

# **What the Polls *Do* Show:** ***Canadian Consistency in the Reporting of Service Attendance***

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- **Good to be here...**



# INTRODUCTION

**Our initial interest:**  
**the difficulty in obtain clear readings**  
**on service attendance in Canada**

**Wanted to explore the extent to which**  
**the variations are due to**  
**different measures & different response options**

*The initial questions led us to some well-known U.S. research...*

- **Since early 90s:** attention given to overreporting of attendance
  - ✓ precariousness of self-reported measures
  - ✓ ASR 1993, Hadaway-Marler Chaves: *“What the polls don’t show”*



- **Focus: Gallup’s** gold standard **7-day item** going back to 1930s

- **Gallup:** 7-day recall = 40-45%
- **HMC:** count-based = 20%

*Americans may differ from people in many other countries, not so much “in terms of behavior, but rather in how they report that behavior” (HMC 1993:748, 749)*

- **WHY?** sampling, social desirability, recall error, varied ways attendance defined

**Note:** *not arguing that people are “lying”*

**Summing things up five years after the original ASR article, Hadaway and Marler (1998:475):**

***most survey participants, including Gallup's, "report what they usually do, what they would like to do or what they think someone like them ought to do."***

- **Phillip Brenner (*POQ*, 2011)**

- use of **time diaries** readily demonstrates survey overreporting in many countries, including Canada

- ✓ value in understanding how overreporting in U.S. compares with elsewhere

- ✓ what such variations say about **religious identities**

**WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US?**

- **Initially**: findings remind us of **age-old methodological rule of thumb** best way to get accurate data on behaviour is to **observe, not ask them**
    - ✓ the difficulty: cannot always observe them/obtain behavioural data
    - ✓ consequently: have to rely on what say
    - ✓ yet we're not naïve; know inverse relationship between personal questions & accurate responses
- NB**: if there's little at stake, little reason for distortion

## **Our argument:**

**Unlike the situation in the U.S,  
there is little at stake when comes to Canadians  
reporting how often they attend religious services**

- ✓ **highly polarized religiously (e.g., 20-40-20)**
- ✓ **pluralism rules; license to be religious or not be religious**
- ✓ **Limited pressure to exaggerate religious involvement, with few possible geographical & religious group exceptions**

**We therefore believe that if Canadians are asked clear,  
non-invasive questions about service attendance,  
they will tend to come through with answers  
that are in touch with their behaviour.**

**Such an expectation is consistent with Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves' (1993:749) observation that some "individuals in others countries [might be] less likely to overreport their church attendance than are Americans." They also predicted that as growing numbers of individuals in countries such as Australia shed their nominal church identities, the inclination to report regular attendance could be expected to decrease. As noted, such a "shedding of nominal religious identity" has been taking place in Canada since the 1960s.**

# Early Results

**Do not support a Canadian exemption to  
Religious attendance hyperbole**

- ✓ **Hadaway & Marler (1997, 1998): Oxford county, southern Ontario**
- ✓ **Philip Brenner (2011): poll & diary gap in Canada**
  - about 10% points in 1980 (30% vs. 20%) & 2000 (25% vs. 15%)  
and rose to 15% in 2005 (25% vs. 10%)

*We think the “raw gap” is actually now very minor*

# Our Procedures

- **Varied items & varied response options:**
  - have made it difficult to get clear bottom line on reported attendance of Canadians
  - e.g., **ATTEND:** last 7 days, how often, last 12 months, “other than” rites
    - Illus. GSS: “Other than...how often...services or meetings....last 12 months?”
  - e.g., **RESPONSES:** yes/no, weekly, monthly, yearly, less yearly, never
- **Felt attention needed be given:**
  - (a) possible new “**monthly-plus**” norm
  - (b) **seasonal “spike”** in attendance

# WHAT WE FOUND

**Sample A: Omni, March 21, 2012**  
(N = 1,009)

**How often do you attend religious services?**

At least once a week	11%
Two-to-three times a month	4
At least once a month	3
A few times a year	13
At least once a year	7
Less than once a year	24
Never	38

**Did you attend a religious service in the past seven days?**

Yes	15%
No	85

**Did you attend a religious service in December?**

Yes	32%
No	68

**Sample B: Omni, March 23, 2012**  
(N = 1,009)

**How often did you attend religious services in the last 12 months?**

At least once a week	12%
Two-to-three times a month	4
At least once a month	3
A few times a year	13
At least once a year	7
Less than once a year	16
Never	45

**Did you attend a religious service in the past seven days?**

Yes	16%
No	84

**Did you attend a religious service in the past month?**

Yes	23%
No	77

**Sample C: Omni, March 30, 2012**  
(N = 1,060)

**Other than on special occasions such as weddings, funerals or baptisms, how often did you attend religious services or meetings in the last 12 months?**

At least once a week	11%
Two-to-three times a month	5
At least once a month	3
A few times a year	12
At least once a year	7
Less than once a year	16
Never	46

**Did you attend a religious service in the past month?**

Yes	22
No	78

**Did you attend a religious service in December?**

Yes	32
No	68

**Measures of Who's Attending Don't Matter Much:** highly consistent regardless of measure

So far, everything seems to make intuitive sense.

Significantly, our analysis of the General Social Survey time use diary data for 2010 found the percentage of Canadians reporting weekly attendance to be...**11%**.

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## Measures of Who's Not Attending Do Matter Much

About the only variant finding is that when people were asked *how often they attend* services – something of a statement of intentions (Sample A), they were slightly less likely to indicate that they “never” attend services, compared to what people recalled they actually did when they look back at the previous 12 months (Samples B and C). But note that, here, it was not the *active attenders* who overstated their participation but rather the *infrequent attenders*.

## Measures of Who's Not Attending Do Matter Much

This inclination of infrequent attenders to not describe themselves as “never attending” was also accidentally uncovered in our large Sample D. In that survey, we used the same response options as the GSS uses. The results for frequent attendance were similar to what we found with samples A, B, and C. But when respondents *did not* have the chance to indicate “less than once a year,” the “not at all” level jumped from around 45% to almost 60%.

Many infrequent attenders seem to need an option between “once a year” and “never.” If they don't have it, they round things off to “never.” In reality, “hardly ever” is not the same as “never.”

### Sample D: May 2012 and GSS 2011

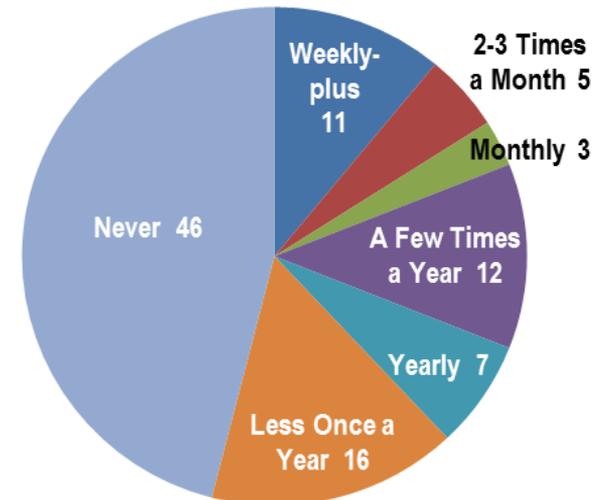
(N's = 52,160 and 22,435 respectively)

*“Other than on special occasions, such as weddings, funerals or baptisms, how often did you attend religious services or meetings in the past 12 months?”*

	Sample D	GSS 2011
At least once a week	12%	18%
At least once a month	5	9
A few times a year	13	19
At least once a year	11	11
Not at all	59	43

Figure 1. Attendance in the Past Year (%)

Source: Omnibus Sample C, March 30, 2012



# DISCUSSION

- In Canada: self-reported service attendance can be taken pretty much at face value, regardless of how Q. asked
  - ❖ no particular gains or losses with fabrication
    - “Thanks be to pluralism!”*
- What’s NB = allow people to express full range of their involvement
- At this point: felt our analysis was pretty much complete
  - pollsters can continue to ask about attendance with renewed confidence that people are “telling it the way it is”
- Only one problem:
  - GSS coming in higher than Angus Reid...and others (e.g., Ipsos); both ID & SA
  - 2 possibilities: social desirability or sampling error; latter seems more plausible
    - Reid online panel; GSS random digit dialing & telephone interviews (66%)
    - not weighted for religion (last “gold standard” = 2001)

**TABLE 5. GSS & ANGUS REID SAMPLES AND RESULTS**

	GSS 2011		ANGUS REID 2012		NHS 2011	IPSOS REID 2011
	% of Pop	% Monthly+	% of Pop	% Monthly+	% of Pop	% of Pop
<b>NATIONALLY</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Catholic</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>29</b>
<i>Outside Quebec</i>	55	39	49	30	55	50
<i>Quebec</i>	45	17	51	11	45	50
<b>Protestant</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>No Religion</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>40*</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>32</b>

\*Includes no religion 18%, atheist 10%, agnostic 6%, spiritual 6%

**GSS & NHS:** far more **Catholics**, far fewer **Nones**

*Readily accounts for the differences in* **SERVICE ATTENDANCE**

**CONCLUSION**

- **So it all seems to come down to this.**
  1. **Various measures:** yield very similar results
    - \***exception:** “nevers”; corrected with “less than once a year option”
  2. **Higher service attendance in GSS and NHS:**
    - due to samples** with more RCs, fewer people with No Religion
  
- **We are left with TWO possibilities.**
  1. **If StatsCan samples representative of the population**  
Canadians inclined both to
    - (a) **overreport attendance** &....*because of the GSS response options*
    - (b) **overreport non-attendance** (“nevers”)

\***Brenner** would be right: a “raw gap exists between reporting and behaviour”

**NB** *But even StatsCan acknowledges that, with 1 in 3 not participating, some parts of the pop have been left out*

**2. Reputable pollsters (Reid/Ipsos), via on-line panel samples:**  
are obtaining more representative samples than  
StatsCan has in its GSS and NHS-type surveys

\*If so: **Brenner** is not right: no “raw gap exists between reporting and behaviour”

The **bottom line** here:

*“When it comes to religious service attendance,  
varied measures are yielding consistent results  
that are verified by diary data.”*

**In short, we are left with the dilemma of whether we vote for Statistics  
Canada or vote for the private pollsters with their on-line panels.**

As we conclude the draft of this paper, **one of us is leaning in one direction,  
the second of us in the other.**

**In either case, we agree that  
“What the Polls Do Show”  
depends, not so much on the people, as the pollster.**



# Andrew's Epilogue

*As one who lives in a glass house, I am reluctant to throw stones at the GSS sample. For starters, our response rate, while 5+ times the industry average, is about 45%. We don't cover non-internet homes. You have to be able to read English or French and have access to a computer. I am not sure I'd want to lay all the blame on sampling error on the part of the GSS.*

*Oh, and did I mention we got the BC election wrong?*

*When you pit the pollsters against StatsCan on sample, please go a little easy. I think there are other factors and I am not sure we pollsters can claim purity after blowing the BC election.*