Given the size of the field, let's have more than one mayors' debate this fall

More to the Story

By Ben Bennett

Last week's announcement and news coverage of a poll suggesting mayoral hopeful Cam Guthrie is way ahead of the incumbent is actually good news for the Karen Farbridge campaign.

(We'll just take a pause here while folks shake their head and re-read that opening paragraph.)

Opinion polls are becoming a larger and larger part of federal and provincial elections nowadays and this year, with at least one candidate having sufficient resources for such things, we are now seeing them at the local level. I am sure we'll see more.

There were two polls in Toronto last week and one here.

The Guelph poll was done using what have become known as "robocalls", which allow the person getting the phone call to hit various numbers to indicate a response to a series of questions from an automated tape. They are much cheaper than polls where someone actually asks questions of whomever answers the phone. Both are aggravating.

There are those who cast doubt on the accuracy of robocall polls; there are those who cast doubt on the accuracy of all polls. And invariably it is those whose team is shown in a bad light who do most of the casting.

The Guelph poll suggests Mr. Guthrie has a wide lead over the current mayor. Of the two polls conducted in Toronto on the mayor's race there, one was done by the same company as Guelph's poll and also used robocalls. It found that current mayor Rob Ford had almost caught up front-runner John Tory. The other, done traditionally using actual interviews, placed Mr. Tory 14 points ahead of Mr. Ford, who was just ahead of a slumping Olivia Chow.

We'll find out in due course which was accurate, but here's a thought.

With Ms. Farbidge now the perceived outsider, any subsequent poll that suggests her numbers are improving - however it may be conducted – will fuel a story about how she is on the move. It may give her the much-desired momentum that seems to drive elections. It may encourage people who were sitting idly by to get up off their rear ends and prompt them to help the cause.

After her relatively easy win against David Birtwistle last time out there may have been some apathy this time, giving some of those who usually support Ms Farbridge a sense that they did not need to get involved. If this new poll does nothing it will motivate the wallflowers.

New poll results in the coming weeks showing better Farbridge numbers would build on that momentum and may suggest to Guthrie supporters that he is slipping. That could affect morale and motivation.

Of course, new poll results showing a continued Guthrie lead – particularly if they came from traditional polling techniques - could be really bad for the Farbridge campaign and send the wallflowers back to their basements.

In the meantime, the signs are starting to go up and the very fact that he has made the investment to have some for his campaign places Jason Blokhuis squarely into third place, albeit a long way back.

You can't get very far in this game without buzz and if the media coverage is low, or concentrating on the leaders, as it inevitably will - having some signs out there will at least get you into a few conversations.

Mr. Blokhuis and the other four contenders, will, one assumes, be invited to join Ms Farbridge and Mr. Guthrie in the usual debate sponsored by the local chamber of commerce. I think we should have more than one debate this fall; it would allow everyone enough time to share his or her ideas, and, yes, call me naïve, but it may even get us beyond the one-liners and sound bites.

Given that mayor only has one vote at the council table, making "I'll do this, I'll do that" promises may be a bit of a stretch, but these debates do at least provide a platform for issues that may be dear to the candidates.

So let's hope we can get some meaningful discussion this fall. It would only be fair to the candidates and it would most certainly be fair to the voters.

(Ben Bennett's past columns can be found at www.bbc.guelph.org.)

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