

Fragmented electorate gives edge to parties who take more extreme positions

It's a fractured electorate where the Conservatives benefit from some issues, the NDP benefit from most issues and the Liberals don't really benefit from any issue.



The Hill Times photographs by Andrew Meade. Smile, it's show time: Prime Minister Stephen Harper, NDP Leader Tom Mulcair, Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau, and Green Party Leader Elizabeth May, pictured Aug. 6 in Toronto at the first televised leaders' debate.

By GREG LYLE | Aug. 10, 2015

Is this election a good time to talk about issues? Not if you're a Liberal.

In Innovative's online survey of 2,833 Canadians, we looked at issues three ways:

What issues matter the most to voters?

Which parties do they perceive as best on which issues?

Are people who care more about an issue different from other voters and how might that impact the campaign?

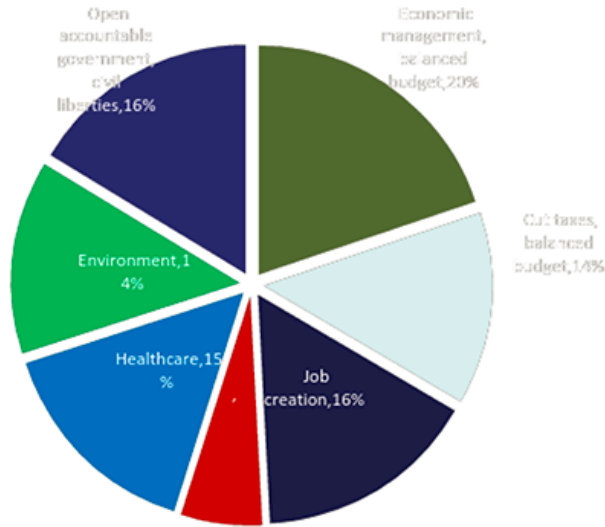
We found a fractured electorate where the Conservatives benefit from some issues, the NDP benefit from most issues and the Liberals don't really benefit from any issue.

The Public is Fragmented When It Comes to Priority Issues

Canadians are fragmented when it comes to issues. We asked respondents to pick their three most important issues from a list of 15 issues we found in party press releases earlier this year. We then grouped respondents who shared similar priorities. We found seven distinct clusters of concern with no single cluster larger than 20 per cent.

Issue Publics

Q Cluster by Issue- Those who consider an issue their "top priority"



It isn't always like that. Some will remember the 1988 Free Trade campaign. Other campaigns have focused on jobs or social programs. But there is little common ground at the start of this campaign, although with 10 weeks to go, a defining moment may yet emerge.

Decided Vote by Issue Public: CPCs favored for economy, terrorism; NDP favored for health, environment, accountability

Q Decided Vote by Issue Public

Decided Vote	Economic management, balanced budget	Cut taxes, balanced budget	Job creation	Terrorism	Healthcare	Environment	Open accountable government, civil liberties
CPC	48%	45%	28%	50%	20%	10%	15%
Liberal	23%	25%	30%	19%	31%	21%	29%
NDP	21%	20%	35%	20%	39%	49%	46%
Bloc	4%	5%	4%	8%	5%	6%	3%
Green	4%	5%	3%	2%	4%	14%	6%
Other	1%	0%	0%	1%	1%	1%	2%



Three of the clusters with a total of 40 per cent of the electorate seem to favour the Conservatives. The Conservatives win 45 per cent of the vote of respondents in the fiscal cluster that focused on balanced budgets and cutting taxes. They win 48 per cent of the vote among people in the good management group who are concerned about economic stability and balanced budgets. And the Conservatives win 50 per cent of the votes of people focused on terrorism.

The NDP win big in two clusters with 30 per cent of the electorate. Among people concerned about government accountability and civil liberties the NDP wins 46 per cent support. Almost half (49 per cent) of the people whose key concern is the environment vote NDP.

The NDP wins by a smaller amount in two other clusters with another 31 per cent of voters. In the health-care cluster, the NDP have 39 per cent of the vote, the Liberals 30 per cent and the CPC just 20 per cent. The jobs cluster is more competitive with 35 per cent NDP, 30 per cent Liberal and 25 per cent CPC.

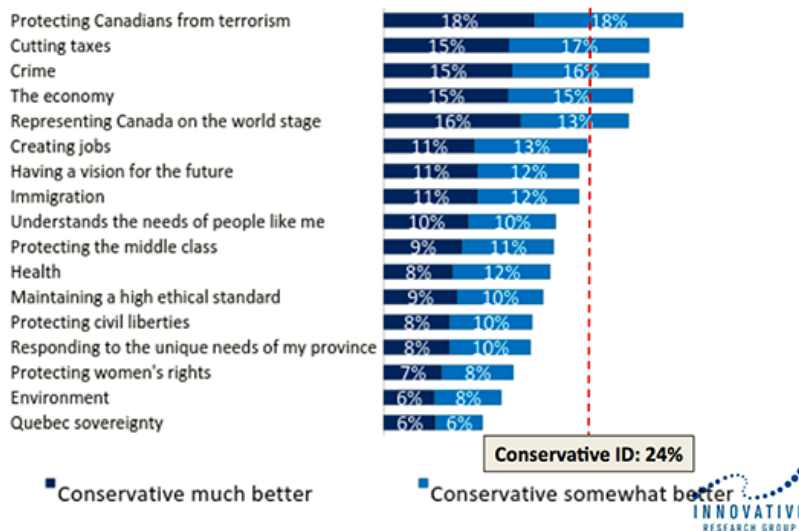
Party Brands

Another way to look at issues is through party brands. Parties are not seen as equally strong on all issues. Parties want voters to focus on the issues where their party is seen as stronger than the others.

To assess where the parties stand, we asked respondents to choose which party they feel is best on a series of issues and then benchmarked those ratings against Party Identification (Party ID), the political world’s measure of “brand loyalty.” Generally, you would assume someone who is a party loyalist will also say their party is best on a given issue. When a party gets a rating above their Party ID measure, they have an issue that can attract the unaligned and supporters from other parties. Ratings below their Party ID means not even their own base supporters like them on that issue.

Conservatives seen as best party on terrorism, tax cuts, crime, economy and representing Canada abroad

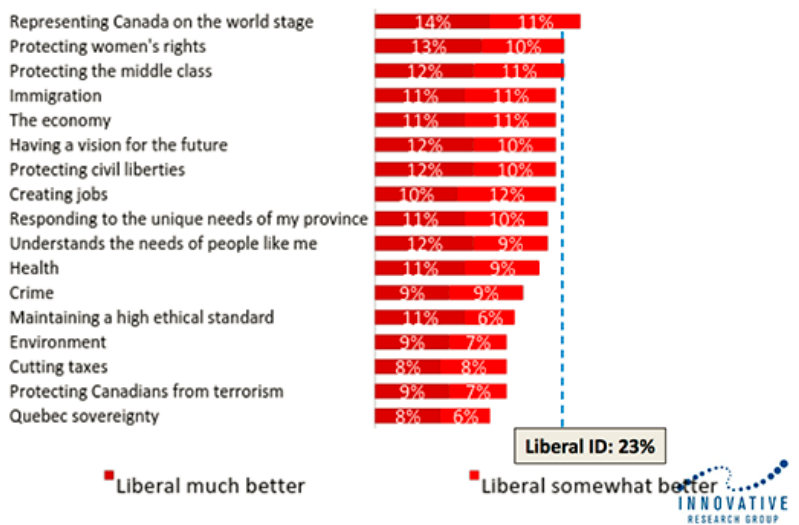
Q Now we are going to provide you with a list of issues. For each of these issues, please tell me which party you think would do a much better job or a somewhat better job of dealing with that issue or if you think none of the parties would do a good job on that issue. How about...? **Conservatives**



Looking at the Conservatives, it comes as little surprise to see they do best on protecting Canadians from terrorism, cutting taxes, crime and the economy. Some readers may be surprised to learn that representing Canada on the world stage is also a relative Conservative strength. Tories will want to avoid the environment, civil liberties and women’s rights as well as responding to the unique needs of my province. They are also lower than average on health, ethics and measures of empathy.

Liberals strongest on world stage, women’s rights and middle class, underperforming on most measures

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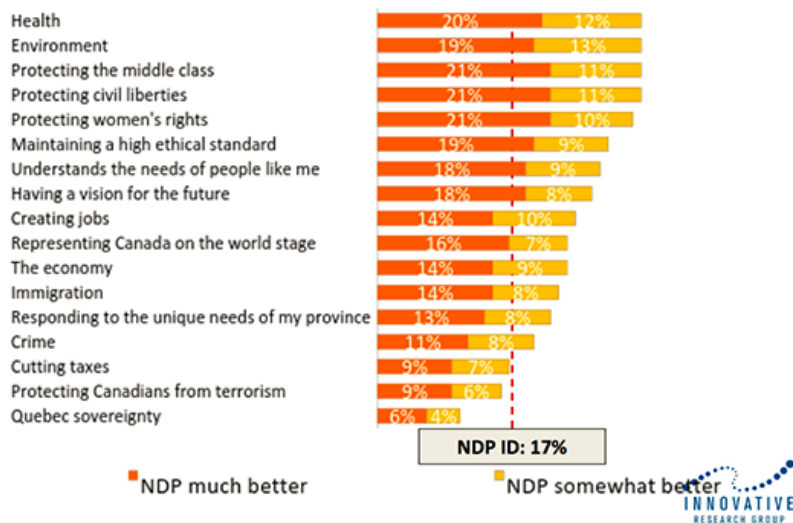
While the Liberals enjoy a relatively high level of Party ID, they exceed their party ID on only one issue—representing Canada in the world. A

number of issues are relatively close to their level of Party ID including measures of vision and empathy, women’s rights and civil liberties, the economy and creating jobs and immigration. Liberals are relative weak on some issues you might expect—terrorism, crime and taxes—and also on some issues that might surprise you—ethics and the environment.

NDP seen as strongest as health, environment, middle class, civil liberties; outperforming ID on every issue

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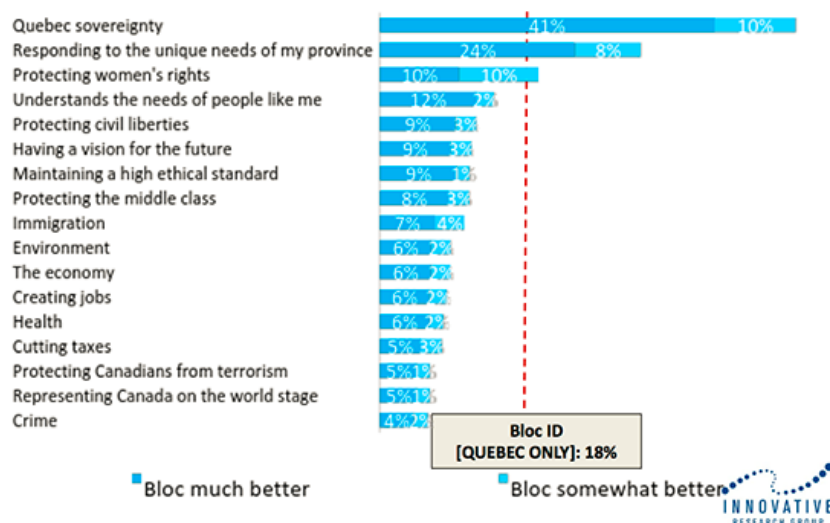
Q Now we are going to provide you with a list of issues. For each of these issues, please tell me which party you think would do a much better job or a somewhat better job of dealing with that issue or if you think none of the parties would do a good job on that issue. How about...? **New Democratic Party**



The NDP appear poised for a re-aligning election that could permanently expand their base of party loyalists. In 14 out of 17 issues tested, the NDP score above and often well above their Party ID score. If people are talking about health, the environment, protecting the middle class, protecting civil liberties, or protecting women’s rights, they are much more likely to prefer the NDP than average. Other issues where the NDP outperform at a more modest level include measures of empathy and vision, jobs and the economy, and representing Canada in the world. In other words, almost every news story primes an issue that benefits the NDP.

Bloc performing better on sovereignty, responding to unique needs of province, women’s rights

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The Bloc Québécois has only three strengths—Quebec sovereignty, responding to the needs of my province and protecting women’s rights. The NDP has stolen the Bloc’s core supporters on most issues. To gain ground, the Bloc needs to find issues to wedge the NDP on selling out Quebec interests in order to gain in other parts of the country.

Who Wins Among Those Who Care?

There is yet a third way to look at issues, a way that explains the benefits of wedge politics.

What people think about an issue only really matters to their vote if they really care about that issue. It is good to know which party the average voter refers to on an issue, but what really matters is which party is preferred by the voters who care the most about an issue.

It is also important to note that those who really care about an issue can and usually do differ significantly from the values of the average voter. In this election, that often gives the CPC or the NDP an edge over the Liberals.

On issues such as economic stability, fiscal and tax issues as well as crime and terrorism, people who care about the issues are more right wing than the average voters. For instance, people who care the most about stable economic management are much more likely to say government should focus on creating opportunity rather than redistributing wealth. As a result, the CPC is seen as better on the economy by 42 per cent of those who care the most about the issue compared to 30 per cent on average.

On issues such as health, the environment, or civil liberties, people who care more about those issues tend to be more left wing than the average voters. For example, people who are most concerned about civil liberties are much more likely to choose civil liberties as a priority over security than average voters. So while the NDP are seen as better at protecting civil liberties by 33 per cent of the overall sample, they are seen as best by 48 per cent who care the most about the issue.

So if the Tories do better with those engaged in “right-wing” issues and the NDP do better with those who care about “progressive” issues, are there any issues that favour the Liberals? If there are, we have not found them. Generally, the Liberals do the same or worse with issues compared to their overall scores.

The bottom line is our analysis shows the Liberals face a daunting challenge. Few people are true moderates. Most people feel strongly about some issues and those who feel strongly tend to have more extreme views than the average Canadian. This provides both the NDP and Conservatives with a clear constellation of issues where they can rally specific groups of people with polarized policy issues but leaves the Liberals squeezed out.

Greg Lyle is the founder and president of Innovative Research Group Inc., a national public opinion research firm with offices in Vancouver and Toronto. Mr. Lyle began his career in politics more than 30 years ago and has participated in dozens of campaigns across Canada for all three levels of government. Innovative Research has correctly called several recent challenging campaigns, including the 2012 Alberta provincial election and the 2014 Ontario provincial election.

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