

Executive Summary:

THE NDP POST LAYTON: DOOMED TO RETURN TO THIRD PARTY OR A POTENTIAL GOVERNMENT?

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Key Findings

Our poll, conducted from March 20-21, 2012, finds the Conservatives retaining a healthy lead, while the NDP and Liberals are statistically tied for second place. The NDP lead in Quebec, but with a statistically insignificant two-percentage point lead over the Bloc Québécois.

Most Canadians are not following the NDP leadership race. Just over a quarter (26%) are following the race closely while fewer than one-in-twenty (4%) are following it very closely. While some candidates are recognized by more than half the sample (Mulcair, Topp, Nash and Dewar), even the more well-known candidates garner large numbers of neutral opinions among those who have heard of them. Most Canadians (64%) agree that if the new NDP leader wants to be seriously considered as a potential Prime Minister, that leader needs to be comfortably bilingual.

When it comes to the Conservatives, the electorate is very polarized. While one-third (33%) of the electorate currently support the governing party, even more (36%) say they never would. An additional third (31%) of Canadians are in play between these two extremes. The Conservatives' competitive strength is that among the two-thirds of Canadians not supporting them, some are undecided and four opposition parties split the rest.

What is the potential of the NDP to unite the rest?

The NDP universe starts with a smaller base of current supporters (22%) but also many fewer people who are hostile to them (15%). At one-third – the largest single group of voters in the NDP universe – are those who do not consider the NDP at all.

One major challenge for the NDP is that just over one-third of Canadians still believe “Canadian politics are really a two-horse race, only the Liberals and the Conservatives have a real chance of forming government.” Similarly, just over one-third believe “a vote for the NDP will split the centre-left and help the Conservatives win.” This is a key barrier among second choice NDP voters, among whom 52% agree with that statement.

While for many Canadians, Jack Layton opened the door for the NDP, some have closed that door now he has gone. Just over one-in-five (21%) agree that “I was willing to vote for the NDP when Jack Layton was leader, but I’m not interested in supporting the NDP now that he is gone.” Thirty percent of the non-NDP group agrees with this statement.

Another hurdle for the NDP is the perception of ongoing value from the Bloc. While in Quebec, 47% agree that “The Bloc Québécois has served its purpose; we don’t need it anymore,” 32% disagree. Among second choice NDP voters in Quebec, 50% agree.

Tactically, the idea of the Bloc, NDP and Liberals finding a way to work together to replace the Conservatives in government is met with support by roughly two-thirds of the first- and second-choice NDPers, but has much less appeal among the uncommitted and non-New Democrats.

So that leaves the power of ideas to rally the centre left.

It is harder to unite the left than it is to unite the right. When we group Canadians according to shared political values, we find five key groups:

- At 30%, the Conservatives are the largest group. They stand out on being the only strong fiscal hawks, they prioritize the economy over the environment, they focus on creating opportunity and believe profit teaches the value of hard work.
- At 16%, the Business Liberals differ from the Conservatives in believing government spending should be based on need for services. They also prioritize the economy over the environment, focus on creating opportunity and believe profit teaches the value of hard work.
- Just over one-in-five (21%) Canadians are Left Liberals. They agree government spending should be based on need for services and focus on creating opportunity rather than redistributing wealth. They differ from Business Liberals by prioritizing the environment over the economy and being nervous about the profit motive.
- At 12%, the smallest group is the Levelers. They want to redistribute wealth, they distrust profit, believe government spending should be based on need and are inclined to blame system for individuals falling behind, not the individual. They are divided on environment verses economy.
- One-in-five (20%) belong to the Progressive Left. They are even more likely than Levelers to want to redistribute wealth, distrust profit, believe government spending should be based on need and are inclined to blame system for individuals falling behind, not the individual. They strongly place environment ahead of the economy.

The Conservatives can build their coalition on two groups – Conservatives and Business Liberals – who agree on most values. The NDP need to build their winning coalition across three different groups. What ideas will work best at pulling these factions together?

As it turns out, many of the ideas floated by the NDP leadership candidates in this race enjoy strong support.

Ideas related to social and economic rights do very well. Women's reproductive rights and right to pay equity enjoy support from about 7-in-10 Canadians and do best in the key NDP support segments. The idea of a right to retire and live in dignity did even better, with 86% support.

Economic issues are a home run for the NDP. Almost 7-in-10 Canadians want the government to take action to close the gap between rich and poor. Two-thirds (66%) want government to raise taxes on the rich and big business. Again, 7-in-10 support the idea of discouraging the export of raw resources and doing more value-added processing and manufacturing here in Canada.

Targeting federal post secondary education funding to lower tuition fees also enjoys wide support.

Canada's role in the world is fertile ground for the NDP. The idea that Canada should play a leading and proactive role on the environment is well accepted by the potential NDP coalition. Shifting Canada's international activity away from the military and towards diplomacy and aid also enjoys strong support across the NDP universe, as does limiting military engagements to UN sanctioned missions. All of these ideas do well in Quebec and give the NDP a chance to speak against the Conservatives on behalf of Quebecers.

While there is strong support on international environmental leadership, specific environmental issues are more challenging. Cutting subsidies to the oil sands gets a majority of support across the NDP universe, particularly among the base. Cap-and-trade also secures majority support across the NDP universe, although with a little more resistance. Opposition to a pipeline in BC does very well with the hardest of the NDP base, but support is more ambivalent, even divided among other elements of the NDP's potential coalition. All of these issues do their best in Quebec.

We found just three issues that were problematic for the NDP.

The first are unions. Just 24% say the government should encourage the growth of unions in Canada. Even within the NDP universe, this idea only secured a bare majority of support among the hardest core of the NDP.

The second is the long gun registry. NDP candidates split on this, as does the NDP base. While a majority of firm and second choice NDP support bringing the registry back, soft NDPers and the uncommitted are more divided.

The third is the national issue. As Brian Mulroney can attest, success within Quebec can create tension with a party's base in the rest of Canada. Across Canada, only 32% agree that "there are a lot of issues where it makes sense to do things one way in Quebec and another in the rest of Canada." The statement failed to get majority agreement among

any of the NDP voter segments. This is the best issue other parties have to hammer the NDP.

While the NDP have shoals they need to navigate, they have a broad agenda on economic, environmental, social and international issues that have great potential to attract support. However, it is important to remember that in politics, the other parties shoot back. While this poll should be encouraging to New Democrats, they need to bear in mind that other parties can embrace these ideas, challenge them, or come up with other compelling ideas. That said, NDP leadership candidates are talking about ideas that have the potential to engage more than enough Canadians to form government.

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