

Pollsters' corner

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DESPITE A DIFFICULT FIRST WEEK FOR THE CONSERVATIVES, POST POLLS SHOWED LITTLE IMPACT ON THEIR PUBLIC SUPPORT. WHY IS THAT? IS THERE A LAG IN VOTER REACTION, OR DID THE TORIES JUST MANAGE TO ESCAPE THE WEEK UNSCATHED?



Greg Lyle (Innovative Research): The fundamentals for the Tories remain unchanged despite the gaffe-watch coverage. Stephen Harper continues to be seen as Canada's strongest, most capable leader. Not only is time-for-a-change sentiment low, there are enough people afraid of change to deliver a Tory majority. Finally, none of the tactical errors in the campaign changed the strategic reality that the economy is a major issue in this campaign, if not *the* major issue, and the Tories enjoy a strong lead on the issue. The one tactical development that may matter is including Elizabeth May in the debate. This will raise her visibility with voters and creates an opportunity to capture the public imagination and likely help the Tories by splitting the centre-left vote.

This past week's coverage may be fascinating to insiders, reporters and pundits, but swing voters will tune most of it out. They are waiting to hear someone talk about their issues. With that in mind, three big things happened during the week. First, Mr. Harper took Afghanistan off the table. Afghanistan was a key barrier to Tory gains among swing voters across Canada, so that was critical. Second, the party ads reached into every living room regardless of what was on the news in between the ads. Third, the NDP came out of the gates with a crystal-clear ballot question — board room tables or kitchen tables — that appeals directly to swing voters.

These three things, and Ms. May in the debate, will be the key developments from the first week that matter in the next week's polls.

Frank Graves (Ekos Research): First, we want to congratulate The Globe and Mail for their innovative and insightful politics hub.

We don't, however, agree with the conclusion that the Conservatives have escaped the first week of the 2008 election campaign "unscathed". Frankly, we think many of the polls are either out of date or done with insufficient sample sizes to detect what we have found to be a clear pattern of mildly eroding Conservative support. Based on a total sample of 4,975 cases allocated over the period Monday to Thursday of this week, our nightly tracking has shown Tory support drop from 39 per cent on Monday to 34 per cent Thursday.

Coupled with a mild strengthening of Liberal support from 24 per cent to 27 per cent over this same period, the net effect has been to narrow a formidable 15 point advantage (which was just in majority territory) to a much more modest 7 point advantage (which places the Conservatives back into minority territory). So, we do think that there has been a real but mild softening of Conservative support.

We have two observations. First, the Tory "surge" largely occurred in the immediate pre-writ period. (Actually, the more striking phenomenon was the Liberal decline in that immediate pre-writ period.) Second, over the first week of the campaign we speculate that the modest decline and narrowing of the advantage over the Liberals was an expression of the now familiar pattern of voters reconsidering their positions once confronted with the concrete possibility of a Conservative majority.

Tim Woolstencroft (Strategic Counsel): While this is a question many in the media have been asking, its premise is fundamentally flawed.

If you were a strategist in the Conservative war room, you would be concluding that the campaign is achieving all key objectives after Week One. In fact, the campaign and the leader had a great week.

To start, the Tory campaign has secured a significant lead over the Bloc Québécois in rural Quebec, and is poised to make significant gains over a vast swath of ridings (in the range of 20 seats if the election were today) in that province. Plus, at this point, the Tories have no obvious vulnerabilities, while the Bloc's relevancy is being seriously questioned by Quebecers. Stephen Harper has also effectively removed one of the major impediments to voting Conservative in Quebec by announcing Canada will be out of Afghanistan by 2011.

Next, the Tories are also on the move in Ontario. Within six days of the writ being dropped, they held a huge lead over the Liberals in the 20 most hotly contested races there. In fact, the Tories even hold a substantial edge over the Liberals in ridings that the Liberals won in 2006. The Tories are on the brink of making significant gains in suburban Ontario.

Finally, the Conservatives are also shaking the ground of B.C.'s Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island. They now hold a significant advantage over both Opposition parties in the closest races of British Columbia. If an election were today, the Tories would pick up four additional seats from the Liberals.

So, why is this happening?

In the first week of the election, the Liberal campaign has been feeble and ineffective in mobilizing the case for change. Their campaign has been a strange mixture of bombastic outbursts, defensiveness about their leader, and a lack of nimbleness in seizing opportunities. As a consequence, the Liberals have failed to dent Mr. Harper's strong approval ratings. Moreover, the Tory campaign mishaps have actually distracted any attention from what should be the core argument of the Liberal campaign: The incumbent government is disconnected with mainstream Canada.

While the country is concerned about the economy, Stéphane Dion is focused on climate change and is not reassuring voters that the Green Shift plan offers benefits to the middle class. Indeed, as my colleague observed before the election, Mr. Dion has shown up for a baseball game in full hockey equipment. The focus of the Liberals on the Green Shift plan has been a gift to the Conservatives who can frame it as reckless, thereby diverting any public concern that a Tory majority might be risky.

Finally, it's clear that the Tory campaign mishaps are not sticking to Mr. Harper. This reflects the fact that Canadians have gotten to know him as Prime Minister for two-and-a-half years and as Conservative leader for four-and-a-half. So Canadians see these issues as campaign missteps and don't see him explicitly involved with them. Plus, on each occasion, he has moved immediately in managing down these problems.

Tim Olafson (Angus Reid Strategies): When looking back at the first week of the election, perhaps the question should be re-phrased as "why haven't the Liberals capitalized on the Tories first week?"

The missteps in the Conservatives' campaign were unfortunate but not catastrophic, and they were committed by "backroom people" and not candidates. The Conservatives dealt with the issues swiftly - something voters would expect from Mr. Harper as they see him as a decisive leader.

If anything, the Greens were the surprising winners of the first week. By stating Elizabeth May had no place in the leaders' debate, Mr. Harper and Jack Layton unwittingly gave her an ideal platform to be seen and heard nationwide. Ms. May ultimately posted a positive momentum score, after spending 48 hours on defence, and saw her party overtake the Bloc for the first time this year.

On the other hand, at the end of the first week neither Mr. Harper nor Mr. Dion garnered positive momentum, thus making it more difficult to move voters.

Conservative support is committed support: There are not a lot of Tories changing their minds at this point about how they will vote. This provides a type of gaffe safety-net. The same can't be said for Liberals supporters. Finally, Mr. Dion isn't resonating with Canadians: He has the lowest approval rating among all leaders.

Had the Tories not dealt with the missteps quickly, if Conservatives were less committed and if Mr. Dion were seen to be a stronger leader, there likely would have been a different dynamic to begin this next week.

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