

Harper's image 'set in stone' despite Tories' best efforts to soften it

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In the federal election campaign's final week, the Conservatives were still landing blows against the man who has emerged as their toughest opponent.

Their attempts to sell their own leader, though, appear to have been falling considerably flatter.

That, at least, is one of the key takeaways from the last of Innovative Research Group's surveys gauging voters' reactions to parties' advertisements through the campaign, which tested (among other ads) a pair of the Tories' recent television spots.

One of them, which labels Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau "economically clueless" about the challenges faced by hard-working Canadians, appeared to achieve its intended effect. Among the randomly-selected voters participating in an online panel who were asked a series of questions both before and after being shown that ad, it caused support for the Tories to go up by several percentage points at the Liberals' expense. It also significantly drove down the share of voters who, when asked several questions about the leaders' relative attributes, said Mr. Trudeau is the one who "will stand up for the middle class."

The other, in which Mr. Harper makes a relatively rare appearance in his party's own advertising to say this election is "not about me" but about "you and your family," seemed to have almost no effect at all on either vote intentions or comparative perceptions of the leaders. And a separate set of questions found that, somewhat unusually for a positive ad, there were significantly more undecided voters who said the ad made them less likely to vote Conservative than there were those who said it made them more likely to vote for Mr. Harper's party.

It was a similar story with a radio ad, which aired last weekend, in which Mr. Harper also used the "not about me" line while wishing voters a Happy Thanksgiving. That ad had no significant effect when tested on survey respondents, either, although it bears noting that it was part of an ongoing radio campaign in which Mr. Harper offers a different message to listeners each day, which may be aimed at more of a cumulative effect.

Meanwhile, it was a reverse situation with the Liberals, with positive messaging featuring Mr. Trudeau proving considerable more effective than attacks on Mr. Harper.

The more negative recent Liberal ad tested by Innovative Research, which shows footage of Mr. Harper while accusing him of being “out of touch,” did not have a significant impact on respondents. But an updated version of an ad that the Liberals ran earlier in the campaign, in which Mr. Trudeau rebuts the Conservative charge that he’s “not ready,” caused Liberal support to go up at the Tories’ expense.

Another spot the Liberals have been running lately, featuring Mr. Trudeau speaking at a large rally, caused a big increase in the share of respondents who think the Liberal leader will best stand up for the middle class, and smaller bumps among those who think he is the most competent and cares the most about “people like me.” Even though it did not seem to create many new supporters for the Liberals, those underlying impressions could be important in sealing the deal with existing backers who have put the Liberals ahead in most polls – and who the Tories are trying to unnerve with their ads.

All told, the reactions to the Liberals’ and Tories’ ads seem to point to a dynamic that makes sense in the campaign’s broader context.

After ten years of Conservative government, Innovative Research managing director Greg Lyle said, “Mr. Harper’s image appears to be set in stone – nothing the Conservatives try moves it.”

Meanwhile, “Mr. Trudeau’s image is still in flux,” as voters continue to take stock of the relatively young and inexperienced leader offering change.

When it came to swaying voters who had not yet fully made up their minds, then, Mr. Harper’s claim that this is not about him – however ineffective in his advertising – may have had a ring of truth in the campaign’s last days.

(Innovative Research’s most recent ad tests were conducted between Oct. 13 and 15 with an online panel of 1,400 randomly-selected Canadians; each participant was shown three ads and asked to focus primarily on one of them. Detailed methodology and full results are available at innovativeresearch.ca)

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