

Have the NDP missed the greatest electoral opportunity in their history?

The Trudeau Liberals are doing to Tom Mulcair what the Wynne Liberals in Ontario did to Andrea Horwath: gaining ground among people who share left and centre-left values.

By GREG LYLE | Sept. 25, 2015

TORONTO—Seven weeks ago, the NDP were at the top of the polls. The Conservatives were under siege. The Liberals were bleeding votes and looked vulnerable to even further losses with a weakened party brand and a leader with as many negatives as positives. The NDP had a clear shot at collapsing their opposition rival and vaulting ahead of the governing Conservatives with a majority government in reach.

Our latest polls say that opportunity has passed.

While the NDP remains a strong contender to form a minority government, if they succeed it will be against revitalized Conservative and Liberal parties.

This week we are reporting on two Innovative Research Group surveys: a 2,805-person online survey conducted Sept. 20-24, and a 1,784-person randomly selected land-line and cell live caller telephone survey conducted Sept. 15-23. We report on both polls in discussing the horse race. The rest of the findings in this article are from the online poll.

It's no secret that there have been some issues using online polls in recent Canadian election campaigns. While we have had good success with online polls going back to the first online poll ever used in a Canadian election in 2006, it is better to be safe than sorry. In our view, telephone sampling methodology remains more robust so we use voter identification numbers obtained by telephone to weight our online results whenever we can.

Looking at the horserace, the two methodologies show a similar story. Both polls have the Conservatives narrowly in the lead, with 32 per cent from the telephone survey and 31 per cent with the online. The Liberals are second in the telephone survey with 30 per cent and third in the online with 28 per cent. The NDP are third in the telephone at 27 per cent and second in the online with 29 per cent.

Looking at the regional results, including the undecided, shows some interesting dynamics. First, the telephone results show a lot more undecided voters than the online. This is not surprising as online polls are conducted from panels of people who like to share their opinions.

Telephone polls are more likely to capture the views of people who are less opinionated. The telephone results are clearly more reflective of the general public. However, since many of the undecided will not actually vote, those differences are less important in anticipating the outcome.

Both the online and telephone results show the same winners in every region. As expected, the Liberals have a wide lead in the Atlantic, the NDP have a wide lead in Quebec and the Conservatives have a wide lead in Alberta. The race between the Liberals and Conservatives is very close in Ontario but the Liberals edge ahead in both surveys while the NDP trail significantly.

B.C. and the Prairies are interesting because while in both polls the NDP lead in B.C. and the Tories lead in the Prairies, there are important differences between the surveys. In B.C., the phone survey shows a tight three-way race while the online makes it a two-way CPC-NDP race. We would always favour the telephone result but we are even more likely to in B.C. given the last provincial election polling.

In the Prairies (Manitoba and Saskatchewan), we see the Liberals much closer to the Conservatives in the online than in the phone survey. We really wish we had a bigger sample here because there are important differences between rural and urban races in these provinces that we can't fully capture. It could be that the online happened to have a few more Winnipeg responses than the telephone. Hopefully some good regional polls will come out to tell us more.

Significant movement within value clusters

One critical element of this election is how the values Canadians hold have interacted with the political debate to change who they are voting for. We have grouped Canadians together by their shared values in both our pre-election benchmark and this week's online poll. We find both a left-vs.-right dimension and a populist-common-sense vs. experts dimension. In discussing the voting intentions of these clusters, we are using the raw voting percentages, including undecided, because the level of undecided in each group also matters.

The Trudeau Liberals are doing to Thomas Mulcair what the Wynne Liberals in Ontario did to Andrea Horwath. The Liberals are gaining ground among people who share left and centre-left values. However, so far those gains are only among the groups that are more deferential. The Liberals have gained seven points among the Core Left, 11 points among Left Liberals and seven points among Business Liberals. This makes a lot of sense when you think about what the Liberals have been saying on issues like deficit, stimulus and immediate increases in social programs. However, while that message is connecting with deferential groups, the Liberals have not made any significant gains among the three centre-left populist groups.

The Liberals are not just gaining at the NDP's expense. Among Business Liberals, the Conservatives are down four points. However, the Conservatives have made their own significant gains, up six points among Deferential Conservatives and up eight points with Populist Conservatives. The shift away from Business Liberals toward Populists also makes sense when you consider the Conservative position on issues such as the niqab.

The NDP have not gained significantly with any group. What is most striking is the NDP drop from 59 per cent among the Core Left to 41 per cent. The grumblings that have made it into the media are being matched by the departing votes of a value cluster that should be the anchor of the NDP's winning coalition.

A group that has yet to show much change but has great potential to do so is the Thrifty Moderates. The Thrifty Moderates often don't know where they stand on values, but when they take a view it is reminiscent of the Saskatchewan NDP mix of fiscal responsibility and redistributive economics. At 20 per cent, this is our largest value cluster and it has the most uncommitted voters with a third who are undecided or wouldn't vote.

Overall, fans of democracy can take heart. There is a substantive debate occurring between candidate controversies and the public is responding in a manner that makes perfect sense.

Winds of public debate ease for Conservatives, grow colder for opposition

A second key dynamic is that voters' perceptions of what they have read, seen or heard for the Tories improved over the past two weeks while it got worse for the NDP and Liberals.

In the first two waves of our election polling, 46 to 48 per cent of those who had heard something about the Conservatives said it left them less favourable, with only 16 to 18 per cent more favourable. That has eased this week with only 40 per cent worse off and 24 per cent better. As I have noted in earlier articles, those very negative read-seen-heard impact numbers made it hard for the Conservatives to rally conflicted voters. As the winds of public debate calm down for the Tories, those conflicted voters are starting to come home. Conservative support among Time for a Change Tories (voters who want change but feel the Conservatives are best to form government), which had dropped to 32 per cent in our mid-September poll, has now bounced back to 43 per cent.

The number of voters who say what they have read, seen or heard about the Liberals left them more favourable is stable (38 per cent) but the number who are less favourable has risen from 23 per cent to 31 per cent. This negative shift occurred despite the fact that those who watched or heard something about the second leaders' debate say Trudeau won (Trudeau 30 per cent, Harper 25 per cent, Mulcair 17 per cent). It appears that comments about the deficit and cancelling the F-35 jets have created some backlash, but the Liberals are now the only party that still has more positive than negative impacts.

The NDP is now "under water" on read-seen-heard impact. Among those who have read, seen or heard something about the NDP, those who were left more favourable has dropped steadily from 37 per cent to 33 per cent to 30 per cent this week. Those who were left less favourable has grown from 27 and 28 per cent in the first two waves to 36 per cent this week. Discussion about the long rollout of the day care promise received the most mentions and left 47 per cent less favourable to the NDP. There was also major backlash on the niqab issue and impressions of unfunded spending promises.

Time for a change declines

The third major dynamic is a decline in the feeling that it is time for a change. Just as it made sense to see time-for-a-change grow after the Duffy trial and the Conservative controversies of early September, it also makes sense that time-for-a-change sentiment should decline as those controversies subside.

After peaking at 67 per cent in our early September wave, time-for-a-change sentiment has dropped to 62 per cent this week, back where it was in the summer. Our other two time-for-a-change statements—"The Conservatives may have their problems but they are still the best party to form government" and "The most important thing in this election is kicking out Stephen Harper"—have also dropped back to summer levels, although there is a directional improvement in the amount of strong agreement that the Conservatives are best able to form government. It matters if that trend holds up because passion equals action and more intense views should mean higher turnout for the Conservatives.

During the first debate, Justin Trudeau asked people if they are better off today than they were 10 years ago, echoing Ronald Reagan's challenge in his debate versus Jimmy Carter. This is a classic way to evoke time for a change but we realized we didn't know how Canadians would answer. So we asked it two ways, with the better off/worse off rotated in the two questions: "Thinking about your life as a whole, are you better off/or worse off now than you were 10 years ago?" And: "Thinking again about the last 10 years, when it comes to Canada's overall performance as a country, do you think Canada has done better or worse than other countries you see as similar to Canada?"

It turns out more Canadians believe both as individuals and as a country they are better off. On a personal level, 39 per cent say they are better off now than 10 years ago while 31 per cent say worse. As a country, 38 per cent say Canada is doing better than similar countries, 35 per cent say worse.

This may be an opportunity for the Conservatives. Just 41 per cent of people who feel personally better off and 55 per cent who say the country is doing better than its peers are currently voting Conservative. Maybe it should be Stephen Harper asking this question in the next debate.

Still lots of room for change

Often election decision-making takes the form of a funnel. Each week more people make up their minds and fewer people are available to change. While we did see an increase in the number of people who made up their minds in early September (50 per cent said then they had heard all they need to make up their minds), there has been almost no change since then (51 per cent this week). There are still 39 per cent who would like to hear more before they make up their minds.

To really drive this point home, in the 2012 Alberta election, 40 per cent of the electorate wanted to hear more with seven days to go. As you recall, the Wildrose had a 10-point lead at the beginning of those seven days and the PCs had a 10-point lead at the end. We have more than three weeks to go.

It is particularly striking to see the large, uncommitted vote in Quebec where 22 per cent are undecided and 11 per cent say they “would not vote” or “none of the above” in our telephone poll. Given the NDP front runners have the support of only 23 out of every 100 Quebec voters, there is a huge potential for dramatic change in Quebec.

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