



Pauline Marois's losing gamble on the Charter of Quebec Values sprung from her belief, based on polls, that it would propel the PQ to a majority. Montreal *Gazette* photo

From One Election to the Next, the Role and Performance of Polls

Claire Durand

On March 5, Quebec Premier Pauline Marois took a calculated risk. The poll results on which that calculation was made were open to interpretation. Premier Marois seems to have thought that indications of significant francophone support for her government's Charter of Quebec Values would translate into sufficient support for her party to grant her party a majority government. The overwhelming loss of that gamble tells us something about both how polls are interpreted and their influence on political actors.

As much as people worry that public opinion polls may influence the vote, they also tend to influence political actors. In analyzing the impact of polls on the political actors in the recent Quebec election, we've taken into account three periods in time: The first runs from the September 2012 election to the presentation of the Quebec Charter of Values in September 2013, the second from September 2013 to the decision to launch the electoral campaign on March 5, and the third comprises the campaign itself.

The Parti Québécois (PQ) was elected in September 2012 after nine years of Quebec Liberal Party (PLQ) rule. The last months of Liberal government had been plagued with allegations of corruption and bad management of the student crisis. Despite these circumstances, the PQ barely succeeded in getting more votes (31.9 per cent) than the Quebec Liberal Party (31.2 per cent) and could

only form a minority government.

Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of polls' estimates as published in the press from the September 2012 election until September 2013, when the Quebec Charter of Values was formally brought forth. During the first months after the election, support for the PQ remained stable. From early 2013 on, however, it kept plunging down to reach only 25 per cent support in May 2013. Meanwhile, the PLQ was making steady gains and reached nearly 40 per cent in voter intention, while Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) was slowly going down, from 27 per cent in the 2012 election to 22 per cent in May.

In March 2013, the Marois government commissioned a poll dealing with questions of reasonable accommodations and the wearing of religious garb by civil servants. The poll showed that a majority of French-speaking Quebecers tended to support restrictions in the wearing of religious signs and in accommodations related to religious prescriptions. The results of this poll seemingly triggered the idea that a Quebec Charter of Values, as it was called later, could help the PQ win a majority government.

By the end of the summer, the Parti Québécois had managed to regain a level of support similar to that obtained in the 2012 election (32 per cent). Meanwhile, the PLQ had maintained its gains and was stable at 39 per cent. CAQ was still slowly going

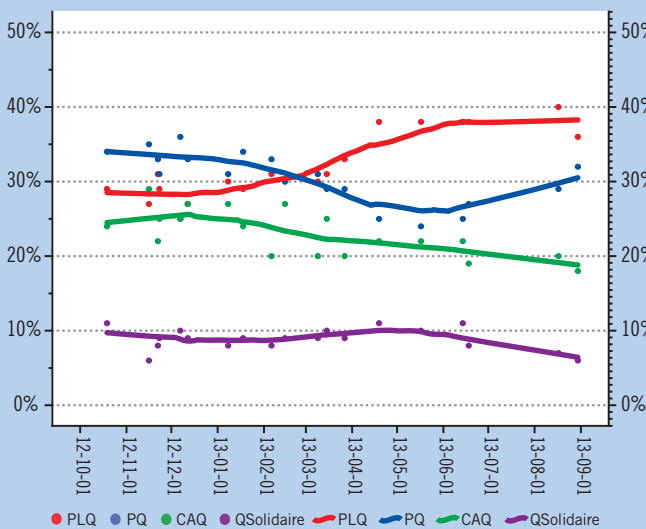
down and had reached 20% by September. Media tended to attribute the increasing support for the PQ to the good management of the Lac-Mégantic train derailment by then premier Pauline Marois, to the absence of the newly elected PLQ leader Philippe Couillard from the public sphere, and to new police interventions in PLQ offices. Voting intentions for the PQ, however, were still very far from that for the Liberals.

It is against this backdrop that a Quebec Charter of Values project was first leaked to the media in August 2013 and formally proposed as a draft bill on which the government invited comments on September 10. The first polls after the leaking of the project were published in September. They showed that support for the charter had been going down by as much as 15 points compared to the polls conducted in August. However, support went back up by about 10 points overall in the next polls published in October. Figure 2 illustrates the evolution of voting intentions from that moment up to March 5, when the election was called. It shows that voting intentions for the PQ went up by about five points when the charter project was made public and remained stable afterwards throughout the fall. More detailed analyses showed that this increase was only due to the francophones outside of the Montreal area and was fragile.

Although support for the PQ had been increasing before the charter project was even leaked, media and political actors alike concluded that the debate on the charter was helping the PQ Québécois reach the level of support needed to contemplate a majority. Over the fall, serious rumours spread that an election might be called. Finally, according to media reports, the government decided to wait because "poll numbers were not good enough".

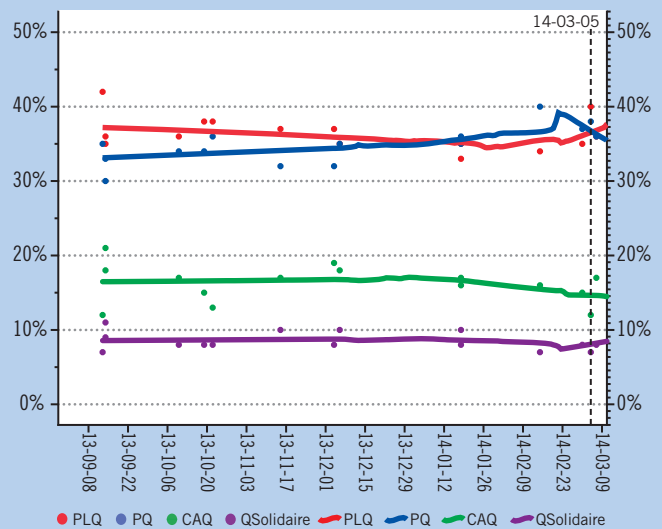
In mid-February 2014, a CROP poll showed voting intentions for the PQ at 40 per cent, ahead of the Liberals at 36 per cent, and leading by 23 points, 47 to 24 per cent among francophone voters who comprise 80 per cent of the population. Two other polls showed the two parties at par. This increase in support for the PQ happened in the absence of any increase in support for the charter project. However, it did not prevent media and political actors from claiming that the increase was due to the approval of the charter by a majority of francophones. How was it that this surge in support for the PQ had not manifested itself during the fall? How was it that support for the charter itself had not increased? Those questions were simply brushed aside. That it was also possible that non-francophones, strongly opposed to the charter, would mobilize against the government, or that their vote may have an impact in some ridings, did not seem to matter either. Nor did the opposition of a majority of young

FIGURE 1: Evolution of published voting intentions from October 2012 to September 2013



Each point represents a poll estimate, positioned at the middle of fieldwork; the lines represent the likely evolution.

FIGURE 2: Evolution of published voting intentions from September 2013 to March 5, 2014



Each point represents a poll estimate positioned at the middle of fieldwork; lines represent the likely evolution. The vertical line represents the launching of the campaign on March 5, 2014.

Quebecers who had helped the PQ win the 2012 election.

Marois decided to call the election on March 5. Three days later, the recruitment of Pierre Karl Péladeau, a well-known media mogul, and his declaration in favour of an independent Quebec, started a spiral that drove the PQ on a slide towards an end result of 25.4 per cent, its worst score since 1970. The CAQ took advantage. Voting intentions for that party started to increase from as low as 15 per cent after the first debate, and surged in the final 10 days following the second debate, to a final score of 23 per cent. Meanwhile, support for the Liberals rose to over 40 per cent on average in the published polls and stayed at that level from the first debate on March 20 until the end of the campaign.

During the campaign, questions arose as to whether similar poll errors as had been seen in the previous BC 2013 and Alberta 2012 elections could happen in the Quebec election. This was unlikely for a number of reasons. Quebec polls have been quite accurate in recent elections. They very successfully predicted NDP's landslide in the federal election of 2011. Quebec polls' actual problem is well known: They tend to underestimate support for the Quebec Liberal Party, particularly when the PQ is likely to win the election. Since it is a rather systematic

bias, there are well-known ways to correct it. Before 2002, pollsters used to distribute non disclosers—respondents who do not reveal a vote intention—non-proportionally, attributing a higher proportion to the Liberals than to the other parties. While pollsters stopped proceeding that way in 2002, I personally went on with non-proportional distribution, attributing 50 per cent of non-disclosers to the PLQ, 25 per cent to both PQ and CAQ and none to the small parties. This correction gave an almost perfect prediction of the results in all the elections since 2003. Figure 3 shows the evolution of polls' estimates from January 2014 to Election Day, corrected with a non-proportional attribution of non-disclosers. With this correction, the evolution is slightly different from that shown in the two other figures. For instance, it shows voting intentions for the PQ equal to that of the PLQ in February 2014. The estimation from all the polls gives a perfect prediction of election results. Some pollsters tended to either overestimate or underestimate vote for the PLQ but the average bias is null, and we can therefore be confident that the evolution is also accurately portrayed.

Did polls influence voters? When polls show huge change in direction in voting intentions, there is a tendency to attribute at least part of that change to the polls themselves. My research, carried out in four provincial and federal elections held in Quebec since 2007, shows that around 10 per cent to 15 per cent of the voters change their minds between the moment they are asked voting intentions and that of their final vote. However, these voters tend to be more interested in politics and more educated than average. In addition, changes go in all directions and they rarely produce a significant shift in one direction at the end. Polls provide important information for stra-

tegic voters, but in the actual voting system, only a very small proportion of voters have reasons and occasion to cast a strategic vote.

Launching an electoral campaign, possibly relying on a small and very recent lead in the polls, and on support for a single policy, is a high-risk wager. In some election campaigns, voting intentions remain stable from beginning to end; in others, there are huge changes of direction and once they have started, and polls show they are happening, they can hardly be stopped. The PQ government seemed to rely on francophones' support for the Quebec Charter of Values to win a majority. However, polls also hinted at the fact that the charter was by far not a major preoccupation and motivation for the vote.

After Pierre Karl Péladeau's candidacy was announced with his famous fist pump and call "to make Quebec a country," the issue of support for sovereignty and the possibility of a third referendum became central. My analyses, together with those of Francois Yale, of over 1000 polls on this question show that support for sovereignty has never reached more than 50 per cent of popular support since 1976, unless the constitutional proposal includes a partnership or association with the rest of Canada and there is a constitutional confrontation or a scandal. In addition, recent research shows that young people are not the primary driving force behind the sovereignty movement any more. Indeed, the polls showed that, in the 18-24 demographic segment, the Liberals were much more popular than they were during the 2012 electoral campaign. This, together with the results of the 2011 federal election in Quebec when the Bloc Québécois was almost wiped out, could have given an inkling of what was going to happen.

Polls provide information that is usually reliable on opinions at a point in time. However, opinions may change with public debate and polls need to be interpreted in the long term, and interpreted appropriately, in order to be useful in decision-making. **P**

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FIGURE 3: Evolution of voting intentions in 2014 after non-proportional distribution of non-disclosers (50% PLQ, 25% PQ, 25% CAQ)

