

Are positive polls a problem for Harper?

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- Comments (45)

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HOW MUCH OF A PROBLEM DO POLLS SHOWING THE TORIES WITHIN REACH OF A MAJORITY GOVERNMENT, SUCH AS THE ONE RELEASED FRIDAY, POSE FOR STEPHEN HARPER?



Scott Reid (*former communications director for Paul Martin*): Obviously, as problems go it's just the kind you'd like to have. Certainly beats the kind of problem everyone else is staring down.

That said, it does pose some serious threats for Mr. Harper. Canadians remain guarded toward his leadership. He dare not openly seek a majority. He must play a careful game and then sneak his desired result past the voters. That's best done at the campaign's close, not its opening.

If the narrative of this campaign quickly becomes whether Mr. Harper can be trusted with unfettered control, it shines the light back on how he's exercised his power to date. And that's not a picture he wants to put in the window. It begs scrutiny of his abusive impulses and is likely to encourage strategic voting, sharper attacks on his character and a much-too-early media focus on whether he's taking the result for granted.



Greg Lyle (*former chief of staff for Gordon Campbell and Gary Filmon*): At the moment the majority headlines don't seem to be a problem. There are almost as many people scared of change as want change. The majority headlines do provide a platform for the Tories in Quebec because of the Bloc pitch — vote for us to stop the majority — but the Bloc needs to up the ante by doing a better job of explaining why a majority would be bad for Quebec.



Gerald Caplan (*former NDP campaign manager*): Note to self, from the hawk in the Tory war room:

"God, another disaster for our campaign. I thought we had finally snuck out of this lousy opening week without any more damage. Now our worst nightmare: a poll that shows us easily winning a huge majority. With 41% and that doofus Dion in a different universe, 15 points behind, we're a shoo-in. God, who needed this?"

"The Boss screwed up on the very first morning by drawing attention to the whole issue. Who needed him to say that he thought he'd only win a minority government and that was okay with him? Maybe his kids believed him. You can be sure no one else did. Even old man Mulroney wasn't as obsessed with winning the whole shebang as our guy. So naturally everybody's watching the polls like a hawk - jeez, we keep flipping birds all week - and now we have five more weeks to convince people it's all a bad joke.

"We have our private polls, ya know, millions of dollars worth. In the whole country, outside Alberta maybe 112 people are yearning for a Harper majority. About 80% are scared poopless, to quote The War Room. We've got work to do."

BEYOND CONTINUING TO DISMISS SUCH POLLS, IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE MR. HARPER CAN DO IN RESPONSE?



Reid: There are things he must do. And things he can do.

He must tell his team to keep a sock in it. No gloating. No talk of a new era of Conservative majority rule. And he must absolutely banish any hint that his master plan is to utterly hobble the Liberal Party of Canada. Professor Flanagan's musings to that end have been cancerously unhelpful to the Prime Minister. Canadians will look gravely upon such a partisan and landscape-altering ambition.

What he can do is engage the NDP and Greens in direct conflict more frequently. That animates their base and helps him keep the prospect of important vote splits alive.

All that said, let's not go wiggy about one or two polls. There's time yet for many ups and many downs. But the polls do deliver a firm message to the Liberal campaign: Get a message! Make a better effort to marry middle-class economic anxieties with your environmental solutions. Conservative gaffes are not a winning strategy.



Lyle: The Tories do need to be careful to avoid adding fuel to the "scary" fire. Coverage of "mean-spirited" tactics would be good to avoid. They should probably shift from negative ads that look negative to negative ads that feel balanced, like the Mike Harris 1995 T-Bar ads.

They also need to tell Canadians what they would do with a majority. To be fair, they have been trying, but the "gaffe watch" coverage has been getting in the way. As well, the current Tory approach has been the traditional gainsburger approach where they have a series of one-off announcements but no clear theme holding them together.

It wouldn't hurt to release and promote a clear-cut plan or agenda that is branded to communicate the benefits or to identify the winners. Something like Keeping More Money in Your Pocket or Giving the Middle Class a Break.







Caplan: More from the Tory war room hawk:

used. Pretty risque for the time, I'll tell ya.

"I still remember Dief the Chief chortling that the only poll he believed in was the one dogs

"We've gotta put the entire War Room to work to make sure no one believes today's results. This is the perfect job for Doug Finley, The Boss' alter ego who runs the party and the campaign. He'll say and do anything at all if it works - The Boss loves this guy. He'll certainly want to un-suspend Ryan Sparrow and promote the Puffin Poop flack. He can remind the boys on the bus (girls too? There are girl reporters?) of the many times the campaign has screwed up this week and confidently predict that there's more of the same in store. He can promise that new polls will show that The Boss frightened off about half the country and that Lizzie May is now topping the polls.

"Then we can go back to praying we can sneak a majority when no one's looking - Job No. 1!"

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