



FEDERAL ELECTION 2015

Mulcair’s newest challenge? Perceptions

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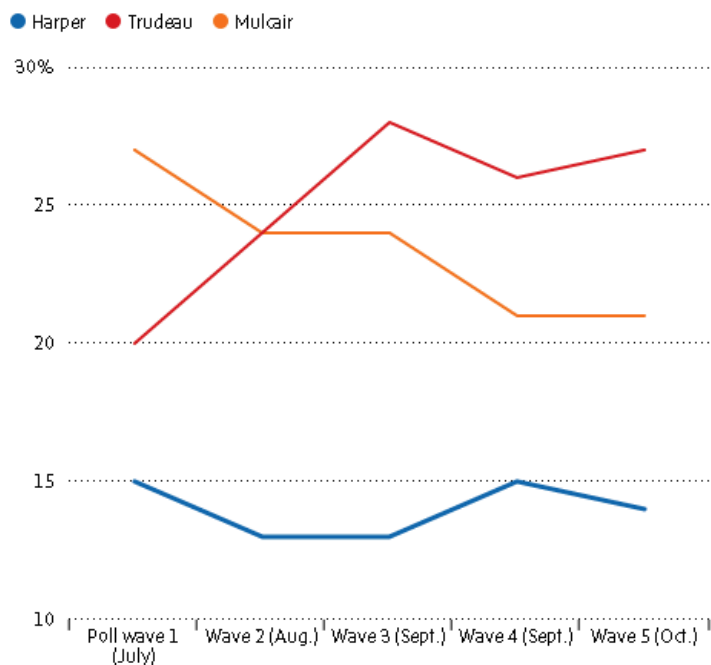
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As the NDP’s apparent slide in popular support has emerged as one of the federal election campaign’s dominant narratives, some equally disturbing numbers for Thomas Mulcair’s party have received less notice.

To look at opinion research on voters’ perceptions of the party leaders is to better understand why Justin Trudeau’s Liberals caught up with and by many accounts surpassed the NDP in the horse race. It is also to get the sense that Mr. Mulcair faces an uphill battle to turn things around in the campaign’s final two weeks – and that the Liberal advantage over the New Democrats could very well widen instead.

Political veterans on all sides would attest that changes in voting intentions tend to follow shifts in how party leaders are viewed relative to one another. The problem for the NDP is that since Mr. Mulcair entered the race significantly ahead of Mr. Trudeau on most perceived leadership attributes, the two have essentially swapped places.

Which party leader most represents positive change?



THE GLOBE AND MAIL » SOURCE: INNOVATIVE RESEARCH GROUP

When Innovative Research Group surveyed approximately 2,800 randomly selected voters through an online panel in late July, just before the campaign started, 27 per cent said Mr. Mulcair was the leader who “represents positive change,” next to 20 per cent who chose Mr. Trudeau. By the time the same company put the same question to

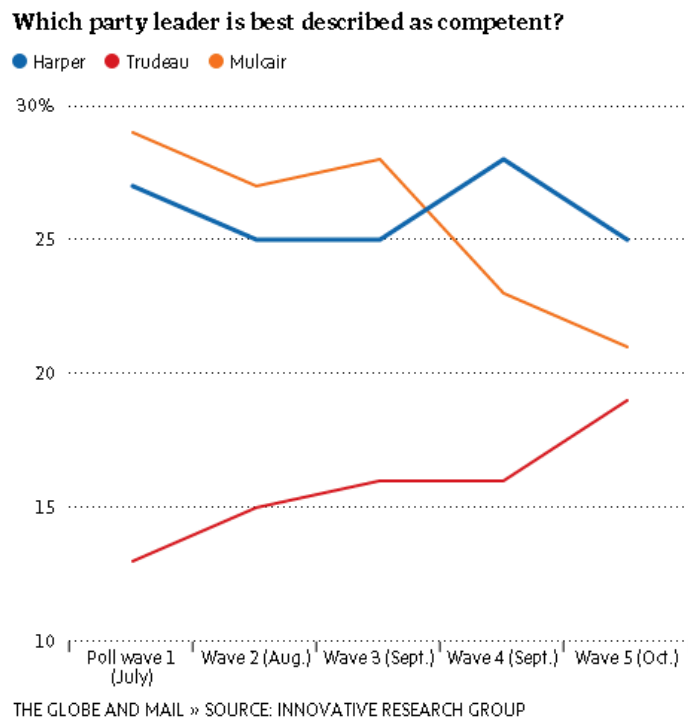
another online panel last week, this time with about 1,500 participants, 27 per cent chose Mr. Trudeau and 21 per cent chose Mr. Mulcair. (Conservative Leader Stephen Harper was around 15 per cent both times, while just less than 30 per cent said none of the above or didn't know.)

On the question of who "has the best plan for the future," Mr. Trudeau went from 16 per cent to 24 per cent while Mr. Mulcair slid from 22 per cent to 18 per cent. And on which leader "stands for what I believe," a narrow 21-19 edge for Mr. Mulcair turned into a 22-17 advantage for Mr. Trudeau.

Even on what seemed the more experienced NDP Leader's most obvious selling point over the youthful and intermittently erratic Liberal one, Mr. Mulcair's advantage has eroded if not quite flipped. At the start of the campaign, 29 per cent chose Mr. Mulcair as most competent, next to just 13 per cent who selected Mr. Trudeau. By last week, their respective numbers were 21 per cent and 19 per cent.

The story is similar when it comes to perceptions of the parties they lead. On creating jobs, on "protecting the middle class," on understanding the needs of "people like me," the surveys show NDP advantages turning into Liberal ones.

It's not that everything is going perfectly according to plan for the Liberals on these fronts, even if it is going very well. Their hope was that Conservative support would start to erode as well. But as with the Tories' share of the popular vote, which if anything has inched upward, perceptions of Mr. Harper and his party compared with his rivals appear to have held steady – which probably is not a big surprise, considering how much of a known entity the Conservative Leader is by this point.



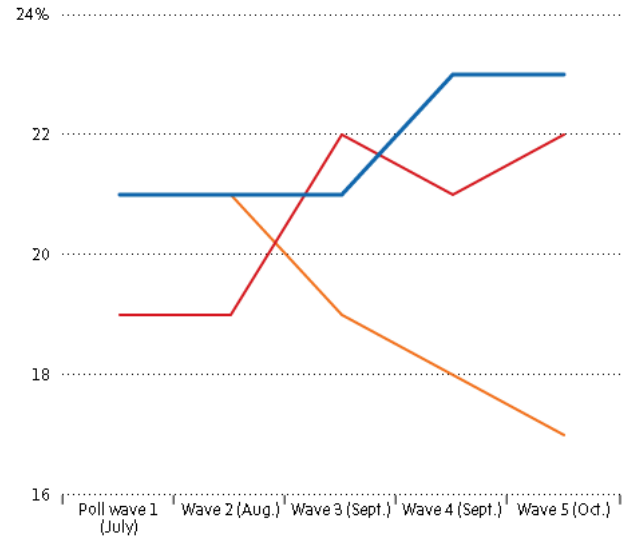
But supplanting Mr. Mulcair as the primary alternative to Mr. Harper was Mr. Trudeau's biggest imperative. And in terms of how the two opposition leaders are perceived, it's not as though the change happened overnight, in a way that suggests it could be reversed just as easily. There were three Innovative Research polls measuring the same things between the first and most recent ones, and they suggest the perception shift between Mr. Mulcair and Mr. Trudeau was a gradual process through August and September.

Two weeks is a long enough time in an election campaign that Mr. Trudeau could yet perform badly enough to undo some of his gains. And the NDP is trying, more aggressively than earlier in the campaign, to zero in on issues that could help Mr. Mulcair re-establish his leadership credentials. That includes a rather sudden interest in opposing a Trans Pacific Partnership trade deal, which in addition to playing to a few target ridings with affected industries seems to be aimed at positioning Mr. Mulcair as the clearest alternative to Mr. Harper.

But it's also worth keeping in mind that there is often a lag between changes in how voters perceive the leaders, and shifts in voter intentions. For the New Democrats, a turnaround would have to start really soon, if it has not begun already. And if what we are seeing in relative perceptions of the leaders holds, the Liberal breakaway from the NDP may only just have started.

Which party leader stands for what I believe?

● Harper ● Trudeau ● Mulcair



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