Public Opinion Research Procurement in the Saskatchewan Government 1991-2007: Polling for the Public Good?

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Abstract. Public opinion research has become a key element of both governmental policy-making and communications strategies in most democratic jurisdictions. However, there are differences among jurisdictions in how public opinion research is procured, how the results of this research are disseminated, and what contribution this research might make to the "public good". Saskatchewan's approach to the commissioning and publication of public opinion research between the years 1991 and 2007 raises questions about how government approaches procurement of polling and other public opinion research, how this research supports government decision-making (including agenda-setting) and communications strategies, whether or not it should have the role it does in decision-making, and what – if any – contribution polling makes to the overall good of the citizens in the province. Given the requirement of public release, how do political actors see the relevance and importance of public opinion research in policy-making?

Keywords. Public Sector Procurement; Public Opinion Research.

Résumé. La recherche sur l'opinion publique est devenue un élément-clef de l'élaboration des politiques publiques et des stratégies de communication dans la plupart des pays démocratiques. Toutefois, il existe des différences entre pays concernant la manière dont la recherche sur l'opinion publique est procurée, la manière dont les résultats de cette recherche sont disséminés, et ce que cette recherché peut apporter au « bien public ». L'approche de la Saskatchewan relative à la commande et la publication de la recherche sur l'opinion publique entre les années 1991 et 2007 soulève des questions concernant la manière dont le gouvernement envisage l'obtention de sondages et d'autres recherches d'opinion publique, la manière dont cette recherche soutient l'élaboration des politiques publiques du gouvernement (en incluant la mise sur agenda) et les stratégies de communication, le fait que cela revête ce rôle dans l'élaboration des politiques publiques, et – si c'est le cas – la contribution offerte par les sondages au bien général des citoyens dans la province. Etant données les conditions requises liées à la parution publique, comment les acteurs politiques voient-ils la pertinence et importance de la recherche sur l'opinion publique dans l'élaboration des politiques publiques ?

Mots clefs. Approvisionnement dans le secteur public; Recherche sur l'opinion public.

1. Introduction

The procurement of goods and services with the use of public funds has inspired much debate within government and within the wider society. Much literature around public procurement examines the processes, purposes, and impacts of this "major economic activity of the government" (OECD, 2007: 10). As an area with great potential for government corruption, procurement has been well-examined in order to ensure that it confirms to a "framework for integrity" (OECD, 2007: 11).

Such prominent public discussions of procurement as those around the HRDC "Billion Dollar Boondoggle" and the "Sponsorship Scandal" at the federal level in Canada have been mirrored by discussions at the provincial level around the processes, responsibilities, and accountabilities associated with public procurement (eg. Saskatchewan's 2002 Review and Ontario's recent legislation on Advertising Procurement). Discussions around procurement – particularly procurement of public opinion research – have often focused on the nature and content of the research being commissioned, and whether it will benefit the governing party disproportionately above the benefit gained by government as a

whole (Rounce, 2006b; see also Page, 2006) or contribute to the overall public good.

Public Opinion Research: The Saskatchewan Case

Public opinion research, including research gathered through the use of polling and/or focus groups, can play a number of important roles for democratic governments. It may be considered a way of communicating with the public and assessing their opinions on particular policy problems, possible solutions, or on policies, programs, and services themselves. It may also be used to assess attitudes, values, and beliefs around general issues; without focusing on specific programs or services – acting as a barometer of where the public "is at".

Governments may respond to these opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and values in a number of different ways, ranging from full-out policy responsiveness to complete non-responsiveness. They may also choose to use the results from opinion research to shape educational and communications messaging which is designed to change citizens' opinions and behaviours. In addition, public opinion research has increasingly been used as a way to benchmark and track opinions for the purposes of performance measurement. Saskatchewan's NDP government between 1991 and 2007 made use of public opinion research in all of these ways, at different times and in different policy domains.

In terms of how public opinion research is commissioned, organized, and funded, Saskatchewan under the NDP between 1991 and 2007 differed from other provincial governments in a number of respects. One of the key differences is that the government released the results of all quantitative public opinion research – public opinion polling – as of 1993. When the NDP government under Premier Roy Romanow was elected in Fall 1991, several things converged to shape the government's new approach to public opinion research. During the election campaign, Romanow had castigated former premier Grant Devine for high levels of spending on public opinion polling, which had normally been undertaken by high-profile Ontario-based firms. Criticisms also focused on the Devine government's propensity to fund public opinion research through the Crown corporations, which did not require the same level of transparency around procurement and release that would have been required when spending line department funds.

Another important element was the Devine government's introduction and passing of new Freedom of Information and Privacy Legislation just prior to the election call of 1991. The new government under NDP Premier Romanow thus inherited a situation where it could choose to enact the legislation or to introduce its own replacement legislation. The government chose to enact the legislation, which proved to have substantive implications for the release of public opinion polling results.

These two realities – the political and the pragmatic – converged to support the new government's change of policy direction around public opinion polling. These changes were carried on under Romanow's successor, Premier Lorne Calvert from 2001 to 2007. The policy decision to release opinion polling research to the public was taken at approximately the same time that major changes in how public opinion research would be procured were introduced. It is possible that knowing that the product of the public opinion research was to be automatically publicly released – without waiting for a citizen to submit a Freedom of Information request – may also have had an impact on the procurement process. Control over procurement – both where it was located and how it was managed – is an important element of how the Saskatchewan government managed public opinion research purchasing between 1991 and 2007. Public opinion polling was controlled tightly at the centre of government through the Executive Council. It was located within the communications function of the centre, close to the Premier.

Thus, studying the procurement of public opinion research in Saskatchewan between 1991 and 2007 provides an opportunity to address a number of questions – around both tools and processes used by democratic governments. First, how was public opinion research treated in the procurement process? In what ways might it be assessed as "different" from other services? Second, how does the organization of public opinion research procurement reflect particular government goals or priorities? Third, did the procurement of public opinion research in Saskatchewan fit the established criteria of transparency, accountability, and procurement as a strategic profession? Last, has the 1991 to 2007 NDP government approach to public opinion polling been carried on by the Saskatchewan Party government?

This paper examines how Saskatchewan spent on public opinion research between 1991 and 2007, and particularly on public opinion polling. I will argue that Saskatchewan's approach had a number of unique qualities, and that the mechanisms of this procurement were related to government's political and policy agendas of transparency and economic development. Although much of the detailed information about the procurement process for public opinion polling is not recorded in a publicly-accessible format, it is clear that there were processes in place – which government has argued are transparent and fair.

2. Methodology

This work is part of a larger study focusing on the relationship between public opinion and public policy in Saskatchewan's post-secondary education policy sector. As work progressed on this larger piece, I began to appreciate how unusual the Saskatchewan government's approach to public opinion research – both its procurement and its regular publication – really was in the national (and international) context. As such, Saskatchewan under the NDP government of 1991-2007 makes a very interesting case study.

Although many of the Saskatchewan government's policies and practices around public opinion research procurement were published, many were not. Thus, the work for this paper made use of a number of both secondary and

primary sources. Secondary sources include the publicly-available public opinion poll reports released since 1993 and the press releases associated with these, which highlighted both the approach to (and definition of) public opinion research, the firms undertaking it, and the costs associated with its procurement. Policies included in the Department of Finance's Financial Administration Manual, the legislative and delegated authority laid out in the relevant legislation, and the information provided by Saskatchewan Property Management (SPM) on how to contract with government provided additional information on the mechanisms of procurement in the Saskatchewan government at the time.

Telephone interviews with public servants responsible for procurement and for public opinion polling procurement in particular were immensely helpful in providing background information. Interviews with public opinion researchers conducted for the larger study provided background information both on the changing nature of the industry in the province and on public opinion research in the provincial government. Last, a questionnaire involving thirty-seven former and current members of the higher education policy community in the province was used to identify perceived strengths and weaknesses of the Saskatchewan approach to public opinion procurement and information release.

3. Procurement in the Saskatchewan Government

How and what government buys has been of interest – and the subject of commissions and discussion papers – since the beginning of the province. Saskatchewan's Royal Commission on Government Administration which reported in 1965 noted that there are a number of objectives government must achieve with its purchasing:

> ...The primary objective of the purchasing function can be summarized: "To buy and sell on the basis of value, recognizing that value represents that combination of quality, service, and price which assures greatest ultimate economy to the user".
>
> In addition, it is sometimes necessary for the Director of Purchases to seek the attainment of supplementary and occasionally conflicting objectives, depending on the general purposes and objectives of the organizations served. In government, other responsibilities devolving on the purchasing function include
>
> - Control of patronage in government purchasing activities,
> - Co-ordination of government purchasing activities with other government programs, such as economic development...(Saskatchewan 1965, 560)

This Royal Commission emphasized the need for constant vigilance in purchasing to ensure that patronage did not come in to the procurement process. In addition, the Commission cautioned government around its conflation of purchasing with other policy goals – in particular around the "Buy Saskatchewan" policy adopted by the government of the time (Saskatchewan 1965, 579-598).

Procurement processes in the Saskatchewan NDP government were also re-visited in the 2002 discussion paper on changes to procedures used by the Saskatchewan Property Management Corporation (SPMC).

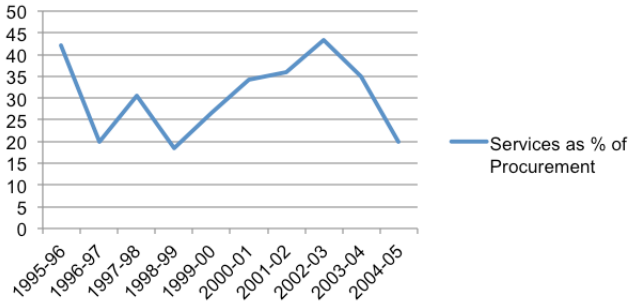
Procurement in the Saskatchewan government was governed by the *Purchasing Act, 2004* (http://www.qp.gov.sk.ca/documents/English/Statutes/Statutes/P49-1.pdf) and its predecessor acts. The Act determines who wass responsible for purchasing in each department or Crown Corporation and the principles behind transparent and accountable procurement in normal and in emergency situations. It allowed the Minister for each department and Crown corporation the ability to appoint a "Director of Procurement" in his/her department, with direct responsibility for fulfilling that department's purchasing needs.

According to Part II, Section 4 (c) of the *Financial Administration Act, 1993* (http://www.qp.gov.sk.ca/documents/English/Statutes/Statutes/F13-4.pdf), Treasury Board had the responsibility for "all matters relating to...(c) administrative policy and management practices and systems in the Government of Saskatchewan". In practice, this meant that Treasury Board maintained the policies around procurement of both goods and services.

As in other jurisdictions, general procurement policies address both the purchasing of goods and of services. There were also specific policies that were created to reflect the differences between most goods and services. As in other jurisdictions, the Saskatchewan government purchased goods and services from both external-to-government sources and interdepartmentally, with departments and Crowns purchasing from other departments and Crowns. In the case of Saskatchewan, an additional policy was created to address the procurement of Public Opinion Polls in particular.

Public opinion polling – as well as other forms of survey research – were considered to be services to government under the NDP government. Generally, the procurement of services fell under Policy 4510 Contracts for Services, with the aforementioned exception for public opinion polls. Policy 4510 laid out a clear process for the procurement process, from selecting a contractor through both formal and informal processes, how to evaluate a bid through its connection with the original specifications, what a services contract should contain, and how to monitor and complete contracts. Similar processes have been used for public opinion research.

Figure 1: Saskatchewan Government Spending: Services as Proportion of Procurement



Source: MARCAN Website, maintained by the Agreement on Internal Trade's Internal Trade Secretariat. Data supplied to MARCAN by provinces.

Government's traditional role in procurement has been to focus on the purchasing of goods. However, evidence shows that the procurement of services increased as a proportion of public purchasing in Saskatchewan between 1995-96 and 2004-05, with the exception of the last two years (see Figure 1). In spite of the decrease in the *proportion* of spending allotted to the procurement of services, the *amount* spent on services continued to increase. In 1995-96, the Government of Saskatchewan reported spending just under $44 million ($43,736,862) on services. By 2004-05, that figure had risen to over $94 million ($93,456,952) (MARCAN, n.d. http://www.marcan.net/index_en/procure.htm).

4. Procurement of Public Opinion Research in the Saskatchewan Government, 1991-2007

Policy number 4540 of the Financial Management and Administration Manual outlined the processes and rules around the procurement of Public Opinion Polling within government. It applied to all departments, Treasury Board Crowns, and the Crown Investments Corporation of Saskatchewan and its subsidiaries: ultimately, it applied to the whole of government in the province. The policy provided information about how public opinion polling might be understood, which areas of government have responsibility and rights in this area, and how public opinion polling may be procured.

Defining public opinion research

How research is defined has had a tremendous impact on how it is procured within the Saskatchewan government. Public opinion research – and particularly polling – was (and continues to be) defined as being within the jurisdiction of the Executive Council. All other research may be handled as service procurement in individual departments or Crown Corporations, with or without support from Saskatchewan Property Management.

Although there was not a clear definition of what the government considers to be public opinion research during the 1991 to 2007 period, it is certain that polling was considered public opinion research. The government's policy on Public Opinion Polls identified product and customer-related surveys as being excluded from the policy. *Which* public was involved in the research process seemed to matter: there was a distinction made between public opinion research involving either the *mass* public (all Saskatchewan people) and *special publics* like farmers and a *particular* public that is the client/customer base for a particular program or service.

If the particular public was of interest as part of a program/service evaluation, opinion research involving the group was usually not considered public opinion research for procurement purposes – as this would likely have fallen under the category of "customer-related surveys" (Department of Finance, Provincial Comptroller's Division, 2003 http://www.finance.gov.sk.ca/fam/manual.html). Other methods of assessing public opinion – such as focus groups – were not specified in the policy, but were conducted regularly within government. If there was any debate about whether or not a proposed research project was public opinion research or not, Executive Council would be the ultimate arbiter.

Procurement Process: Outsourcing

Most public opinion research work undertaken by the Saskatchewan government was outsourced during the NDP's tenure. With the exception of an occasional focus group, most government departments and Crown corporations did not have the capacity to design, implement, and analyse a public opinion survey. They simply would not have the expertise, the time, or the infrastructure to do so. It seems likely that dealing with an independent contractor should also build credibility and enhance the legitimacy of the resulting report.

Additionally, it seems that government had a strategic economic reason for contracting out public opinion research services: it helped to build that industry's ability to work within the province. As one public opinion researcher noted, twenty years ago there were a couple of firms that did public opinion research work in the province. As of 2007, there were at least fifteen active firms (Pollster 1, 2007). There was a historical precedent for this type of policy: the "Buy Saskatchewan" policy from the 1960s focused on similar arguments for focusing on Saskatchewan suppliers for government's purchasing needs (Saskatchewan, 1965). However, focusing on in-province suppliers remained contentious for the NDP government. For example, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business's response to the 2002 SPMC Discussion Paper on procurement advocated strongly against instituting such a policy (Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 2003).

Role of Executive Council in Public Opinion Research Procurement

In 1993, the role of Executive Council in public opinion research procurement was formalized through the Financial

Management and Administration Policy 4540. Executive Council had a broad mandate to support and communicate research, analysis, and policy advice within Cabinet, but also to coordinate policy development and government communications (Government of Saskatchewan, 2006b: 85 http://finance.gov.sk.ca/paccts/paccts06/volume2-2005-06.pdf).[1]

More specifically, an important responsibility of Executive Council was to

> ...facilitate[s] co-ordination of government communications by providing strategic direction in communications, providing communications counselling to government organizations, and by ensuring a fair and equitable process for contracting communications services and printing requirements (Saskatchewan Government: Executive Council n.d.a. www.executive.gov.sk.ca/branch_info/coc.htm)

The Communications Coordination and Media Services Unit in Executive Council was tasked with the management of the procurement of public opinion research. Broadly, this unit undertook and was responsible for the following:

> ...provid[ing] strategic direction to the communications delivery system in government and communications counselling. [Executive Council] provides a fair and equitable process for contracting communications services and printing requirements (Government of Saskatchewan, 2006b: 85 http://finance.gov.sk.ca/paccts/paccts06/volume2-2005-06.pdf).

More specifically, Communications Services/Print Procurement "administers the terms and conditions of the government's fair and equitable process for contracting communications services and printing requirements" (Government of Saskatchewan: Executive Council, n.d.a.).

The emphasis on the "fair and equitable" nature of contracting runs through all of the references to procurement in this area. While the exact unit managing POR procurement changed occasionally in the period between 1993 and 2007, the continued location of public opinion research procurement within the Communications section of Executive Council – rather than in the other units of Executive Council that are involved in the provision of research and policy advice – seems to emphasize the role of public opinion research in the communications function of government. Policy 4540 specifies that:

> .01 No department or Crown corporation shall conduct a public opinion poll without prior arrangements being made with the Department of Executive Council. Excluded from the policy are product and customer related surveys.
>
> .02 The Department of Executive Council manages all public opinion polls by selecting and engaging polling companies and processing payments for the services they provide for omnibus polls (Department of Finance: Provincial Comptroller's Division, 2003 http://www.finance.gov.sk.ca/fam/manual.html).

Procurement Process

Public opinion research procured by Executive Council between 1991 and 2007 generally fell into two categories. The first involved one department or Crown Corporation's own particular public opinion research (usually a poll) such as those undertaken by Culture, Youth, and Recreation in their *Youth Quality of Life Survey* of 2004 and Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food's *Report on Saskatchewan Farmer's Attitudes and Opinions on Grain Marketing* of 2007. These are considered to be "Stand Alone Polls" for the purposes of government policy.

The second is the "Omnibus Poll", which incorporates questions from any departments or Crown Corporations willing to pay for their selected questions. Done irregularly throughout the year depending on departments' demands for this research and various environmental factors (such as election periods), the "Omnibus Poll" may also be supplemented by a general attitudinal survey. Budget-related public opinion research may be part of the Omnibus Poll or it may be conducted as a stand alone poll or series of focus groups. This involvement in the Omnibus Poll reflects the fact that one of the key roles of Executive Council in public opinion research procurement was that of coordination.

There are a number of requirements that departments must meet overall when undertaking public opinion research during this time period. According to Policy 4540, all departments must have approval from Executive Council before embarking on a poll. They must also have approval for the interview guides from Communications Consulting (Executive Council) before the poll begins.

a. Stand Alone Polls

When departments or Crowns decided to conduct a stand alone poll, they first would go to Communications Consulting to determine how a supplier will be found. The process depended on a number of criteria, including the size of the project and the timelines involved. Communications Consulting either undertook a competition or allocate a supplier based on the existing database (or Standing Offer list).[2] Occasionally an expression of interest was issued to invite potential suppliers to be part of this list, based on their ability to meet particular criteria. By 2007, there were 5-7 sup-

[1] For a historical look at the development of the Executive Council in Saskatchewan, see Rasmussen and Marchildon (2005).

[2] Saskatchewan Property Management notes that the Standing Offer – or "agreement between the government and a supplier through a tender process" is used when government anticipates the need for a product or service on an on-going basis (SPM, Common Purchasing Methods/Terms).

pliers on the rotating list, and as projects come up, they were offered to the next supplier on the list in rotation.[3]

Although it was less common to use standing offers in the procurement of services than of goods, it makes sense in terms of public opinion research because this type of opinion research often took place with very little notice. When departments or Crown corporations had smaller projects (under $5,000) to undertake, they could usually access a supplier through the Standing Offer list.

Projects assessed at more than $5,000 had to be publicly advertised. The Government of Saskatchewan maintains the "www.Sasktenders.ca" website, which was designed to provide a portal to all existing Requests for Proposals and other expressions of interest associated with procurement in the province.

When public opinion research projects were valued at more than $100,000, the Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT) became relevant for procurement purposes. Until that point, the Saskatchewan government could continue to use provincial base as a factor in the selection process. However, after the $100,000 mark, the process became a national one – Canadian companies from all provinces and territories must have an equal opportunity to access Requests for Proposals and submit bids for these projects. Thus, government would advertise the competition and accepts bids nationally instead of provincially. For this level of project, government may have advertised using the MERX system in order to gain access to a wide audience of possible contractors (MARCAN n.d.b.).

b. Omnibus Polls

As departments or Crowns had questions that they wanted to include in the Omnibus Poll, they could submit these to Executive Council by completing an Agreement for Omnibus Polling Participation. Once having completed the form, they were committed to paying for the costs associated with their chosen questions. Costs per question were determined at the time of form submission.

As with the Stand Alone Polling, Communications Counselling of Executive Council managed the competition process for the supplier of the polling services and the contract with the successful supplier as well as arranging for the poll to be conducted. Communications Counselling retained the central role of controlling the content of polling, as it had the right of final approval for all questions on the poll.

The response to a Written Question from the Official Opposition provides an outline of both the process of contacting potential suppliers and of evaluating the proposals received:

> Mr. Morgan, asked the Government the following Question No. 226, which was answered by the Premier: To the Premier: What is the criteria used by Executive Council when choosing a tender for advertising and/or marketing research services?
>
> Answer:
> ... When market research services are tendered, a Request for Proposal is issued to qualified suppliers. Responses are received and the following criteria are used to evaluate the responses: quality of the proposal provided by the supplier, the supplier's industry experience related to the needs of the client, supplier delivery of service standards, cost and the quality of the supplier's presentation (Government of Saskatchewan, 2006a).

Suppliers

Saskatchewan's public opinion research industry grew between 1991 and 2007. Having the government regularly undertake and release public opinion polling seems to have been helpful for the industry, with a number of firms growing and taking on more government business since 1992.

The NDP government had a policy which emphasized the importance of developing Saskatchewan-based industries. According to Saskatchewan Property Management's "About Purchasing" website information available in 2007, "goods tenders valued between $5,000 and $25,000 and services under $100,000 may be subject to a preference for Saskatchewan suppliers" (n.d.). The public opinion research sector is one of those areas that government worked to develop, in part through its contracting of both omnibus and stand alone polling and through other forms of public opinion research.

Table 1: Suppliers for Omnibus Polling in Saskatchewan, 1992-93 to 2006-07

Fiscal Year	Supplier for Omnibus Public Opinion Polling	Base
1992-93	CanWest Opinion	Regina
1993-94	CanWest Opinion	Regina
1994-95	CanWest Opinion	Regina
1995-96	Anderson/Fast Market Research	Saskatoon
1996-97	Anderson/Fast Market Research	Saskatoon
1997-98	Anderson/Fast Market Research	Saskatoon
1998-99	Anderson/Fast and Associates	Saskatoon
1999-2000	Anderson/Fast and Associates	Saskatoon
2000-01	Doug Fast and Associates	Saskatoon
2001-02	Fast Consulting	Saskatoon
2002-03	Fast Consulting	Saskatoon
2003-04	Sigma Analytics	Regina
2004-05	Sigma Analytics	Regina
2005-06	Sigma Analytics	Regina
2006-07	Points West Consulting and Norsask Consumer Interviewing Services	Regina

Sources: Government Omnibus Provincial Public Opinion Polling, various years.

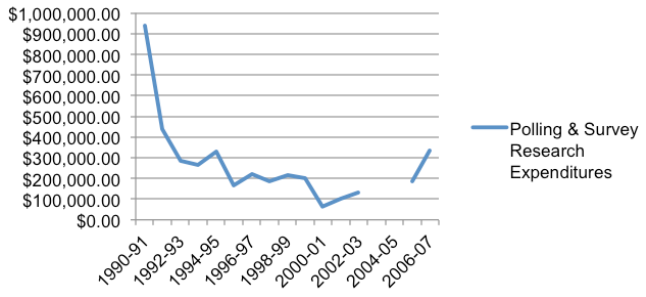
[3] See also the government of Saskatchewan's Contracts for Services Policy 4510, which specifies the steps of the formal versus informal processes.

Omnibus survey work began in late 1992, with the contracting of CanWest Opinion – a Regina firm (see Table 1). CanWest held the contract for three years, after which it was replaced by Anderson/Fast Market Research (later to become Anderson/Fast Opinion Research, Doug Fast and Associates, and then Fast Consulting) of Saskatoon for eight years. A shift in approach to the omnibus was visible with the shift to Sigma Analytics and the contract moving back to Regina in 2003-04. The last contract awarded under the NDP government saw Points West Consulting (with Norsask Consumer Interviewing Services) of Regina taking over the omnibus polling and reshaping the presentation of reports and resulting data.

How Much was Spent

How much is actually spent on public opinion research – and public opinion polling – can be challenging to measure. As of 1992-93, the Government of Saskatchewan committed to specifying the costs associated with public opinion polling in conjunction with the release of the related reports. However, in the case of public opinion research that is not automatically released, those monies are not always as easy to track. Although research tools like focus groups may be considered public opinion research, and managed through Executive Council along with the public opinion polling, the results themselves are not automatically released. Thus, the amounts spent were not automatically released.

Figure 2: Polling (Market Research) Expenditures in the Saskatchewan Government, 1990-91 to Present



Sources: Government of Saskatchewan press releases accompanying the release of polling reports, 1992-93 to 2006-07 along with the Public Opinion Polling Releases released quarterly by government between 1992-93 and 2006-07.

Figure 2 shows the amounts calculated by Executive Council that have been spent on public opinion polling annually since 1990-91. After a sharp decrease in spending in 1991-92 by the newly-elected NDP government, the amount spent on public opinion polling has increased over time.[4] Figures from 2004-05 and 2005-06 are not complete in the public record, and have been excluded from this version of the paper. Of particular note is the spending in 2006-07, which is higher than the spending in previous years by the government.

Another way of accessing both the processes for procurement and the amounts spent is through the Opposition's submission of Written Questions. Then Opposition Saskatchewan Party (now Government) recently submitted a series of Written Questions to the Legislature to assess how much was being spent by individual departments (including Executive Council) on public opinion research (aka marketing research) and advertising. However, these figures are reported as aggregate spending on advertising and research, and have had the amounts allocated to departments/Crowns removed so do not portray an accurate picture of the total spending on public opinion polling conducted by the province.

5. Discussion

Between 1991 and 2007, Saskatchewan located its public opinion procurement function within the Executive Council of government. Many other provinces did not create a separation between procurement of public opinion research (particularly polling) and procurement of other services. It seems possible that this reality arose from the government's policy of releasing the reports from all polling conducted with public monies, but further research is needed to confirm or challenge this preliminary conclusion. Thus, when one talks about procurement in this area, it is necessary to also talk about the release (or non-release) of the resulting research.

The focus on quantitative research – public opinion polling – as publicly releasable is important. Not only does this relate to the role of Executive Council in procuring and vetting public opinion polling, it has implications for what types of research might be undertaken. Preliminary research into the question of whether or not the required publication of public opinion polling findings impacts the content of those polls indicates that it did, and that it could lead to the use of other forms of research that were not automatically released (see Rounce, 2006a).

The role of Executive Council (EC) in this area is an interesting one. It expanded with the different types of opinion assessment although originally designed to deal specifically with polling, and certainly relates to the release of public opinion polls. Financial Administration Management Policy 4540 specified that EC will incur the costs to release and/or publish polling, and implied that it also had the responsibility to publicise those releases. It served a coordination function for the "whole of government", as well as ensuring that Cabinet had access to public opinion data to support its work.

Another important note about the role of Executive Council during this time is that it had responsibility for advertising and market research as well as public opinion

[4] In her book *Minding the Public Purse*, Janice MacKinnon refers to the contract-based spending in 1991-92 that the newly elected NDP government inherited from the previous Conservative Government, which likely had an impact on the public opinion research spending in 1991-92.

polling. This is a potentially more politicised area of procurement, which has implications for how public opinion research is also viewed. The federal government (with support from the Auditor General) concluded that having both advertising and public opinion research procurement in the same institutional home was inherently problematic, yet Saskatchewan's government functioned in this way.

The OECD's 2007 report *Integrity in Public Procurement: Good Practice from A to Z* identifies three main challenges for good practice and integrity in procurement: determining the appropriate level of transparency in the process, turning procurement into a strategic profession, and establishing lines of accountability to ensure accountability to the public (11-14). Although this paper's main focus is not to evaluate the Saskatchewan government's procurement policy (and its implementation) for public opinion polls, it becomes evident though both the interviews conducted and the government's own literature that the NDP government was concerned about meeting these three challenges.

There was much attention to transparency – particularly on the part of Saskatchewan Property Management (SPM) – of process and outcomes. Since government decided in 1992-93 to release all polling conducted with public funds, Saskatchewan has had to deal with very few concerns about the lack of reports and the potential use of polling for political purposes. One challenge under the Freedom of Information Act in 2004 was settled in the government's favour when the Commissioner ruled that the government was releasing polling information in a timely fashion, although it was encouraged to release more detailed information than was being provided at the time (Saskatchewan Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner, 2004 http://www.oipc.sk.ca/Reports/2004-005.pdf). An additional challenge related to written versus de facto policy: although the government's literature refers to the "Communications Procurement Policy" that mirrors the SPM policy on procurement of services, this policy does not seem to exist in writing.

Executive Council's Communications Unit, in its various incarnations and with various names, did support the idea of procurement as a profession. It became specialised, with a number of consultants hired specifically to deal with contracting and service procurement of public opinion research. In addition, the procurement professionals at SPM supported governments' approach to and mechanisms of purchasing overall.

Finally, lines of accountability seemed to be in place for the procurement of public opinion research, as there were clear responsibilities outlined in the various policies relating to its procurement between 1991-2007. In addition, the Opposition's ability to request information about public opinion research through the Written Questions process seems also to reinforce the sense that there was accountability within the process. Appeals processes were in place (at least in policy) that failed bidders should have been able to access. However, there is often a gap between what is in writing and what happens in reality, so more research is needed in this area before concluding that the appeals process was an accountable one.

6. Conclusions

Overall, this paper raises as many questions as it answered, laying the groundwork for further research. In terms of the role of Saskatchewan's Executive Council in the procurement of public opinion research – and particularly polling – it seems that the centralised purchase and control of this type of research may be seen as more suspect than other kinds of purchasing during the NDP government's tenure. Although departments technically had the right to contract public opinion research that reflects their needs and interests, Executive Council remained at the centre to vet their processes and questions.

Defining what is meant by public opinion polling is also important. Is polling research? Is it communications? Who is the public? Who determineed whether the public being surveyed is part of the "mass public", subject to Executive Council's jurisdiction, or a "special client/customer public", which falls outside of the Executive Council's mandate? Relatedly, questions around whether it served the public good to regularly survey Saskatchewan people on issues of concern while acknowledging that the automatic release of results can hinder the value of the questions asked. In research involving the higher education policy community in the province, respondents concluded that there was value to both conducting and releasing public opinion polling, supporting government goals of transparency and accountability to the public, while providing the interested public, stakeholders, and researchers the ability to access trend information about the public mood that had not been "translated" or "altered" by the media (Rounce, work in progress). However, it is not clear whether these positives have been outweighed by the negatives of difficult questions not being asked, the sense that the public is not accessing anything of real value, and that government may use the resulting information more for communications purposes than for policy formulation.

Further research into the connection between the release of public opinion polling and the definition of public opinion research is in order, particularly in terms of its management by the successive NDP governments between 1991 and 2007. Whether or not the procurement processes in place meet the international standards of ethical procurement should also be further explored.

An additional point of interest is how the Saskatchewan Party government – elected in October 2007 – has been managing the procurement and publication of public opinion research for the future. The government has conducted limited public opinion polling with public funds, although it maintains its party relationship with Angus Reid. Much of the research has been focused on program performance and awareness, although some general questions have been asked occasionally. Summary reports have been released quarterly, along with summaries of the amounts spent on the polling. It is clear, however, that the Saskatchewan Party government is not undertaking the same amount of publicly-released public opinion polling as the previous government. Although they have followed the same path as the previous

government so far, they will need to consider whether the government may be better served by not releasing polling results automatically, whether or not to move forward with regular polling, what that polling might look like, who will control it, and whether the procurement processes currently in place will remain.

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