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Parties calculate strategy to appeal to the widest range of potential supporters

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Campaign strategists in each camp spend countless hours trying to devise just the right phrase or image to motivate their base

Fear, hope or apathy – what drives people to make the trek to the election polls, and what persuades them to just stay home?

These are the calculations that can make or break elections. The campaign strategists in each camp spend countless hours trying to devise just the right phrase or image to motivate their base – and to discourage the other side.

From the start, the B.C. Liberals adopted fear. Say what you like about their tactics, they have been consistent on this.

Behind Liberal Leader Christy Clark's "we say yes" message is an unrelenting negative commentary: The NDP would say "no" to jobs, to resource development, to prosperity. And when the New Democrats' Adrian Dix disputes her assertions, she attacks him and his ethics.

Mr. Dix went into the campaign promising to run a campaign of hope. It wasn't enough to win a mandate based on just getting rid of the Liberals, he said. He wanted to offer an antidote to apathy. He observed that in the past provincial election campaign, half of eligible voters opted to give up their power to choose their government. That means there are about 1.5 million votes just sitting out there, up for grabs, if people could just get excited about something.

But he knew it wouldn't be easy to stay positive - in fact it was risky. "Just running a campaign trashing the Liberals is not courageous," Mr. Dix said in a mid-campaign interview. And, in this final week of the campaign, as the race seemed to tighten up, the New Democrats have fallen back on more traditional attacks, reminding voters why so many were angry about the harmonized sales tax, about the priorities that put a half-billion-dollar stadium roof ahead of, say, anti-poverty measures.

NDP strategist Marcella Munro said the shift is needed to counter what appears to be an effective Liberal campaign. "It's a very simplistic message, based on fear, but [Ms. Clark] has been extremely disciplined," Ms. Munro said. It has helped drive some of the Liberals' flock back home, but the New Democrats worry that swing voters are also getting driven away from their camp.

"There is a dark underside to their fear-driven campaign," she said. "They are not just trying to rebuild their

coalition, but it's a suppression manoeuvre, to try to scare people who want to vote NDP. ... As we head into the final stretch, we have to go back to our 'change' message. We hope that's a big motivator."

In an increasingly negative campaign, there is a danger that both parties will create a climate that makes voters just stay home.

After the 2009 provincial election, when British Columbia hit a new low in voter turnout, Elections BC conducted polls about what makes people vote, or not.

What they found: The majority of non-voters seem to "believe that their vote does not matter and do not think the election directly affects them." In a word, apathy.

But give voters a message of hope, and funny things can happen: In last November's federal by-election in Victoria, it was the upbeat Green party that tripled its share of the vote, and came very close to seizing an NDP stronghold.

Elections BC also polled those who did vote. The top reason for voting? The issues. They wanted a say in who manages health care, the economy, the environment. And here is one of the difficulties with B.C. politics – the parties will try to say otherwise, but really there isn't a huge chasm between the ballot choices.

"In terms of the policy debate, it is inches instead of yards," observed pollster and political strategist Greg Lyle, a former B.C. Liberal campaign manager. "If you read the two platforms, you would not see a huge difference in the language." There is largely consensus on big issues; liquefied natural gas is good, deficits are not.

Mr. Lyle figures the NDP has deliberately kept the tone soothing to protect the double-digit lead they had in the polls going into the campaign. "I think they were trying to bore the electorate. The best way for nothing to change is for no one to pay attention."

Which is why the Liberals had to go negative, he argued. They needed to get voters' riled up. "You go negative because it is easy to make someone fearful or angry."

Tuesday night we'll find out who won. But we can also learn from voter turnout, up or down, which emotion ruled – fear, hope or apathy.

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