

The Polling Paradox:

How Survey Methods Confront – and sometimes fuel – the disinformation crisis

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EXOS

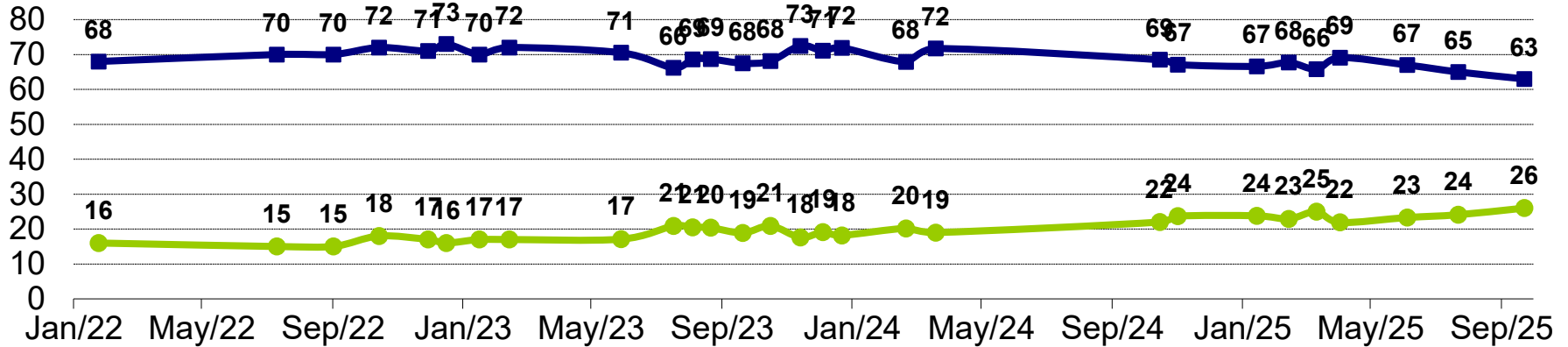
Disinformation and polarization (i)

- » Complex and poorly understood interaction of several major forces producing unprecedented polarization
 - Ordered populism is now amplified by dis- and misinformation
- » Disinformation levels not coming down
 - Rather, climate denial and belief governments concealing vaccine deaths are up
- » Confidence in one's ability to identify false information exhibits a curvilinear pattern where both the best informed and most disinformed exhibit the highest levels of confidence in their beliefs
 - Asking people's experience encountering health disinformation is a flawed indicator
- » Considerable evidence that non-probability methods exaggerate disinformation and belief in conspiracies

Incidence of disinformation: Concealed vaccine deaths

Q. To the best of your knowledge, are the following statements true or false?

Deaths due to COVID-19 vaccines are being intentionally hidden by the government



■ False (1-2)

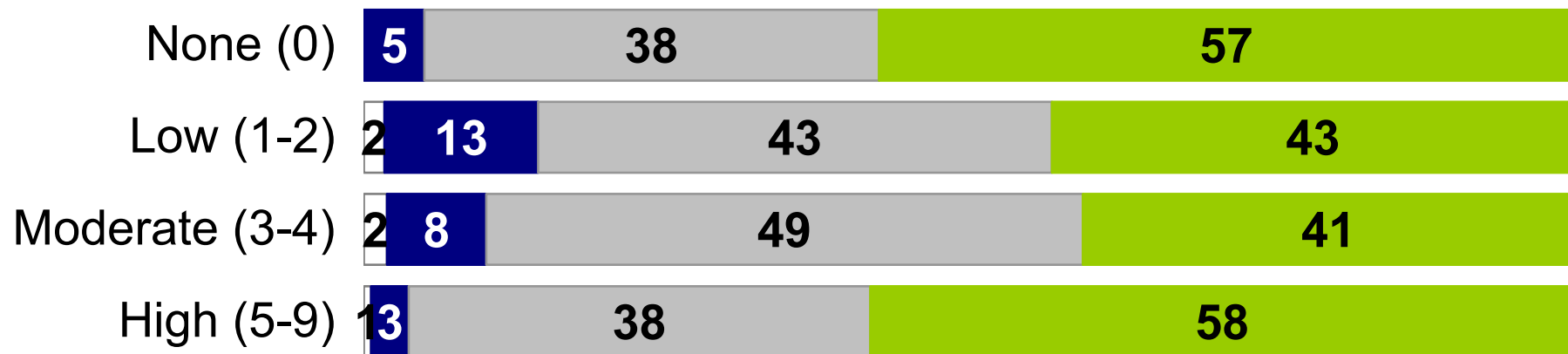
● True (3-4)

Confidence in ability to identify misinformation

Q. How confident are you in your ability to identify false information?



Level of disinformation



□ DK/NR ■ Not confident (1-2) ■ Moderately confident (3) ■ Confident (4-5) 4

Disinformation and polarization (ii)

- » Intense polarization around disinformation
- » While ordered populism has been a critical feature reshaping voter landscapes over past decade, disinformation even more powerful
- » Spurious beliefs about climate change, vaccine safety, and Russia now best predictors of:
 - Vote intention
 - Approval of Donald Trump
 - Attitudes to immigration
 - Support for secession
 - Support for populist movements such as the Freedom Convoy
 - National attachment

Attitudes to confederation by level of disinformation

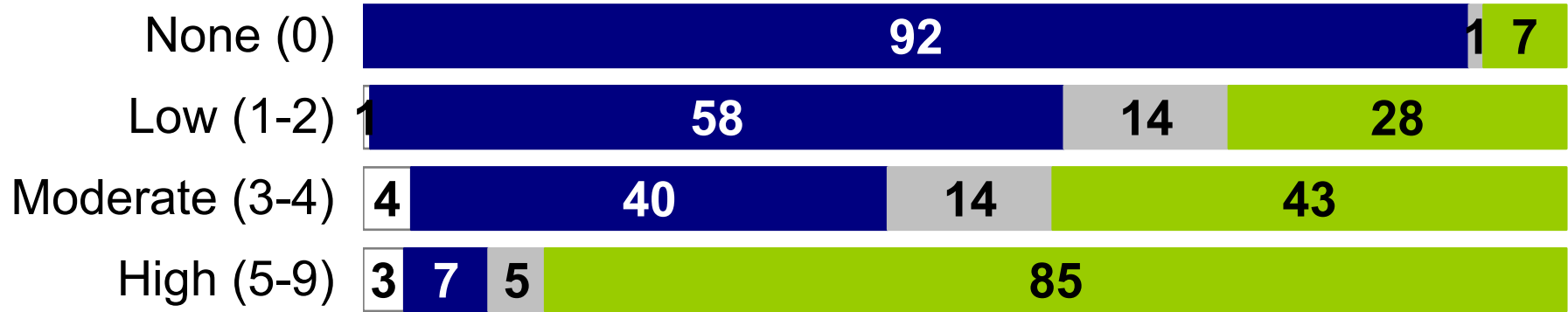
Support for secession (Alberta only)

Q. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

I think my province would be better off as an independent country



Level of disinformation



DK/NR
 Disagree (1-3)
 Neither (4)
 Agree (5-7)

Probability versus non-probability

- » In 2024, Pew demonstrated that opt-in panels can grossly distort sensitive measures (e.g., Holocaust denial)
- » In 2023, a study published in *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* reported that 96% of responses to an online, non-probability survey of commercial beekeepers were fraudulent
- » In 2023, the Pew Research Center compared three probability-based and three opt-in panels, finding that non-probability samples exhibited roughly twice the absolute error relative to benchmark statistics
- » In a 2022 opt-in survey experiment, the Pew Research Center found that 12% of adults under 30 claimed to be licensed to operate a class SSGN nuclear submarine
- » In 2025, the U.S. DOJ unsealed an indictment alleging a \$10 million scheme involving fabricated survey responses sold to market-research clients, confirming that synthetic “respondents” are a growing industry risk

Methodological comparison

Feature	EKOS Probit Panel	Large crowd-sourced panels
Recruitment	Random-probability recruitment from known frame	Opt-in via online ads, apps, affiliates
Verification	Live operator contact; re-contactable records	Double opt-in email; no identity validation
Representativeness	True random sample; known selection probability	Convenience sample; unknown coverage
Data Integrity	Verified real respondents; low synthetic risk	High risk of bots, duplicates, fabricated data
Weighting	Post-stratification only	Heavy post-hoc weighting required

Unexplained convergences (i)

- » In stable periods, probability and non-probability methods produce similar vote intention estimates
- » During moments of rapid change, probability samples detect breakouts first
- » Probability methods, however, first to reveal break-outs (e.g.,
 - In the January 2025* and post-Davos Liberal surges, non-probability polls showed apparent stability and only captured these shifts later
 - If scientific methods are being applied, estimates should not systematically diverge during periods of turbulence
 - Instead, systematic gaps emerged during periods of flux and disappeared by Election Day
 - The fact they converge much later at election time is suspect (herding)

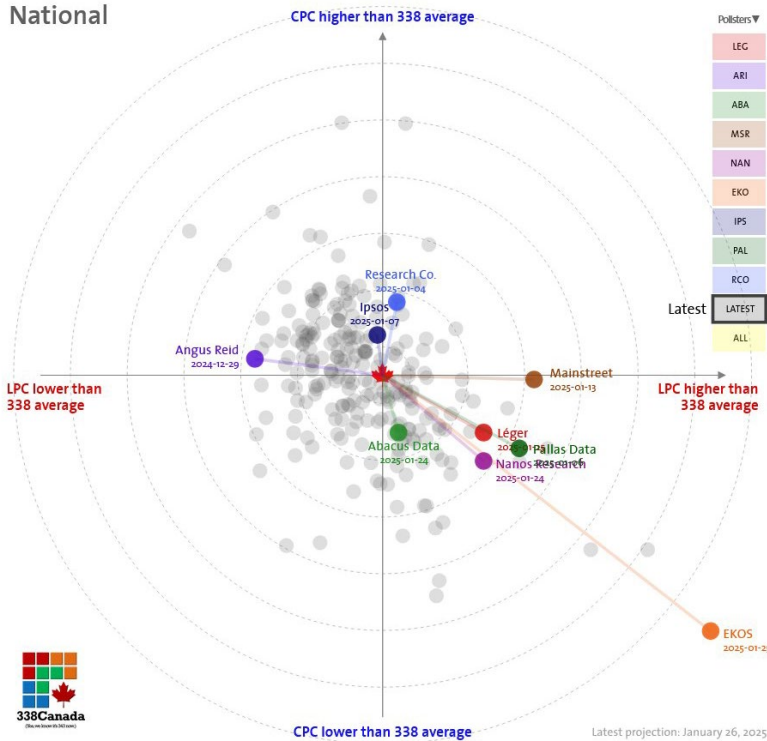
* For further reading, see [“Polling Alone”](#) by Frank Graves and [“Poilievre's potential polling panic isn't just noise”](#) by Kirk LaPointe.

Unexplained convergences (ii)

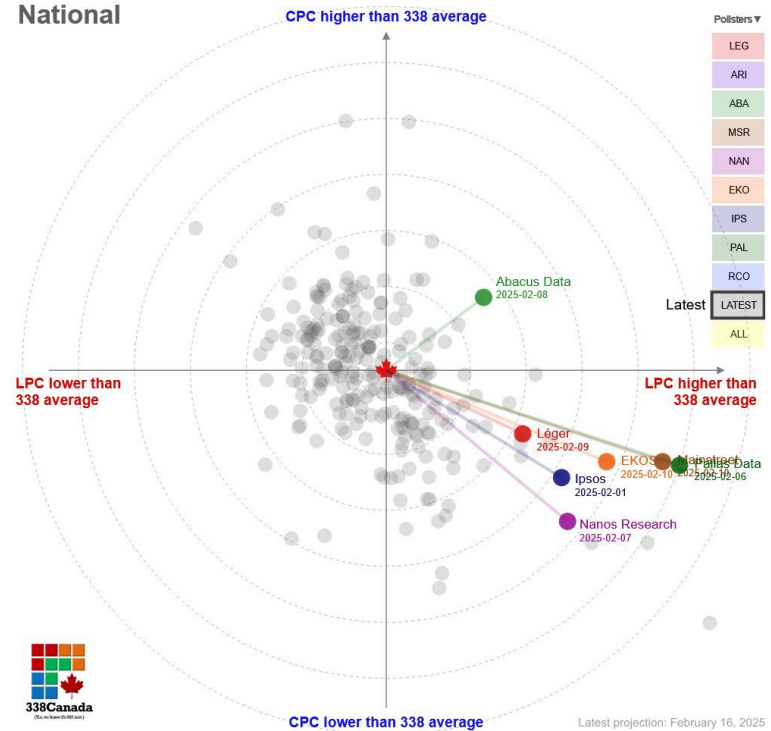
- » Media, aggregators, and some providers focus heavily on final pre-election polls, often overlooking performance during and before campaigns
 - Evaluating only the final poll legitimizes methods that are incapable of picking up important shifts
- » A particularly clear illustration is the 2025 federal election
 - In late 2024, the Liberal–Conservative gap differed by only about two points across probability and non-probability polls
 - As Liberal support surged in early 2025, this gap widened to roughly eight points
 - By the April 2025 election, this gap had largely vanished

Unexplained convergences (iii)

January 26, 2025



February 16, 2025



AI and bogus respondents

- » Synthetic respondents now capable of adopting realistic personas, simulating human-like timing, and answering questions in ways coherent with assigned persona
 - Passed 99.8% of attention/fraud checks in 40,000+ trials*
 - Would not identify as submarine pilots as in PEW study
- » Simulations on 2024 U.S. national election polls show injecting only 10-52 AI completes can flip the leading candidate
 - These attacks are cheap (~\$0.05 per complete), scalable, and can be targeted to specific polls
- » Probability panels largely AI-resilient (but not completely)

* For the full study, see [“The potential existential threat of large language models to online survey research,”](#) by S.J. Westwood (2025).

Conclusions

- » Disinformation continues to worsen despite broad consensus that this is an urgent priority
 - Broad agreement more forceful response from governments needed
 - Public not particularly confident industry can self-regulate
- » Properly done, survey research can be an indispensable tool for understanding important issues like disinformation its drivers
 - However, we need to be cautious
 - It can both elucidate how disinformation is evolving, but can also contribute without ensuring validation of respondents
 - Non-probability methods are defenceless against synthetic data/other intrusions and should not be used when accurate data is critical

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