

## The hard evidence of the NDP's niqab problem in Quebec

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When the Bloc Québécois took aim at the NDP by launching a television advertisement showing an image of oil leaking ominously and turning into a niqab – an attempt to attack Thomas Mulcair’s party on pipeline politics and its opposition to restrictions on veiled women simultaneously – it was criticized for what seemed an offensive act of desperation.

But new opinion research suggests the ad, which began airing in mid-September, has played a role in loosening the New Democrats’ grip on Quebec’s electorate. And it shows how much the niqab debate in particular, while a very limited factor in Mr. Mulcair’s struggles elsewhere in Canada, has contributed to the apparent erosion of what was a dominant lead for the NDP in that province.

When Innovative Research Group showed the Bloc ad to an online panel of randomly selected francophone Quebecers as part of the polling company’s efforts to gauge voters’ reactions to the parties’ campaign ads, it found support for the NDP fell by several percentage points. The impact on perceptions of Mr. Mulcair relative to his rivals was similar, with a decline in the share of respondents who chose him as the leader who most “cares about people like me” and “will stand up for the middle class.” [Tweet](#)

The survey, conducted between Sept. 23 and Sept. 28, suggests the ad did not necessarily have an immediate positive impact for Gilles Duceppe’s party. Instead, it mostly appears to push some NDP supporters into the undecided camp – potentially opening up some of those voters to Stephen Harper’s Conservatives, who have also been trying to exploit the NDP’s tolerance for the niqab.

As the Tories aim to pick up a few NDP-held seats in and around Quebec City, the Bloc may have been doing some of their heavy lifting. While the sovereigntists’ ad was chipping away at New Democratic support by striking at identity issues, a recent French-language Conservative ad that takes economic aim at the NDP was found to have no statistically significant impact. (Innovative Research shows the ads to 600 voters in its surveys, with the ads rotated so that 200 of them focus primarily on each one. Detailed methodology is available at [innovativeresearch.ca](http://innovativeresearch.ca).)

In recent days, the Conservatives have begun running a niqab-focused Quebec ad of their own. And while the effect of that one has not yet been tested, a separate Innovative Research poll conducted between Sept. 29 and Oct. 1 illustrates why both they and the Bloc are keen to exploit the issue.

As with other polls, that online survey of more than 1,500 randomly selected Canadians found that

while a strong majority of voters across the country support the Conservative policy of banning the niqab from citizenship ceremonies, that view is much more intense in Quebec than elsewhere.

But particularly relevant in this case is what self-identified NDP supporters had to say. Outside Quebec, only about one in 20 of them said Mr. Mulcair's opposition to the niqab restriction made them less likely to vote NDP; inside Quebec, that was what three in 10 of them said.

It's unlikely the niqab accounts for all the New Democrats' recent Quebec troubles, especially considering a mild recent uptick there for the Liberals, who are on the same side of the issue. Nevertheless, the NDP is in the midst of an understandable effort to shift Quebecers' focus back to other topics.

The aim heading into the leaders' debate on Friday was to put the spotlight back on the economic and ethics record of Mr. Harper. And Mr. Mulcair made lots of Quebec-oriented news earlier in the day, signalling potential opposition to the Pacific Rim trade deal the government is negotiating and reiterating his commitment to asymmetrical federalism.

Given how the niqab issue has played out of late, and what their own research is no doubt telling them, both the Conservatives and the Bloc can be expected to try to keep the attention exactly where it has been.

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