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# Opinion polls skewed by folks who won't talk

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**S**hort of leisure time, increasingly protective of their privacy and annoyed by "junk calls" from marketing companies, unco-operative Canadians are adding new uncertainties to the opinion polling during the election campaign.

In a phenomenon known as survey fatigue, a growing number of Canadians are turning their anger on pollsters by refusing to answer their questions.

It's a trend that has triggered questions from experts who wonder whether survey results are being skewed by the exclusion of people who won't talk to pollsters – and the assumption they hold the same views as those who co-operate.

It's even led one pollster to wonder if there's any future for polling.

"Any time the number of people who refuse to respond outnumbers those who are willing to respond, you're in trouble," says Frank Graves, president of Ekos Research, an Ottawa polling company. "That level of refusal has become standard and it's growing."

The problem is most acute in major urban centres where some polling companies are reporting non-response rates as high as 70 percent, two or three times levels recorded a decade ago.

In the three national surveys conducted for the media since the start of the Oct. 25 federal election campaign, the pollsters – Angus Reid and ComQuest Research – recorded roughly equal numbers of respondents and non-respondents.

That's a somewhat higher rejection rate than pollsters experienced in the 1988 election or last fall's constitutional referendum.

Nearly everyone agrees the declining response rate is the result of a more hectic lifestyle and the dramatic increase in calls from tele-marketing companies seeking opinions on products.

"City people are simply more squeezed for time – two jobs, commuting and so on – and to be frank, they're less friendly to demands on the time they have left," says ComQuest vice-president Jim Matsui.

Adds Neil Nevitte, a University of Calgary polling researcher: "There's plenty of evidence that Canadians increasingly value their privacy .... they're tired of being asked for their opinions."

But there is little agreement on how – or whether – the falling

response level affects poll results.

It's a complicated debate. Not all those categorized as non-respondents are unwilling to co-operate with pollsters. Random calls to businesses or fax machines are part of the count, as are those not home when the call is placed.

Pollsters generally make callbacks to the latter group, but when pressed for time they move on to other randomly-selected respondents. This worries critics who believe segments of society more likely to be home – the elderly, homemakers, the unemployed, for instance – are often over-sampled.

Pollsters say they are able to compensate for over- or under-sampling by weighting their results to reflect the make-up of Canadian society. For example, if the percentage of elderly respondents interviewed is lower than the actual percentage of elderly citizens, pollsters assign more importance to their answers.

They correctly point to their successful track record in elections and last year's constitutional referendum, and confidently say the profile of non-respondents matches that of those who agree to respond.

"If you do your survey properly, and take care that your sample is representative and doesn't rely too heavily on weighting, you can be pretty sure your results reflect what is going on out there," says Donna Dasko, vice-president of Toronto-based Environics Research Ltd.

Graves isn't so sure. He wonders whether it's realistic to assume that those who aren't home or refuse to be interviewed hold the same views as those who agree to talk.

"In a sense, you are systematically excluding people who weren't around to answer the phone," he says. "I don't see how you can be sure they carry the same profile as those who answered. And typically, the weighting used to compensate for these missing respondents tends not to be very sophisticated."

Nevitte is not so pessimistic. He agrees with pollsters that weighting is a useful way to restore some degree of accuracy to results, but he, too, warns that the process has its limitations.

As a result, he believes the media should ask pollsters to provide details of response rates when reporting results.

"There are too many examples of just a handful of respondents being used to speak for a much larger group," Nevitte says. "The public, through the media, should know these things."

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