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The Numbers Tell the Story...So Far

Posted on: 15 September 2008 by Steve Paikin

Greg Lyle is a former charter member of Mike Harris's Common Sense Revolution. Now he makes his living heading up the Innovative Research Group and is one of the leading pollsters in the country using the internet to measure public opinion.

Last week, he gave a wide-ranging briefing on several significant issues related to the current federal election campaign. Here are some of his chief findings:

1. Brand loyalty today favors the Conservatives.
2. Stephen Harper towers over his rivals on the leadership scorecard.
3. Canadians trust the Conservatives more than any other party to help us out of our economic problems.
4. Canadians trust the Liberals more than any other party to solve the environmental issue.
5. The Bloc Quebecois has a problem. Their reason for existence has never been more in doubt.
6. Quebecers are losing faith in the Afghanistan mission.
7. The Conservative government's cuts to high profile culture programs is a problem for the party in Quebec.
8. In perhaps the most interesting finding, Canadians outside Quebec still question whether Stephen Harper likes the country he wants to run.

Okay, now the details...

Brand Loyalty

Lyle's survey suggests more people are open to voting Conservative than at any time since the new party's creation. And the party's base is the most rock solid of all the parties at 24%. The Liberal base, Lyle says, has fallen to 12%, a shockingly low number for Canada's natural governing party.

Leadership

Stephen Harper cleans up here. When asked who'd make the best prime minister, 37% of Canadians say Harper (up from 22% in December 2005). Only 17% pick Stephane Dion (down from 38% who picked Paul Martin in 2005). The NDP number is virtually unchanged.

In fact, on a wide range of issues, the Conservatives have a strong lead outside Quebec. For example:

Who has the best plan for the country?

CON 33%
LIB 19%
NDP 10%
GRN 6%

Who stands for what I believe in?

CON 33%
LIB 19%
NDP 15%
GRN 10%

Lyle says it's unusual for the Tories to score so high on the empathy issue.

The New Democrats score well in one category: "Who cares about people like me?"

CON 24%
LIB 13%
NDP 25%
GRN 7%

Even in Quebec, the NDP leads in this category:

CON 15%
LIB 7%
NDP 28%
BQ 24%
GRN 4%

Economic Management

In January 2006 at the time of the last election, the legacy of former Liberal finance minister Paul Martin's slaying the deficit dragon gave his party a 13 point lead on the Conservatives on the economic management file.

Those numbers have now flipped. Today, the Tories command the economic management issue.

Conservative Vulnerability

Where is Harper vulnerable? Lyle asked "is Harper committed to defending the things that make us Canadian?" On that question, the Conservatives face a big drop in support. Most people say no.

When asked who's being too negative, Canadians also thought the Conservatives were the nastiest:

CON 29%
LIB 19%
NDP 24%
GRN 5%

The Environment

Stephane Dion's Green Shift plan has definitely captured the environmental issue for the Liberals. In January 2006, the Liberals were only seen by 19% of the electorate as being the prime champions of the environment. Today, that's jumped to 28%, and most of that support has been taken from the NDP, which saw its ownership of this file fall from 41% to 19%.

(Whether the Liberals will keep this lead is an open question, now that the Green Party is becoming a bigger player in the campaign).

The Need for the BQ

Is a vote for the Bloc Quebecois the best way to protect Quebec's interests? During the last election campaign, 49% of Quebecers said yes. Today, it's just 39%, and fully 1/3 of Quebecers disagree with that statement. These numbers suggest the need for the Bloc has

subsided.

Who Leads on What Issues?

The Conservatives own crime, Canada on the world stage, cutting taxes, and the economy. They are perceived as the worst on the environment, protecting women's rights, and health care.

"The Conservatives will get killed on the environment unless they can make it a tax issue," Lyle says. "Conversely, if there's anything the opposition can do to get the abortion issue back into the campaign, that'd be bad for the Tories."

"The only issue the Bloc Quebecois owns is securing the ability to live and work in French and responding to the unique needs of my province," says Lyle.

"They underperform on every other issue."

The Seats

The Conservatives need to pick up 28 seats to win a majority government. Lyle has looked at the riding maps of the country and suggests the following scenario:

The Conservatives will lose 5 of their current seats.

In B.C., 8 seats are in play. The Conservatives could win 5.

On the Prairies, the Conservatives could win 2 more.

"So the question becomes, can they win 25 seats in rural Quebec or suburban Montreal? They already won most of the close races in Ontario last time," Lyle says.

The Debate

Lyle figures the debate could be unusually influential this time 'round. "There is lots of potential for a gang-up on Harper on the environment," he says. "Stephen Harper can use that. He can say, I'm going to solve the environment problem without putting my hands in your pockets. He'll try to turn this into a tax issue."

Finally, Ontario

Premier Dalton McGuinty has been urging Ontarians to champion his "Fairness for Ontario" campaign. He's asking voters to ask the candidates what they plan to do for Ontario, when they come knocking on your door.

Lyle says the issue has no traction at all. Ironically, he says Ontarians would be very prepared to vote Conservative, "if only Harper could be seen as being on its side."

"The Conservative brand is not warming up in Ontario, especially in the Greater Toronto Area," Lyle says. "People may not be voting the (Fairness for Ontario) issue, but it has stopped the Conservatives from winning a majority government through Ontario."

So that's the lay of the land today. Election day is still 4 weeks and one day away.

That's an eternity for all the parties involved to try to change these numbers.



Meantime, speaking of the numbers, they're getting worse and worse south of the border, just as a former guest, Nouriel Roubini, predicted on this program several months ago. If you want to check out Dr. Roubini's prognostications, [watch this web-exclusive video](#).

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Comments

How representative is the internet? Who actually votes?

Your post raises more questions than answers.

Who actually votes? I keep hearing that people my age (early twenties) don't vote. I keep hearing that old geezers are the only ones who turn up.

How representative is the internet? Compared to what I've heard about voting, the internet seems to be the total reverse. The young use it habitually. The old stay away as much as possible.

So what should we make of a poll surveying internet users? How does the pollster find these people? With people being really sensitive about time wasted and spammers...who actually agrees to get polled online?

posted by Escobar on 16 September 2008 at 4:34 AM

How did elections become about branding?

Why have all the pollsters and media jumped on using the "brand" term when it comes to parties and elections. While not an expert on branding, the basic concepts that I am aware suggest the concept and terminology do not apply to political parties and campaigns. One of the key concepts of branding is the brand promise and being able to deliver on the promise consistently to its customers. Firstly, an election is about the voters being seen as citizens, not consumers. Secondly, I suspect that most voters even the ones that are supporting a specific party would give them high ratings on delivering on the promise. Thirdly, part of the branding process is creating an emotional experience for the customer. Again, I suspect that most voters, other than the hard core supporters of a party, are having an emotional experience when supporting a political party in an election.

The next time you have some of these pollsters and advisors, please challenge them on the use of a "brand" in a political environment.

As well, the question is why do people think that Stephen Harper is best able to deal with a deteriorating economy? After all, he has been in charge as the economy has been getting worse. What is the reason for his strong support?

posted by Oxford on 16 September 2008 at 9:20 PM

Escobar

Your questions are good ones. Lyle swears by his methodology. To clarify, this isn't a survey of whoever wants to sign up. It's demographically representative of the population. Lyle says he ensures that all regions, age groups, both genders, etc are represented in the survey. So while it's not a traditional phone poll, it's still representative, he says. The fact is, his numbers in the last campaign were pretty solid.

posted by Steve Paikin  on 17 September 2008 at 12:52 PM

harper's lead

could you image if obama or mccain had numbers as low as harper concerning who has the best plan for the country or who stands for what i believe?

americans mock bush for having favorability ratings in the low 30s /high 20s.

posted by brendan on 17 September 2008 at 6:21 PM

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posted by brendan on 17 September 2008 at 6:21 PM

Thanks Steve...

Thanks Steve,

I originally interpreted it as a poll of Canadian internet users. Not very representative in and of itself.

So thanks for clearing it up. This is a normal poll, only the communication takes place online (instead of on the phone).

posted by Escobar on 18 September 2008 at 7:27 AM

Escobar

You've got that exactly right.

posted by Steve Paikin  on 18 September 2008 at 1:26 PM

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