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Budget adds to immediate NDP woes but potential for rebound remains

The NDP have dropped to 12% of the decided vote while the Liberals have grown to 46% support. At 30%, the Conservatives remain in the ballpark of their election night support.



NDP Leader Tom Mulcair, pictured campaigning in the last federal election. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

By GREG LYLE

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VANCOUVER—The first Liberal federal budget has twisted the Trudeau knife further in the wounded New Democratic Party. The first budget of the new government is a big hit with elite centre left voters, a moderate success with populist or struggling groups, and leaves conservative groups infuriated. As a result, the Liberals are up, the NDP has declined even further from their election night and the Conservatives are treading water. Despite more short-term pain for the NDP, the party still retains a slightly larger pool of available voters than the Conservatives. The challenge is to find issues that have both a populist and a left-wing appeal.

Innovative Research Group Inc. conducted an online poll of 2,456 Canadians from March 22 to March 30. The results were to ensure that the overall sample's composition reflects that of the actual Canadian population according to Census data. The survey profiled voters by their party identification, their vote in the recent election, their current vote and their underlying values to look at the long term implications of the recent budget.

Budget Impact More Positive Than Negative, Appeal Most Positive Among Left-Wing and Deferential Voters



Most respondents (71%) to this survey paid attention to this budget and more were left satisfied (42%) than dissatisfied. In terms of values, the more economically left-wing and deferential voters are, the happier they are with the budget. The more right-wing and populist voters are, the more upset they are with the government. As a result, not only is a strong majority (72%) of Liberal identifiers satisfied with the budget, a clear majority of New Democrats (58%) is also satisfied.

Four-in-10 Canadians feel their own personal situation will be impacted by the budget with almost half (49%) of those respondents expecting to feel a negative impact and 41% a positive impact. Westerners generally and Albertans in particular are most likely to expect to be harmed by the budget. Quebecers and Atlantic Canadians are most likely to feel they will be positively impacted. The values story follows

the same pattern as with overall satisfaction. More right-wing and populist voters feel they will be negatively impacted. More left-wing and deferential voters expect a positive impact. Politically, not only do Liberals expect a positive impact, so too do New Democrats and Bloc supporters.

Like the Liberal campaign, the core strength of the budget is economic. More respondents expect the economic impact to be positive (40%) rather than negative (29%). Over one-third (35%) say the budget will result in a higher rate of economic growth while just under one in five (19%) expect economic growth will be worse. And more respondents believe unemployment will go down (32%) rather than increase (18%).



Respondents feel more anxious than angry about the budget.

Only one-third (34%) of respondents feel angry about the budget. That anger is coming primarily from Conservative partisans, conservative value clusters, and Albertans. This level of anger is actually quite similar to Harper minority budgets, but from different people.

Respondents feel a bit more anxious about the government (38%). While this level of anxiety is not much higher than the level of anger, it is quite a bit higher than the level of anxiety generated in the early days of the Harper government.

One key concern are taxes. Just over four-in-10 expect to pay more in taxes while only 14% expect to pay less. Not only do Westerners generally and Albertans in particular expect to pay more, almost half (48%) of the Ontario respondents expect to pay more.

Respondents are also more likely to expect more users fees (35%) than less (6%).

Most respondents expect the budget will make little difference to health care.

The Liberals have a lot of ammunition to build further support for the budget.

Of 12 budget initiatives tested, all but two leave voters more favourable towards the government rather than less and the other two simply divide respondents. Increases in infrastructure spending, aid to veterans, benefits to seniors and clean technology investments are the most popular initiatives. All four of those initiatives leave more than 60 per cent of respondents more favourable.

The more left-leaning and deferential value clusters are strongly impressed by all the measures tested. Business Liberals, Thrifty Moderates and the Populist Left are also impressed although they are a little more conflicted on reversing the Harper tax breaks and deferring the small business tax break. Populist Liberals are also generally impressed except for the tax cut reversals which divide them. Only the two conservative value clusters show serious resistance to the appeal of the measures we tested with only the Populist Conservatives resisting the appeal of almost all budget initiatives.

The issue of the deficit is more divisive. Respondents are split on whether the deficit is a result of forces beyond the Trudeau Liberals control (45%) or is yet another example of party leaders making campaign promises they had no intention of keeping (43%). Again, Conservatives partisans, conservatives value clusters and Albertans strongly see the deficit as proof of nefarious plans while more left wing and deferential groups as well as Liberals and NDPers are more likely to see it as the result of events beyond the government's control.

The short-term consequences of the NDP are dire.

The NDP have dropped to 12% of the decided vote while the Liberals have grown to 46% support. At 30%, the Conservatives remain in the ballpark of their election night support. As the budget reaction would lead us to expect, Liberal gains are greatest among left-wing and deferential groups.

In terms of leadership, Thomas Mulcair has dropped in net favourables. While his negatives are flat, he has lost more of his favourable to uncertainty since the election. However Mulcair's image remains net positive among all centre and left value clusters. His image is only negative among "small c" conservative voters.

Justin Trudeau's overall numbers look good but his strong unfavourable score is now almost as high as it was on election eve in July. The only group with a negative view of the Prime Minister are the Populist Conservatives but his image has dropped 17 points in net favourables among that group since the election.

While the news is almost universally bad for the NDP in the short run, the party is far from over.

Just over 4-in-10 (41%) of Canadians say they are at least somewhat likely to vote NDP. While this is well back of the Liberals who enjoy a pool of 57% of the electorate, it is actually marginally larger than the Conservative pool of 39%. The NDP pool is almost as big as the Liberals among Core Left voters and is within single digits of the Liberals among the Populist Left and Thrifty Moderates. Regionally, the NDP has a significantly larger potential pool of support than the CPC in Atlantic Canada and Quebec and a slightly larger pool in Ontario and BC.

Moreover, the NDP are the clear second choice of Liberal voters with 45% support compared to just 12% for the CPC.

The Tory edge in actual votes over the NDP can be found in the passion of the CPC base. Their voters are angry with the Liberals and their dislike of Justin Trudeau is growing in terms of passion. This is good news for Conservative leadership membership drives and for Conservative fundraising and it leads to more first choice preferences at the moment.

The Liberals cannot stay focused on rallying the left forever. In the election, Conservative support was limited to just the two conservative value clusters. While this budget rallied the most left wing groups, the populist centrist groups and the Business Liberals are growing anxious. This provides an opportunity for the CPC to grow their base ... if they will seize it.

The NDP challenge is to find a meeting place between populism and progressive economics. Centre left voters who don't trust elites have not warmed to the Liberals in the same way as centre left voters who do trust elites. What is keeping the NDP in the game is not university profs and teachers but the cleaning staff that sweep up their classrooms and counter staff that serve them at Tim Hortons.

What the NDP need to find is an agenda that can put the Liberals on the defensive on issues that unite these groups. Many of those issues can be seen in the last election's NDP platform. Universal day care. Raising the minimum wage. Most importantly, making corporations pay their fair share. In addition, some early government decisions such as adopting the Trans Pacific Partnership trade deal, the Saudi arms deal and putting more troops into Syria could also boomerang with key Liberal-NDP swing voters.

Right now though, centre left voters want to enjoy the moment. For 10 years Stephen Harper was the bane of their existence. Whatever else they may think of this budget, this is definitely a budget that proves the days of Stephen Harper are behind them. And for many voters, that is reason enough to celebrate.

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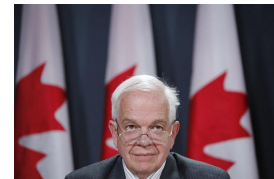
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