sociology professor at the University of Manitoba. He had tenure and enough leisure time to dabble in public opinion surveys.

Now Reid's 400 employees interview more than half a million Canadians every year and he can joke about the comfortable academic life he left behind.

"Someone once referred to it as welfare with dignity; I mean it was a nice, easy job teaching and I had no intention of leaving the university," says the energetic president of the Angus Reid Group, one of Canada's largest polling companies.

"I never viewed this as the kind of enterprise where 10 years later we'd be doing 10 or 11 million dollars a year in business."

Polls have become big business since George Gallup first used his market research techniques to help his mother-in-law win election as Iowa's secretary of state in 1932.

Pollsters have an obsession with numbers – quantifying just about everything except themselves. The Professional Marketing Re-

search Society – polling's professional body – doesn't keep track of the number of pollsters in Canada or the number of polls.

But Reid's group will conduct about 600 this year. The federal government alone will spend over \$20 million this year taking the public pulse.

"There are more (polls) all the time," says Alan Frizzell, professor of journalism and director of Ottawa's Carleton University Survey Centre. "What people are now doing is polling on a whole range of policy issues," he says. "We know people's thinking on capital punishment, on women's issues, on the environment All sorts of groups are getting in on the action."

In the last few months, Reid's organization has discovered that cancer patients in chemotherapy worry more about nausea and vomiting than physical pain; that Ontarians don't want no-fault auto insurance; that businesses risk losing one-third of their customers each year because of poor service; and that 30 per cent of Saskatchewan TV viewers would sooner cancel their cable service than pay a \$2 cable tax.

Polling makes for a more open system of government, says Reid. "Ultimately in a democracy, it's the public that has to speak. I guess we're a big set of ears that help people listen to what the public has to say."

But others argue that those ears only hear what they want to hear and that polling has given governments and other groups new

ways to manipulate public opinion.

"Really, it's a minimal version of participation that's involved here – where you get to answer a set of questions over the phone," says Paul Thomas, a political scientist at the University of Manitoba.

Thomas says there are many reasons to distrust the reliability of polls and their use. People who answer polls are often reluctant to admit they don't know about an issue and will offer an opinion.

And polls frequently reduce complex issues to simplistic choices and are of little use in helping governments determine policy.

Reid admits polls have become an essential part of every government's "propaganda machine" but he also views polls as playing a key role in history.

He suggests public opinion helped persuade U.S. President George Bush to help the Kurds after earlier promising not to interfere in Iraq's domestic affairs.

"I really believe that one of the most important phenomena of our time world-wide is the force of public opinion," says Reid.

Thomas would like to have a better look at those numbers. Canadians would have a much better idea of the value and dangers of polls if they knew what kinds of questions governments are asking and what kind of answers they're getting, he says. "If they're paid for out of public funds, I don't see why we shouldn't have a glimpse of them!"

The article EM9107 reprinted above is used, together with EM9108, in Figure 8.13a of the STAT 220 Course Materials and in Figure 2.6a of the STAT 332 Course Materials.