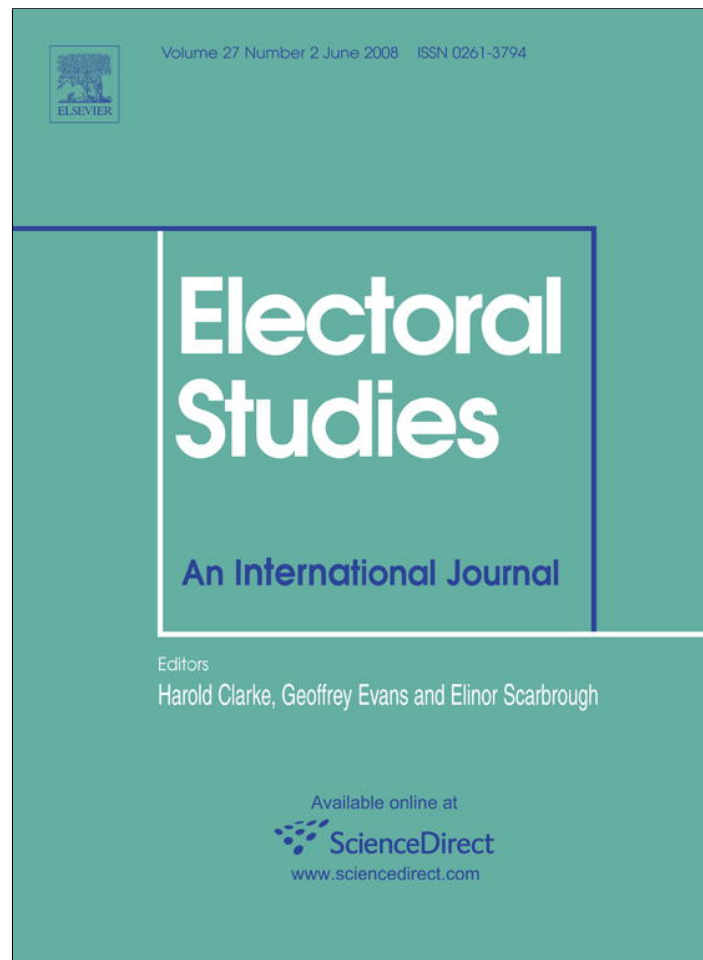


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Measuring expectations: Comparing alternative approaches

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Abstract

The paper compares three alternative approaches employed by the Canadian Election Study to measure voters' perceptions of parties' chances of winning in their local constituency. The first approach, used in 2000, consists of asking respondents to rate parties' chances on a 0 to 100 scale in a random sequence. The second, used in 2004, entails first asking whether each party had a chance of winning and then inviting people to rate the chances. In the third approach, adopted in 2006, respondents are first asked which two parties had the best chance of winning and, then, if any other party has a chance, before requesting that they rate the mentioned parties. By comparing "objective" and "perceived" chances of winning, the paper concludes that the third approach provides a more valid measure of voters' expectations. The paper discusses the implications for the measurement of expectations in different types of electoral systems.

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A large body of literature has shown that voters do not vote solely on the basis of their preferences among the parties and candidates; they also factor in strategic considerations in order "to make their vote count" (Cox, 1997). Strategic voting entails the voter deciding to vote for a party/candidate that is not the most preferred because of her expectations about the outcome of the election (Blais et al., 2001).

Expectations about the outcome of the election are crucial in the process of strategic coordination. As Cox (1997, p. 7) argues, "contributors do not contribute to, activists do not volunteer, and citizens do not vote for hopeless candidates, ensuring that those

expected to do poorly, do poorly in fact". If we accept that strategic considerations are an integral element of the voting decision, the implication is that we need to take into account voters' perceptions of which candidates are viable or not and to understand how people form these perceptions. All this is impossible, of course, unless expectations are correctly measured.

A few studies have attempted to measure voters' expectations about the outcome of the election, what affects these expectations and how they influence vote choice (Uhlener and Grofman, 1986; Abramson et al., 1992; Blais et al., 2001; Blais, 2002; Blais and Turgeon, 2004). But there has been no systematic evaluation of the specific measures used to tap voters' perceptions of the various parties' chances of winning. This study fills the void.

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We compare and evaluate three different approaches to measuring voters' expectations about the various parties' chances of winning in their constituency that have been utilized by the Canadian Election Study (CES). Canada is a parliamentary plurality system which had 301 single-member constituencies in the 2000 federal general election and 308 districts in both 2004 and 2006.

In each of these three elections a slightly modified set of questions was employed. Because each Canadian Election Study employed a different set of questions that have some commonalities but also important differences, this permits a useful framework within which to examine the effect of different sets of questions on voters' responses.

We use the campaign surveys for the last three federal elections. All are rolling cross-section telephone surveys conducted over the course of the election campaign. The 2000 survey was conducted over a period of 33 days, the 2004 over 36 days and 2006 over 55 days.¹ In each case, the last interview day was the day before the election. The total number of respondents was respectively 3651, 4323 and 4058, and the response rates were 60%, 55% and 57%.

In all cases, the questions about voters' expectations are couched in terms of voters' perceptions of the various parties' chances of winning. Framing of the question in terms of chances of winning is perfectly logical. As Cox (1997, p. 30) points out, "instrumentally rational voters eschew wasting their votes on hopeless candidates, preferring instead to transfer their support to some candidate with a serious chance of winning."

All three studies use a 0 to 100 scale to tap perceived chances of winning. We cannot determine whether a 0 to 100 scale is more or less appropriate than a 0 to 10 scale or the use of ordinal categories (for a detailed discussion see Bilodeau, 1999). But it makes intuitive sense to talk about a 20% chance of winning, and the full scale is indeed utilized by respondents even though there is a strong concentration on "round" (10, 20, 30...) numbers. We assume that the 0 to 100 scale is justified.

Our objective is to compare responses to three different sets of questions (see Appendix A for the precise wording). In the 2000 CES, the "0 to 100 chance"

questions were asked about each party in a random sequence. In 2004, the respondents were asked whether each party, in sequence of declining national strength, had "a chance of winning" and they were then invited to rate on the 0 to 100 scale the chance of the parties they thought had some chance. In 2006, respondents were first asked which two parties had the best (and second best) chance of winning and if any other party had a chance, and they were then invited to rate the chance of the parties they thought had some chance on the 0 to 100 scale.²

The basic argument of the paper is that the 2006 approach is preferable to the 2000 and 2004 approaches. The deficiency in the 2000 approach is that people are reluctant to say that a party has a 0 chance when offered a 0 to 100 scale. It is easier to respond "no" when asked whether a party has a chance of winning, though it can also be too easy an option to choose, an apparent deficiency in the 2004 approach. The challenge is to strike a balance, something that the 2006 approach was designed to do, by encouraging people to identify parties that are in contention and then to rate their chance.

1. Comparing the distribution of responses

The analysis begins by comparing the distribution of responses obtained by the three sets of questions. Perhaps the most revealing pattern concerns the number of parties that are given some chance of winning.³ Table 1 shows strikingly distinct distributions. In the 2000 CES, the most frequent response was to give four parties some chance, and two-thirds of those

² In 2004, national strength was determined based on the number of seats a party held in the House of Commons immediately prior to the election, placing the Liberals first and the NDP last. In 2006, the order in which the respondent identified parties as having the best chance of winning was the order used for the follow-up. In both 2004 and 2006, if the respondent indicated that only one party had a chance, there was no follow-up and the single party identified was given a score of 100 (and all other parties a score of 0).

³ We consider only the parties that held seats in the Canadian Parliament both before and after the election in question. This gives us five parties in the 2000 Canadian election: Liberal, Canadian Alliance, Progressive Conservative and New Democratic parties nationwide, and the Bloc Québécois in the province of Quebec. Since the Bloc only ran candidates in the province of Quebec, its perceived chance was measured only among Quebec respondents in each election. The 2004 Canadian election witnessed the advent of a "new" Conservative party, the outcome of a merger between the Progressive Conservative and the Canadian Alliance parties. The same party configuration exists for 2006, with three parties outside Quebec (Liberals, NDP, and the Conservatives) and four in Quebec (the addition of the Bloc Québécois).

¹ The survey/campaign periods ran from October 24 to November 26, 2000, from May to June 27, 2004 and from November 29, 2005 to January 22, 2006 (though no campaigning or surveys took place between Christmas and New Year's Day during the campaign period of 2006).

Table 1
Number of parties given a chance of winning in the respondent's constituency

Chance	Distribution		
	Canada 2000	Canada 2004	Canada 2006
Chance given	396	2685	471
to one party	12.1%	69.4%	14.2%
Chance given	657	1059	2291
to two parties	20.1%	27.4%	69.2%
Chance given	653	118	551
to three parties	20.0%	3.1%	16.6%
Chance given	1258	5	—
to four parties	38.5%	0.1%	—
Chance given	299	—	—
to five parties	9.2%	—	—
<i>N</i>	3266	3871	3313

interviewed indicated that at least three parties could win.⁴ In the 2004 CES, 69% said that only one party had a chance of winning. In 2006, 69% identified two parties as having a chance of winning. This striking difference cannot be explained by differences in the electoral context. For instance, the number of constituencies in which the winner had at least a 20 point lead over the next contender was almost the same in 2004 and 2006 (135 and 137) and it was in fact slightly higher in 2000 (158).

The framing of the question made a huge difference. In the 2000 CES, when asked about each of the parties in a random order, few respondents said that a given party's chance was nil. In the 2004 CES, when asked whether each of the three main parties (four in Quebec) had a chance, the most frequent response was to indicate that only one party had a chance. In 2006, respondents were invited to name the two parties with the best chance, and only a few (14%) failed to name two; they were then asked whether there was any other party with a chance in the race, and the great majority said "no".

Table 2 presents the distribution of scores, on the 0 to 100 scale, attributed to parties in the three studies. Because it is the relative chance that matters, namely how good a party's chance appears compared to the other parties' chance, we use standardized scores; the score given to a party is divided by the scores given

⁴ The pattern is somewhat different outside and inside Quebec because of the presence of a fifth party (the Bloc Québécois) in that province. Outside Quebec, the modal response, provided by 51% of the respondents, is to credit four parties with some chance. In Quebec, the most frequent responses are five parties (27%) and two parties (26%).

Table 2
Distribution of perceived chance of winning

Perceived chance	Distribution		
	Canada 2000	Canada 2004	Canada 2006
No chance	25.7%	58.2%	38.1%
1–10%	13.6%	0.1%	2.0%
11–20%	14.0%	0.1%	2.8%
21–30%	16.8%	0.8%	6.1%
31–40%	12.4%	3.9%	11.7%
41–50%	8.1%	3.6%	14.8%
51–60%	2.3%	10.8%	10.5%
61–70%	1.0%	1.1%	5.0%
71–80%	0.9%	0.4%	2.7%
81–90%	0.9%	0.1%	1.3%
91–99%	1.7%	0.0%	0.7%
Certain victory	2.5%	20.9%	4.4%
<i>N</i>	12,623	11,468	10,782

to all the parties and multiplied by 100, so that the total scores given by each respondent add up to 100.⁵

The dominant response in 2004 was obviously 0. Just under three-fifths of the responses were "no chance". The distribution in the 2004 CES has the additional interesting feature that the second most frequent category is "certain victory." Eighty-two percent of respondents gave the NDP (the smallest party in terms of seats in Parliament) no chance of winning in their constituency. As for the incumbent Liberals, 48% thought that they had no chance and 25% indicated that they were certain to win.

In the 2000 CES, 0 was also the modal category, though only 26% of the time. The NDP received "only" 39% zeros, and the largest party, the Liberals, a mere 8% zeros. In 2006, no chance was reported 38% of the time, with 67% of respondents giving the NDP no chance of winning and 23% saying the same for the incumbent Liberals.

2. Assessing the validity of responses

The three sets of questions produce very different sets of responses. Which is most appropriate? We start with the assumption that a party's chance of winning in a constituency depends to a great extent on the outcome of the previous election in the same constituency. We establish the "objective" chance of parties on the basis of the previous election results in a given constituency, and compare with the subjective chance yielded by the three sets of questions. The procedure that

⁵ Cases where a respondent named an "other" party were dropped (this happened in less than 2% of the cases and only in 2006).

produces the best fit between “objective” and “subjective” chance is deemed to be more valid.

We first examine the lead that each party experienced in the previous election in a given constituency (or gap from the frontrunner in the case of unsuccessful candidates) and relate it to their success (or defeat) in the subsequent election, in order to obtain an “objective” measure for likelihood of electoral success.⁶ The working hypothesis is that the greater the lead (or gap) a party had in the previous election in a given constituency, the better (or worse) its “actual” chance should be in the following election.

Table 3 shows the relationship between winning or losing in a given election (the dependent variable) and the party’s lead or gap in the previous election (the independent variable). Not surprisingly, there is a strong correlation between the two variables in each election, which confirms the conventional wisdom that the previous election results are a good predictor of who does and does not have a good chance of winning. The variations between years reflect the different relationship between previous lead or gap and electoral success in that specific election, and its purpose is to provide a baseline against which to evaluate our measures of respondents’ expectations in these different elections.⁷

Regardless of the election in question, the odds of winning for a party that was more than 30 points behind the frontrunner in the previous election were close to nil in all elections and, inversely, a party that had won by more than 20 points had about a 90% chance of winning the constituency again. If we assume that voters “rationally” form their expectations about the local race on the basis of the constituency results in the previous election (see Blais and Bodet, 2006, for supporting evidence), there should be a strong connection between the “objective” odds of winning (given the party’s lead or gap in the previous election) and the perceived chance of winning.

Using the logit model of the relationship between winning and previous lead/gap, shown in Table 3, we generated predictions on the likelihood of electoral success for each party in the various elections and constituencies. Table 4 shows the relationship between a party’s perceived chance of winning as reported by

⁶ In the two instances where independents were elected to Parliament, that constituency was excluded from our analysis.

⁷ In the 2000 election, the governing Liberal Party was able to maintain its majority position in the Canadian Parliament, something it had enjoyed for almost a decade. In the 2004 election, the Liberals were re-elected with only a minority and the newly merged Conservative party moved into second place in terms of seats. In 2006, the Conservatives defeated the Liberals, though with only a minority.

Table 3

The relationship between winning/losing in a constituency and lead/gap in previous election

	Canada (2000)	Canada (2004)	Canada (2006)
Lead/Gap in previous election	0.17** (0.01)	0.10** (0.01)	0.13** (0.01)
Constant	−0.18 (0.14)	−0.13 (0.11)	−0.17 (0.11)
<i>N</i>	1189	999	994
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	0.73	0.58	0.60
Log likelihood	−183.09	−259.14	−246.29

***p* < 0.001.

Note: The coefficients are logit estimates with robust standard errors in parentheses. The lead/gap in Canada (2004) is the percentage of votes after transposition of the 2000 election results onto the 2004 constituencies, with Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservative results combined into the new Conservative Party.

CES respondents (the dependent variable) and the “objective” odds as generated by the logit model.

If there were a perfect match between the objective odds and perceptions, the correlation and the regression coefficients would equal 1 and the intercept would be 0. The weakest correlation and regression coefficients are obtained in 2004, while the 2006 approach produces the strongest coefficients (and the smallest intercept). We take this as an indication that the 2006 set of questions is the most satisfactory of all.

It could be argued that the comparison between 2004 and the other two elections is not “fair” because the former had witnessed the merger of two parties into one (a “new” Conservative party) and that as a consequence it was more difficult to evaluate the parties’ chance in the new environment created by the merger. However, the correlation between previous lead or gap and winning is about the same in 2004 and 2006 (see Table 3). Furthermore, the results are basically the same if the model to predict the “objective” odds of winning includes (besides lead/gap in previous election) dummy variables for the political parties.

In all three elections, the chance of a previously unsuccessful party winning the election is systematically overestimated by respondents and the chance of a previously successful party is systematically underestimated.⁸ These findings are consistent with those of previous studies showing that people overestimate the

⁸ For instance, in 2000 the predicted subjective chance of a party with an “objective” chance of 10% is 18%, while it is only 50% in the case of a party with an “objective” chance of 90% (see Table 4).

Table 4
The relationship between perceived chance of winning and predicted probability of winning (based on lead/gap in previous election)

	Canada (2000)	Canada (2004)	Canada (2006)
Predicted probability of winning	0.40** (0.00)	0.31** (0.01)	0.56** (0.01)
Constant	14.49** (0.22)	21.71** (0.48)	13.72** (0.27)
<i>N</i>	11,563	10,829	10,720
<i>R</i> ²	0.37	0.08	0.47

***p* < 0.001.

Note: Above coefficients are linear regression estimates with robust standard errors in parentheses. Predicted probability of winning is estimated on the basis of the logit models shown in Table 3.

probability of rare events and underestimate that of frequent ones (Kahneman and Tversky, 1982).

These “biases” emerge in each study. But the overall fit between “objective” and “subjective” chance is strongest in 2006 and weakest in 2004. These results strongly suggest that the 2006 set of questions is the most appropriate and the 2004 the least satisfactory. The 2006 CES yielded scores that were systematically closer to the parties’ “objective” chance, as predicted on the basis of the previous results in the constituency.

3. Discussion and conclusion

The verdict is that the random sequence approach utilized in the 2000 CES is not the optimal measure of voters’ perceptions of the parties’ chance of winning in their constituency, the original suspicion that led to question redesign.

Why is it so? Quite simply, respondents seem reluctant to answer 0 (or less than 10) when they are asked to rate a party’s chance on a 0 to 100 scale, even with respect to parties that had finished way behind the frontrunner in the previous election.

Take the NDP in the province of Quebec, for example. The party has never won a seat in a general election in the province, and it has never even finished second in any constituency since 1988. The odds of the NDP winning any seat in Quebec in the 2000 election seemed extremely bleak, very close to 0. Yet, only 57% gave the party a 0, and as many as 28% gave a score of 20 or above. In 2004, by contrast, when asked whether the party had a chance of winning in their constituency, 95% said “no”.⁹

⁹ Note that the party did better in 2004 (4% of the vote) than in 2000 (2%) in Quebec.

What about the 2004 format? The main problem here lies in the fact that 69% of the respondents said that only one party had a chance of winning in their constituency. There are safe constituencies in Canada; in 2004 the winner won by a margin of more than 20 percentage points in 137 constituencies out of 308. But the fact is that most constituencies are not safe. Furthermore, even in those constituencies which were closely contested, with the winner’s lead over the runner-up being less than 10 points,¹⁰ as many as 65% of the respondents indicated that only one candidate had a chance of winning.

It appears to be too easy to say “no” when asked whether a given party has a chance of winning in one’s constituency. The consequence is that we get a bimodal distribution in which three-fifths of the parties get 0 and one-fifth get 100. This does not reflect the fact that in many constituencies there was a real race going on and that, for most of these, two parties had some chance of winning.

All in all, then, the 2006 approach performs better than either the 2000 or 2004 approach. The reason is that the 2006 set of questions invites people to indicate that two parties have a chance of winning.

Admittedly, this question increases the number of two-way races being predicted. In 2006, 69% of the respondents gave two parties a chance of winning even though in 44% of the constituencies the winning party ultimately won by more than 20 points. But in most constituencies there is a race (that is, there is some uncertainty about the outcome), and most often the race is limited to two “viable” candidates.

In short, the 2006 approach is more satisfactory because it circumvents respondents’ reluctance to give weak parties a very low chance when asked successively about each party’s chance of winning on a 0 to 100 scale (the problem with the 2000 CES) and to say “no” when asked whether a party has a chance of winning (the problem with the 2004 CES). The 2006 CES set of questions is not free of bias, leading people to indicate that two parties have a chance of winning, but that is a “good” bias because, as the theory predicts (Duverger, 1954; Cox, 1997), the race in single-member plurality elections will more often than not be between two candidates.

There is thus no absolute “best” way to measure voters’ perceptions of the parties’ chance of winning a seat in a constituency. Any sequence of questions is bound to push responses in a certain direction. The

¹⁰ There were 109 such constituencies.

trick is to find the approach whose “bias” distorts “reality” the least.

In electoral contexts like Canada where the most frequent situation is for the incumbent to have a “good” chance of being re-elected, for the second contender to have “some” chance of defeating her, and for the other candidates to have little chance, the “best” approach is one that “leads” respondents to name the top two contenders while allowing them to name a third if they wish.

What are the implications of our findings for other countries? The implications are obvious in single-member plurality systems. The 2005 British Election Study includes a set of expectation questions that is very similar to the 2000 CES approach, except that it uses a 0 to 10 scale. The respondents are asked about each party in a random sequence and they are asked to indicate how likely or unlikely, on the 0 to 10 scale, each party is to win the election in the local constituency. Our findings suggest that it would be preferable to first invite respondents to name the two parties with the best chance of winning, and then to indicate if any other party had a chance, before having them to rate the parties’ chance.

A similar situation occurs in the single-member plurality component of mixed systems. Again in most cases there should be only two viable candidates and we would recommend using the CES 2006 approach. Indeed this is the strategy employed in the New Zealand Election Study (NZES). More precisely the NZES first asks which party has the most chance of winning and how much chance it has (on the 0 to 100 scale), then which is the next most likely to win and its chance, and finally if any other party has a chance. This procedure inspired the set of questions adopted in the 2006 CES.

Strategic considerations are not confined to single-member plurality systems, and so the question of how to measure voters’ expectations about the outcome of the election arises, whatever the electoral system. This is particularly clear in two-round run-off systems. The 2002 French Electoral Study included questions about the perceived chance of the first and second most preferred candidates in the presidential election (see Blais, 2004a,b). The implication of our findings is that it would be more fruitful to have people first identify the three candidates with the best chance of winning, then indicate whether any other candidate has a chance, and finally rate the chance of these candidates.

What about PR systems? There are at least two types of strategic voting to be considered in a PR

system. The first is the decision not to support a party that is unlikely to win any seat or that is uncertain to reach the required threshold (what Cox calls threshold insurance; see Cox, 1997, p. 197). In both cases, there is a need to tap voters’ perceptions of the party’s chance of winning at least one seat or clearing the threshold. In these cases, the strategy would be for the researchers to identify the relevant party or parties (that may not be able to win any seat) and to have specific questions about their perceived chance.

A second type of strategic voting in a PR system entails voting for a party that is not the most preferred because of preferences and anticipations about the potential government coalitions to be formed about the election. Aldrich et al. (2005; see also Blais et al., 2006) have shown that such considerations played a role in vote choice in the 2003 Israeli election. The 2003 Israeli Election Study identified four potential coalitions (right religious; secular; left; and national unity) and asked respondents to rate the odds of each coalition forming on a 0 to 100 scale. The approach here is basically the 2000 CES one, since the odds questions are asked about each party. Our study would suggest that it is preferable to start with questions about which coalitions are most likely to occur before asking respondents to rate their “probability”. Because there seems to be no strong theoretical reason to suppose that there are only two or three “viable” options, however, the logical procedure would be to have the respondents rank order the coalitional possibilities in terms of probabilities and then rate each of them (from the most to the least likely) on a 0 to 100 (or 0 to 10) scale.

The bottom line is that strategic voting is a real option in all kinds of electoral systems and that in all cases it makes sense to tap voters’ perceptions of the parties’ and/or coalitions’ chance of winning a seat or forming the government. Our study shows that in designing questions to tap these perceptions, one should be aware of respondents’ reluctance to give very low scores. Whenever there are good reasons to suppose that there are only two or three viable options in an election, we would argue that one should first identify what these viable options are and then only ask about their relative chance.

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Appendix A. Question wording

A.1. 2000 Canada

Now let's talk about how the parties are doing in your riding. Use a scale from 0 to 100. 0 means a party has no chance at all of winning, 50 means an even chance, and 100 means the party is certain to win. You can use number from 0 to 100.

The Conservative party's chances of winning in your riding?

The Liberal Party's chances of winning in your riding?

The New Democratic Party's chances of winning in your riding?

The Alliance party's chances of winning in your riding?

The Bloc Québécois chances of winning in your riding? (Quebec only)

A.2. 2004 Canada

Now let's talk about your own local riding. Do you think that the Liberal party has a chance of winning the election in your own local riding?

Do you think the Bloc Québécois has a chance of winning in your own local riding? (Quebec only)

Does the Conservative have a chance of winning the election in your own riding?

And what about the NDP?

What are the (mentioned) party's chances of winning the election in your own local riding? Use a scale from 0 to 100. Zero means no chance at all of winning, 50 means an even chance, and 100 means a certain victory. You can use any number from 0 to 100

A.3. 2006 Canada

In your OWN LOCAL RIDING, which party has the best chance of winning?

After the (first choice), which party has the best chance of winning in your local riding?

Do you think any other party has a chance of winning in your local riding?

Use a scale from 0 to 100. Zero means no chance at all of winning, 50 means an even chance, and 100

means certain to win. You can use any number from 0 to 100.

What are the (first choice)'s chances of winning in your local riding?

What are the (second choice)'s chances of winning in your local riding?

What are the (third choice)'s chances of winning in your local riding?

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