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The last election broke the mold of Canadian politics. In this election, Justin Trudeau and his team have put the mold back together again.



The Hill Times photographs by Jake Wright
Prime Minister Stephen Harper, NDP Leader Tom Mulcair and Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau out on the hustings.

By GREG LYLE | Oct. 9, 2015

VANCOUVER, B.C.—A daring strategy, a strong performance by their leader and some of the best political advertising in recent history have placed the Liberal Party at victory's doorstep with just 10 days to go. While it is true that a week is a long time in politics, in the normal course of events, today's numbers would see Justin Trudeau return to his boyhood home.

In an online Innovative Research Group poll of 3,417 Canadians conducted from Oct. 5 to Oct. 8, 35 per cent of decided voters preferred the Liberals, 30 per cent chose the Conservatives and 24 per cent said they would vote for the NDP. This is a complete reversal of our election eve poll where 34 per cent were voting NDP, 29 per cent Conservative and just 26 per cent voting Liberal.

The Conservatives

In any normal campaign, a government with the Conservatives' numbers at this point would be defeated on election day. On a host of attributes, Stephen Harper and the Conservatives are no further ahead than when they began. Despite the long campaign and the largest advertising budget in Canadian history, time for change sentiment refuses to budge. The niqab did not increase the number of voters who say the PM stands for what they believe. The Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement has not increased the number who think the Conservatives are best on the economy or best at creating jobs or who think that Harper is the leader with the best plan.

The Conservatives have only three things left that give them hope.

First, they can hope for the return of 10-second Tories. These are voters with conflicting views about the Conservatives who are currently sitting in the undecided column, or with another party. What makes them 10-second Tories is they return to the Tory fold on election day just long enough to cast their vote for the Conservatives. But that hope is dim.

Currently only 32 per cent agree "the Conservatives may have their problems but they are still the best party to form government." That is only one point higher than at the start of the campaign. In British Columbia, the provincial Liberals won with 41 per cent agreeing with that sentiment about the Christy Clark government. In Ontario, Kathleen Wynne won with 44 per cent agreeing with the best able to form government statement. It is hard to imagine the federal Conservatives winning without a gain of eight points on this question in the next 10 days.

Even if the Conservatives convince more people to agree they are best able to form government, it may not be enough. When we combine the people who agree the Conservatives are best able to form government with those who agree it is time for a change to identify "Time for a Change Tories," we find only 37 per cent of those conflicted voters are currently voting Conservative. The B.C. Liberals won with 52 per cent of their "Time for a Change Liberals" while the Ontario Liberals won with 50 per cent. The federal Tories need to gain 13 points in 10 days in their support among "Time for a Change Tories" to equal those numbers.

That seems unlikely.

Second, they can hope for better turnout than the other parties. There is no magic formula for predicting voter turnout so we explore it six ways. Three ways offer the Conservatives faint hope at best and three ways leave no hope at all.

The obvious way to predict vote is to ask respondents if they voted before and if they are planning to do so again. When we look at people who say they voted in the past and are definitely planning to vote this time, the Liberal lead narrows to two points nationally. But the Liberals still win by 10 points in Ontario among these likely voters. That Ontario lead on its own is enough to defeat the Conservatives. Conservatives might be hopeful on the overall numbers among likely voters, but those hopes are dashed when we look at Ontario.

We looked at people who see a difference between parties on the presumption that they are more likely to vote because they think who wins matters. The Conservatives win by three points among those who are most likely to see a difference but the Liberals win by five points among those with only a little less passion. Some faint hope but not much.

What about age? It is well established that older people are more likely to vote than younger people. Among 65-plus voters, the Conservatives are statistically tied with the Liberals. The Liberals win among 55- to 64-year-olds by five points, but the Conservatives win by six points among 45 to 54-year-olds. So it is a tied race among people 45-plus.

However, no matter how low their turnout is, some younger voters will vote and the Liberal lead grows as voters get younger. Again, some faint hope for the Conservatives but if any young voters turn out at all, that is enough to swing the outcome to the Liberals.

It is true that people who see voting as a duty (and are therefore more likely to show up) are more Conservative than those who see voting as a choice. However, the Liberals still lead by four points among voters motivated by duty. No hope for the Tories there.

Another theory says voters with more knowledge of politics (cognitively engaged voters) are more likely to vote. We don't have knowledge measures but we do have a "don't know" option when we ask voters to rate parties and leaders. So we added up all the "don't knows" on the assumption that people who say "don't know" are less informed about politics, and used this information to classify voters according to their level of certainty when rating parties and leader. The Liberals win by eight points among voters who are the most certain of their views and by four points among the next highest cohort. Again, no hope for the Conservatives.

Finally, it could be that those who pay more attention to the campaign are more likely to vote than those who pay little or no attention. Looking at those paying the closest attention to the election doesn't help the Conservatives either as they lose by 10 points among this group, although the gap among those paying moderate attention is much closer. Absolutely no hope for the Conservatives if attention drives voting.

So mixed results at best. Turnout may offer some hope that the race may be closer than it appears. Perhaps turnout can make the race close enough that whatever 10-second Tories can be found could push the Conservatives over the line. But the evidence is inconsistent and turnout is insufficient to turn the tide on its own.

The third hope for the Conservatives is that events will place a spotlight on Stephen Harper's remaining strength, strong leadership. Stephen Harper still enjoys a clear lead over the other leaders on competence and strong leadership. But as outrageous as it seems, the Conservatives need a disaster to have strong leadership come to the fore. And not just any disaster. A weather disaster could just remind people of climate change and hurt the Tories. They need an economic or security disaster. It is a calamitous campaign that leaves you wishing for a calamity to win.

The NDP

The NDP began the campaign with three pillars of success and has lost all three of them.

First, the NDP started with the highest level of support among its most loyal voters of all three main parties. Now 14 per cent of their vote is defecting to the Liberals. And there is potential for the number of defectors to grow as voters learn more about the NDP's shifting fortunes. The strategic voting that worked for them at the start of the election could work against them at the end.

Second, the NDP were winning defectors from other parties. They began with at least one in five of the Liberal, Green and Bloc partisans. While the NDP still win almost one in five Bloc and Green identifiers, they have dropped to just one in 10 Liberals. And since there are far more Liberals than Green and Bloc partisans combined, losing the Liberal defectors is a critical blow to the NDP. In fact there is now a larger share of NDP identifiers (14 per cent) defecting to the Liberals than Liberal identifiers (10 per cent) defecting to the NDP.

Third, looking at unaligned voters, the NDP entered the campaign with an eight-point lead over the CPC and a nine-point lead over the Liberals. While they still lead the Tories by four points, they now trail the Liberals by four.

With a less efficient vote, fewer defectors and fewer unaligned voters, the NDP is left without a regional stronghold, a critical weakness in our first-past-the-post system.

In Quebec, they trail the Bloc and the Conservatives in the region around and including Québec City. They trail the Liberals in Montreal Anglophone seats and are just even with the Liberals in the Francophone seats. While we still show a healthy NDP lead in the remaining regions of Quebec, other pollsters do not.

In Ontario, we show the Liberals with a wide lead in Toronto while the NDP have dropped to third in the southwest and the northeast.

The NDP remains competitive in western areas such as Prairie cities and B.C.'s Lower Mainland but even on Vancouver Island their lead has narrowed to the point where other parties may be able to challenge them in one or two seats.

As things stand now, the NDP is well positioned to win the second greatest victory in the party's history. In any other election that would be cause for celebration. In this election, it will likely result in revolution.

The Liberals

The Liberals began the campaign in desperate straits. The 2008 election was tied for their worst in Canadian history and in 2011 they dropped again. At the start of the election, 27 per cent of their core partisans were defecting to another party. They trailed the NDP by nine points on their chosen ground – protecting the middle class. Their leader had dropped six points in favourables and picked up three points of negatives since May as the Conservatives stoked up the Liberal leader-defining machine. At the start of the campaign the Liberals were struggling just to hold their own in the seats they were competitive in during the 2011 election. Atlantic Canada, the last place you would call seat-rich, was their only bright spot.

All that has changed, in many cases reversed.

The Liberals have regained more than half their defectors. The party now leads on Represent in the World, Creating Jobs and Understanding the Needs of People Like Me, and it owns Vision for the Future and Protecting the Middle Class.

Since the election began, Justin Trudeau has gained 16 points in net favourables, nine points as Best Prime Minister, and now leads on Best Plan, Stands for What I Believe, and Cares About People Like Me, and he owns Positive Change.

Most significantly, the Liberals have built strength in regional pockets where they can turn votes into seats.

They lead in the Atlantic by 25 points. They are poised to win big in Ontario. They have a 23-point lead in the City of Toronto. They have a 10-point lead in Ontario's southwest. They have an eight-point lead in the GTA. They even have a six-point lead in Ontario's northern and eastern seats.

In ridings that had three-way races in the last election where the Liberals only had a three-point lead over the Conservatives, the Liberals now have a 15-point lead. They're ahead by nine points in Saskatoon/Regina/Winnipeg, which likely means seat gains in at least Winnipeg and maybe even Saskatchewan's cities. The Liberals have a narrow lead in B.C.'s Lower Mainland, which means they may not only win in Vancouver but on the North Shore and in Surrey and Delta.

And there could be Liberal surprises in what were core Conservative seats in 2011. In rural seats, the Conservatives won by 25 points or more in 2011, the Liberals have narrowed the gap to eight points. In seats the Conservatives won by 15 to 25 points four years ago, the Liberals trail by just two points. In Edmonton and Calgary the Liberals are now 11 points ahead of the NDP and just eight points behind the Conservatives.

There could even be Liberal surprises in core NDP seats. In seats the NDP won by 25 points or more four years ago, the Liberals are now in a statistical tie. In seats the NDP won by 15 to 25 points in 2011, the NDP have dropped 12 points to 36 per cent while the Liberals have gained 14 points, rising to 27 per cent. In the 33 seats that were CPC/NDP races and the Liberals won just nine per cent of the vote last time, the Liberals have gained 17 points and are just six points behind the Conservatives and five behind the NDP.

Finally, it is important to note that the winds of public debate continue to blow in favour of the Liberals. Trudeau split the TVA debate win with Duceppe in Quebec, and he was the clear perceived winner outside Quebec. More voters paid attention to the Liberals this week and 43 per cent were left more favourable with just 23 per cent less favourable. Even respondents who mentioned Trudeau was "on the fence" or "Trudeau was reviewing the TPP" said it left them more favourable (51 per cent), not less (18 per cent). If this favourable momentum continues, it should be enough to push the Liberals over the line.

Expect the Unexpected

The last election broke the mold of Canadian politics. In this election, Justin Trudeau and his team have put the mold back together again.

That has important implications for a new development in Canadian politics: aggregators. I use aggregator sites such as ThreeHundredEight and Too Close To Call regularly, evenly daily in this campaign. They are a great way to keep up on polling when you don't have time to review individual reports. But several seat models are being featured prominently in this campaign and they all share one weakness in common. They assume that the patterns of party strength and weakness we saw in the last election will be repeated this time.

But why should they?

The 2011 election was an exceptional election—the highest of NDP highs and the lowest of Liberal lows. Why should that exception now be the rule? Two challenges make it hard for aggregators to do anything else but use the 2011 election results. First, redistribution makes it difficult to look before the 2011 election to build models using more traditional voting patterns. Second, aggregators have to work with regionally aggregated data. They can't combine results from ridings with similar results from the 2011 election to see if the patterns are holding. But a pollster with a large enough sample can do just that. And we did. When we look at the results of ridings that share similar voting patterns in the last election, we find the 2011 election's patterns are falling to the wayside as old loyalties and new excitement combine to reassert more traditional patterns and maybe even create a few new ones.

Can I say for sure the Liberals will win? Not yet. But I would bet on it. Anyone give me odds?

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