

## TWENTY ELECTIONS SINCE 2007: ANGUS REID'S RECORD IN THE U.S. AND CANADA

In 2007, the Angus Reid division of Vision Critical initiated an online polling program that has transformed the discipline of electoral forecasting across North America. In one respect, our headline is very simple: our online polling approach has worked brilliantly, either matching or outperforming telephone polls in 19 of the 20 contests that have been covered. Indeed, in over half of these elections, Angus Reid provided the most accurate projections compared with the entire roster of published polls. This record includes elections in the U.S. and Canada, as well as democratic processes where the dominant language was either English or French.

Not all online pollsters have achieved this record of success. Many in the U.S., some in Canada and others around the world have performed poorly, leading some journalists and academics to question this approach to collecting information on the views and attitudes of citizens. Commentators have attacked online approaches to polling as non-random, skewed towards well-educated and wealthier households, and vulnerable to manipulation because of respondent self-selection issues.

This paper explores the merits of online polling (and online market research in general) and discusses some of the procedural and methodological considerations that delineate the divide between accurate and reliable online polling approaches and those that are not. Unlike telephone-based surveys, where providers rely primarily on the same tools, live interviewers and some form of randomization, the variation in the online sphere is immense. Pop-up and spam are at one end, while carefully constructed and maintained National Panels are at the other. Between these two extremes, there are many flavours of online research.

The concept of online research—defined as all surveys or studies conducted via the Internet through a PC, laptop, or mobile device—is attractive for several reasons. The first is that traditional telephone-based approaches to collecting survey data have become increasingly problematic. Unprecedented refusal rates, technology barriers and declining coverage have all made telephone interviewing a challenge in much of the developed world. This type of research is quickly becoming little more than “phone spam” and alternative approaches are desperately needed by organizations and institutions that require an accurate reading of the public mood. Online research has arrived to fill this gap.

Another reason for the appeal of online methods is that they provide a far richer environment for measuring public opinion. The online environment presents respondents with highly visual, interactive, and engaging surveys, ensuring that people provide thoughtful and true-to-life responses to questions tackling complex subject matter. Pictures, audio and video clips become part of the experience for respondents, who are not asked to remember something they might have seen or heard, but presented with the opportunity to see and hear it.

During a recent provincial campaign in British Columbia, online respondents were presented with an exact replica of the ballot that they would see in their home constituency on election day, complete with all party names and registered candidate. This approach would be impossible to duplicate over the phone. Likewise, when assessing the leaders debate in the Canadian federal election, the researchers were able to place segments of the debate in front of hundreds of online panelists to gauge their second-by-second reaction.

Finally, online panels allow researchers to delve into areas of respondent perception and experience that are simply impossible to penetrate via the traditional telephone survey. This includes detailed surveys of health conditions, personal experience with abuse, and detailed inventories of household possessions.

Online research far exceeds the reach of the telephone, allowing for the development of strong bonds between sponsoring organizations and the people who participate in surveys. Indeed, unlike most telephone surveys where the relationship between study participants and researchers is fleeting, anonymous and largely devoid of commitment; most successful online research requires transparency, physical or symbolic incentives and trust

## COMMUNITY PANELS: THE KEY TO ONLINE RESEARCH

Sending online surveys through the Internet to a random sample of the population is not possible in an era of anti-spam regulations and Internet etiquette which considers such practices to be a gross violation of proper manners. Unlike traditional telephone-based sampling practices, where random spam is considered a methodology of preference, effective online research requires a significant investment in establishing respondent participation and engagement.

Potential respondents must be carefully invited into the survey process using a wide variety of methods and channels. Since the investment associated with this invitation process can be significant, it is increasingly attractive both methodologically and financially to invite potential survey participants to a situation where they agree to accept questions from more than one survey. Those who agree to consider taking multiple surveys are referred to as “panelists” or “research community members” and the group to which they belong, in the eyes of a research practitioner, are referred to as “panels”, “research communities” or “community panels”. These panels can consist of groups as small as several hundred members to vast communities in the millions.

The methodological advantage of panels in the online world is that panelists typically share background geo-demographic information which forms part of their “profile”. This profile is an essential tool for sampling and analysis purposes, meaning that respondents will not be asked to continually answer questions on matters such as gender, age and where they live.

The financial advantage of community panels is that the effort and expense associated with securing panelist cooperation can be amortized over several surveys. This in turn allows for greater investment in building bridges to respondents and facilitates payment, incentive and reward systems for survey respondents.

# ANGUS REID NATIONAL PANELS

Vision Critical has built and currently maintains hundreds of community panels. Most of these are proprietary community panels for organizations that wish to stay connected with their consumers or users. The Angus Reid division of Vision Critical has built several National Panels to assess broad citizen/consumer sentiment. These National Panels are recruited via a proactive campaign that incorporates a widespread invitation approach and a double opt-in screening procedure. Willing respondents are recruited through targeted banner ad placements in an extensive array of websites and through partnerships with non-governmental and charitable organizations. This approach ensures ensure an appropriate demographic balance that captures the diversity of each country across all sub-segments of the population.

Thereafter, the National Panels are maintained through advanced sampling techniques and frequent verifications of personal identity, contact information, and demographic characteristics. Relying on a combination of sampling regions based upon configurations of electoral districts and past voting trends, the Angus Reid panels in the United States and Canada reflect the general population by continually verifying and recruiting so that the socio-demographic characteristics of each sampling region match actual sub-populations according to both the census and electoral data.

There are almost 500,000 members of Angus Reid National Panels in North America. These panels have served as the platform for 20 electoral forecasting studies since 2007.

## REPRESENTATIVENESS

Today, the level of Internet penetration in North America is very high—approximately four-in-five Canadians and Americans have online access either at home or at work, with most having access at both locations. Online access in North America has spread to every significant demographic group, including seniors, youth, and people with above and below average household incomes. Comparatively, telephone surveys face continually declining response rates—often fewer than 10 per cent of North American adults agree to participate in a telephone survey.

The National Panels contain enough people in each major demographic group to draw random samples that represent the population as a whole. In order to ensure that all of our online research accurately represents the public-at-large in terms of both demographics and attitudes, our surveys are based upon randomly-selected, representative samples from each panel that are statistically weighted according to the most current demographic, regional, and political voting data available.

## CONDUCTING SURVEYS

When Angus Reid conducts a survey, the first step is to randomly select a portion of the National Panels that is representative of the general population at large. The selected panel members later receive an e-mail invitation and are asked to complete the survey by clicking on an Internet link to our secure online survey platform. In order to participate in the survey, these members must log in with their username and password. This ensures that the right people complete the survey, and enables their answers to demographic questions to be confirmed according to the demographic information that they provided when they first registered. It is important to note that our panel members do not receive survey invitations too often or repeatedly on the same subject.

Furthermore, respondents receive a small monetary incentive—ranging from \$1 to \$5—for completing each survey, as well as occasional prize draws. This encourages respondents to participate regardless of subject matter. The accumulated incentive cheques are delivered by mail, providing another opportunity for identity verification. Naturally, Angus Reid abides by strict confidentiality and privacy guidelines, and the personal information of our panel members is never divulged to anyone.

## CUTTING-EDGE SURVEY AND PANEL MANAGEMENT

By utilizing Sparq—the industry-leading, graphics-forward, and interactive survey software developed by Vision Critical—the National Panels present members with highly visual surveys that create realistic environments and incorporate interactive drag-and-drop usability. This approach to surveys creates a more engaging experience that captures more thoughtful responses. It also allows researchers to tackle complex subject matter in respondent-friendly ways.

The National Panels also benefit from a longitudinal capacity, archiving all survey responses over time. This procedure allows researchers to gain the most insight out of data and to better track and understand the significance of trends as they emerge and develop.

## FOUR MISCONCEPTIONS

“Web polls are inadequate. Anyone can take part and skew the sample.

A survey conducted by Angus Reid through the National Panels should not be confused with the millions of “quick polls” (or “instant web polls”) that appear in websites all over the world. These “quick polls” serve to take the pulse of visitors to a specific website, but are neither scientific nor descriptive of any particular population.

While the “quick polls” do elicit the opinion of web users, their results—usually accompanied by a disclaimer—should never hold the clout of a representative survey. The polls conducted by Angus Reid through the National Panels are always accompanied by a section that describes the methodology in detail: number of interviews, dates, and margin of error. From time to time, “quick polls” are used as a device to recruit new panel members. However, their results are never considered representative.

“An online panel cannot represent the entire population.

One of the misguided observations about online polling alleges that certain segments of the population are underrepresented, making a credible sample unattainable. In North America, four out of five people now have access to the Internet. The National Panels have enough panelists from every important demographic group in Canada and the United States to guarantee that samples are representative of the entire adult population.

Still, gathering interviews is only one step in the process. Every survey requires a procedure known as weighting. This exercise, an essential component of public opinion research, entails interpreting the responses in accordance with up-to-date social and demographic data. This ensures that the make-up of a constituency (a city, a province or state, or the whole country) is carefully represented within the sample, in areas such as gender, age, and income.

“An online panel does not allow for random selection.

Other critics claim that online polling is biased, because people choose to become panelists in order to respond to surveys themselves, instead of being picked at random through a list of telephone numbers. This argument erroneously assumes that every person will be asked to take part in every online poll at every time. Invitations for particular surveys are sent to a randomly selected portion of the National Panels, to ensure a representative sample.

“Online panels cannot match the accuracy of a telephone-based poll.

Indubitably, the most effective way to gauge the accuracy of public opinion research is an election. Democratic processes present the best opportunity to evaluate if the views of poll respondents are similar to the opinions that they actually declare at the ballot box.

Since 2007, Angus Reid has successfully predicted the final outcome of eight Canadian provincial elections, two Canadian federal elections, three United States gubernatorial elections, and four United States senatorial elections. In 12 of these 20 democratic processes, the prediction was the most accurate out of all pollsters who published a forecast.

# OUR RECORD

## Manitoba – October 2011

The voting intention survey conducted days before the provincial ballot provided an exact prediction for three of the four contending parties - New Democrats, Liberals and Greens - and a difference of a single point for the Progressive Conservatives.

	Actual	Angus Reid	Probe	Environics	Viewpoints
New Democratic Party (NDP)	46%	46%	46%	42%	51%
Progressive Conservatives	44%	43%	43%	45%	39%
Liberal Party	8%	8%	7%	10%	6%
Green Party	3%	3%	4%	3%	4%
Difference		-1	-3	-7	-13

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## Ontario – October 2011

Going into field on the final day of the campaign, our research noticed a shift towards the governing Liberal Party that materialized on election night.

	Actual	Angus Reid	Forum	Abacus	Nanos	Ekos	Ipsos
Liberal	38%	37%	37%	37%	38%	38%	41%
Prog Con.	35%	33%	36%	34%	33%	32%	31%
NDP	23%	26%	23%	24%	26%	23%	25%
Green	3%	3%	3%	4%	2%	6%	3%
Other	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%
Difference.		-6	-2	-4	-6	-7	-9

## BC Referendum – August 2011

The last survey conducted before registered voters in British Columbia received their ballots to take part in the mail-in referendum on the future of the harmonized sales tax (HST) pegged support for the Yes side at 56 per cent. When all the ballots were counted, the Yes side emerged victorious with 55 per cent of the vote.

	Actual	Angus Reid
Yes	55%	56%
No	45%	44%
Difference		-2

## Canada – May 2011

In this contest, Angus Reid squared off against eight other firms, including three which relied on online panels for some of their data collection. The final survey perfectly predicted the level of support that three of the five main contending parties—Liberals, Bloc Québécois and Greens—would get at the ballot box.

	Actual	Angus Reid	Ipsos	Nanos	Leger	Forum	Decima	Abacus	Ekos	Compass
Con.	40%	37%	38%	37%	36%	36%	36%	37%	34%	46%
NDP	31%	33%	33%	32%	31%	33%	30%	32%	31%	26%
Lib.	19%	19%	18%	21%	21%	19%	19%	18%	21%	17%
BQ	6%	6%	7%	6%	7%	6%	6%	7%	6%	7%
Grn.	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	5%	6%	7%	6%	4%
Difference		-5	-6	-6	-7	-7	-7	-9	-10	-14

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## New York – November 2010

Voters in the Empire State participated in three elections in 2010, due to the retirement of Hillary Rodham Clinton from the U.S. Senate. Veteran incumbent Charles Schumer and Democratic gubernatorial candidate Andrew Cuomo both enjoyed blowout victories. The prediction of the second Senate race, where Kirsten Gillibrand defeated Joseph DioGuardi, was the best of all pollsters.

### NY Senate (1) – November 2010

	Actual	Angus Reid	Siena	Rasm
Schumer (D)	65%	61%	66%	62%
Townsend (R)	33%	35%	33%	33%
Other	2%	4%	0%	5%
Difference		-8	-3	-6

### NY Senate (2) – November 2010

	Actual	Angus Reid	SUSA	Siena
Gillibrand (D)	63%	59%	57%	60%
DioGuardi (R)	35%	38%	37%	39%
Other	2%	2%	6%	0%
Difference		-7	-12	-11

### NY Governor – November 2010

	Actual	Angus Reid	NYT	Rasm
Cuomo (D)	63%	55%	70%	54%
Paladino (R)	33%	38%	29%	39%
Other	4%	7%	2%	5%
Difference		-16	-15	-16

## Ohio – November 2010

Angus Reid covered two elections in the Buckeye State in 2010, providing the best predictions of the online era, with a difference of only two percentage points from the final outcome of each democratic process. The surveys predicted a victory for Rob Portman in the race to replace departing U.S. Senator George Voinovich, and a defeat for incumbent governor Ted Strickland.

### OH Senate – November 2010

	Actual	Angus Reid	Quinn	PPP	UCinn
Portman (R)	57%	57%	61%	59%	61%
Fisher (D)	39%	40%	40%	41%	39%
Other	4%	3%	1%	0%	1%
Difference		-2	-8	-6	-7

### OH Governor – November 2010

	Actual	Angus Reid	PPP	SUSA	Quinn
Kasich (R)	49%	49%	51%	51%	53%
Strickland (D)	47%	46%	49%	46%	46%
Other	4%	5%	0%	4%	1%
Difference		-2	-8	-3	-8

## California – November 2010

In the Golden State, the Angus Reid surveys correctly anticipated the re-election of U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer, and a victory for Democratic gubernatorial candidate Jerry Brown over Republican challenger Meg Whitman. An adequate assessment of the level of support for four third-party candidates proved crucial in the Senate prediction.

### CA Senate – November 2010

	Actual	Angus Reid	PPP	SUSA	Rasm
Boxer (D)	52%	51%	52%	51%	51%
Fiorina (R)	42%	44%	47%	42%	47%
Other	6%	7%	0%	7%	2%
Difference		-4	-11	-2	-10

### CA Governor – November 2010

	Actual	Angus Reid	PPP	SUSA	Rasm
Brown (D)	54%	49%	53%	53%	51%
Whitman (R)	41%	44%	47%	41%	46%
Other	5%	7%	0%	6%	2%
Difference		-10	-11	-2	-11

### Nova Scotia – June 2009

The Angus Reid surveys conducted during this provincial campaign anticipated a third place finish for the Progressive Conservatives, and a victory for the New Democrats—who had never formed the government in any Atlantic Canadian province.

	Actual	Angus Reid	CRA
New Democratic Party (NDP)	45%	47%	44%
Liberal Party	27%	26%	28%
Progressive Conservative Party	24%	23%	26%
Green Party	2%	3%	2%
Other	1%	1%	0%
Difference		-5	-5

### British Columbia – May 2009

This provincial election featured the debut of Real Ballot—a revolutionary approach that showed respondents the candidates that were running in their respective constituencies. This approach allowed researchers to provide an exact prediction for two opposition parties: the NDP and the BC Conservatives.

	Actual	Angus Reid	Ipsos	IRG	Mustel	Enviro.
BC Liberal Party	46%	44%	47%	46%	47%	47%
New Democratic Party (NDP)	42%	42%	39%	37%	38%	36%
Green Party	8%	10%	10%	11%	12%	12%
BC Conservative Party	4%	4%	4%	6%	3%	5%
Difference		-4	-6	-10	-10	-12

### Quebec – December 2008

The December 2008 election in Quebec provided a chance to review the effect of two emerging parties in the provincial landscape. The final Angus Reid survey anticipated that the governing Liberals would receive 42 per cent of the vote, while other firms that relied on the telephone overstated their predictions.

	Actual	Angus Reid	Leger	CROP	Nanos
Liberal Party (PLQ)	42%	42%	45%	45%	44%
Parti Québécois (PQ)	35%	36%	32%	29%	36%
Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ)	16%	13%	15%	15%	12%
Québec Solidaire	4%	5%	4%	5%	5%
Green Party	2%	3%	3%	6%	5%
Difference		-6	-8	-16	-11

### Canada – October 2008

Angus Reid, using its online approach in a national election for the first time, conducted the only one that foresaw a high number of votes for the Conservatives, a perfect prediction for the Green Party, and a double-digit difference between Tories and Grits at the national level.

	Actual	Angus Reid	Ekos	Leger	Ipsos	Decima	Nanos	TSC	Segma
Con.	38%	37%	35%	36%	34%	34%	34%	33%	35%
Lib.	26%	27%	26%	27%	29%	25%	27%	28%	23%
NDP	18%	20%	19%	20%	18%	19%	21%	18%	21%
BQ	10%	9%	10%	8%	9%	11%	10%	10%	10%
Grn.	7%	7%	10%	9%	8%	9%	8%	11%	11%
Diff.		-5	-7	-9	-9	-9	-9	-11	-13

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### Alberta – March 2008

Four of the five parties in this election, which featured a particularly low turnout, were called within the margin of error, and all contenders were listed in the correct order.

	Actual	Angus Reid	TSC	Leger
Progressive Conservatives	53%	43%	50%	55%
Liberal Party	26%	28%	25%	24%
New Democratic Party	9%	13%	8%	7%
Wildrose Alliance Party	7%	10%	10%	8%
Green Party	5%	7%	8%	6%
Difference		-21	-16	-11

### Saskatchewan – November 2007

A series of Angus Reid surveys showed that respondents in Saskatchewan were ready for a change of government, as the popularity of sitting premier Lorne Calvert waned and opposition contender Brad Wall connected with the population. The final Angus Reid survey accurately predicted that more than half of voters would support the Saskatchewan Party in the election.

	Actual	Angus Reid	Sigma
Saskatchewan Party	52%	52%	54%
New Democratic Party (NDP)	37%	35%	34%
Liberal Party	10%	12%	8%
Difference		-4	-7

### Ontario – October 2007

The election in Canada's most populous province was marked by the decision of the opposition Progressive Conservatives to call for specific changes to education guidelines. In the end, all participating parties were predicted within two percentage points of their actual result.

	Actual	Angus Reid	SES	Enviro.	Ipsos	TSC	Decima
Liberal Party	42%	40%	43%	46%	43%	42%	42%
PC Party	32%	34%	31%	31%	32%	27%	31%
NDP	17%	19%	18%	20%	18%	19%	17%
Green Party	8%	7%	9%	3%	6%	11%	10%
Difference		-7	-4	-13	-4	-10	-3

### Manitoba – May 2007

An Angus Reid survey conducted a few days before the provincial election was held showed that incumbent premier Gary Doer was unquestionably more popular than opposition challenger Hugh McFadyen. The voting intention numbers confirmed that the governing NDP would win the election by a double-digit margin.

	Actual	Angus Reid	Probe
New Democratic Party (NDP)	48%	49%	44%
Progressive Conservative Party	38%	37%	37%
Other parties	14%	15%	19%
Difference		-3	-10

### Quebec – March 2007

This was the first prediction of a Canadian democratic process that relied entirely on data collected from online research. While three other firms anticipated a third place finish for the opposition Action démocratique du Québec, the Angus Reid surveys saw a steady rise in support for the ADQ that would ultimately lead to the party becoming the official opposition in Quebec.

	Actual	Angus Reid	Leger	CROP	TSC
Liberal Party (PLQ)	33%	31%	35%	34%	30%
Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ)	31%	30%	26%	25%	28%
Parti Québécois (PQ)	28%	29%	29%	28%	31%
Difference		-4	-8	-7	-9