

Pollsters' Corner

Some of the country's leading public opinion experts reflect on the federal election campaign's first two weeks, and suggest what to look for going forward

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GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE
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Tim Woolstencroft (Strategic Counsel): Last week, the Conservatives stumbled somewhat, the Liberal campaign started to show new life (but it has a long way to go to in order to change the current dynamics of the election), the Greens continued to hurt the Liberals/NDP, and the Bloc Quebecois were still holding tough in Montreal, but continue to be in real trouble in rural Quebec.

The Conservatives found themselves going off message several times and faced vigorous attack advertising mounted by the other parties. Still, they continue to have a lead in the crucial battlegrounds: They hold a significant advantage in rural Quebec, are performing well in key battlegrounds in Ontario, and are maintaining a large lead in key B.C. swing ridings in the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island. While Tory voter support is solid and less vulnerable to switch away, Canadians in Ontario and Quebec swing ridings are beginning to think that "change" would be a good thing. The Tories need to remain sharply focused on the economy over the next week.

The more vigorous Liberal campaign (compared to the first week) has helped to bolster support in key Liberal-held ridings, but it needs to kick into high gear quickly by leveraging on traditional Liberal party messages and moving away from the "Green Shift."

The Liberal campaign faces some significant problems, particularly in Montreal and the Lower Mainland. The party's vote in Montreal is hemorrhaging to the Tories and NDP, while the Bloc vote continues to hold — this could mean that the Liberals will be able to hold onto Montreal, while losing a significant number of seats in the rest of the province. Plus, Elizabeth May and her Green Party continue to be a drain on Liberal support. As we enter the third week of the campaign, the biggest challenge facing the Liberals is the softness of their vote, which is vulnerable to switching to the NDP/Green and the Conservatives.

Over the next week, watch for the Liberals' advertising to become even more negative toward the Conservatives in a bid to boost their traditional base and change the dynamics of this campaign. The Tories will continue to focus on their wedge issues — leadership and the economy — hoping that there are no additional distractions from leaks emanating from the federal bureaucracy.

Greg Lyle (Innovative Research): With two weeks under our belt, it's clear this election is the Tories' to lose. At this point, we are left with three key questions:

1. *Can the Tories make it to a majority?*

They are gaining now in B.C. and rural and small-town Ontario and Quebec. The Tories will also likely win more than their fair share of close races with the Liberals, because the Tory base consists of voters more likely and more motivated to vote, and the Tory machine will do a better job of pulling the vote. But they may still be a little shy.

2. *How far will the Bloc fall?*

Right now, the Bloc continue to maintain a strong hold on their urban seats and their remaining rural vote looks quite firm. However, their campaign is very negative and opens the door to a pox-on-both-their-houses debate moment for Jack Layton. Not likely, but something to look for in the Quebec debate. In addition to the appeal of Mr. Layton and the NDP to the Bloc's social democratic base, the other Quebec wild cards are core federalist Liberals. If the Liberals appear to be out of the race, a last-minute appeal from the Tories could see suburban

Liberals vote Conservatives to stop the Bloc


3. *How far will the Liberals fall?*

Right now the Liberals remain well above the Turner floor, but their vote remains soft and under siege by the Greens, the NDP and the Conservatives.

The key to how far the Liberals fall is the populist nature of the swing vote in this election. Up until now, the Liberals have been talking to voters like they were in a grad school seminar. But for swing voters, politics are about emotions, about hopes and fears. Especially fears.

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