

Leadership Critical in Early Voter Decisions

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Election news reports are filled with stories of leaders and polls. But how important are leaders as people decide which party to vote for? And how important are perceptions of who is likely to win as voters make up their minds? This week we focus on the elements of voter decisions that are most likely to change – leadership images and perceptions of likely election outcomes.

Leadership perceptions in the early stages

You don't have to be liked to win an election, but it doesn't hurt. As election 2015 kicks off, Thomas Mulcair

is the best liked leader with 45% favourables, Justin Trudeau is at 37%, and Stephen Harper has 30%. Gilles Duceppe is at 32% in Quebec.

What is really important for Mulcair is who likes him. Looking again at our online baseline survey of 2,833 Canadians, we find all the leaders are the best liked by their own partisans but Mulcair has the only strongly favourable image among unaligned voters and is the only leader who also has a strongly positive image among other partisans (38% more favourables than unfavourables among Liberals and 34% more among Bloc voters).

Net Leader Impression by Party ID

Net favourability is the % who are favourable minus the % who are unfavourable.

	Conservative	Liberal	NDP	Bloc	Unaligned	Green/Other
Stephen Harper	+64%	-58%	-68%	-67%	-31%	-47%
Justin Trudeau	-52%	+67%	+4%	-44%	-1%	-6%
Thomas Mulcair	-19%	+38%	+76%	+34%	+16%	+28%
Gilles Duceppe	-35%	-55%	-4%	+82%	-7%	+8%
Elizabeth May	-33%	+9%	+20%	+2%	+1%	+37%



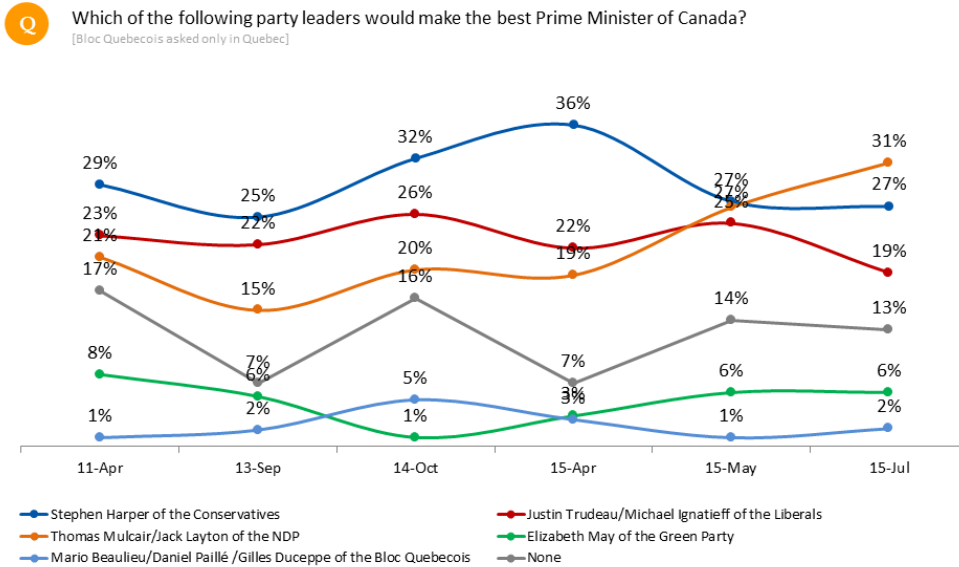
At 31%, Mulcair also has pulled ahead of Stephen Harper (27%) as Best Prime Minister. Justin Trudeau trails at 19%

When we look at underlying dimensions of leadership, we see further signs of Mulcair strength. While Harper has a narrow 4 point lead over Mulcair on “strong

leadership”, Mulcair and Harper are virtually tied on “competent”. Trudeau trails badly on these measures.

On empathy, Mulcair has a 9-point lead over Trudeau on “will stand up for the middle class” and a 7-point lead on “cares about people like me”. Only on “stands for what I believe” do Trudeau and Harper rival Mulcair.

Best Prime Minister: Mulcair takes the lead

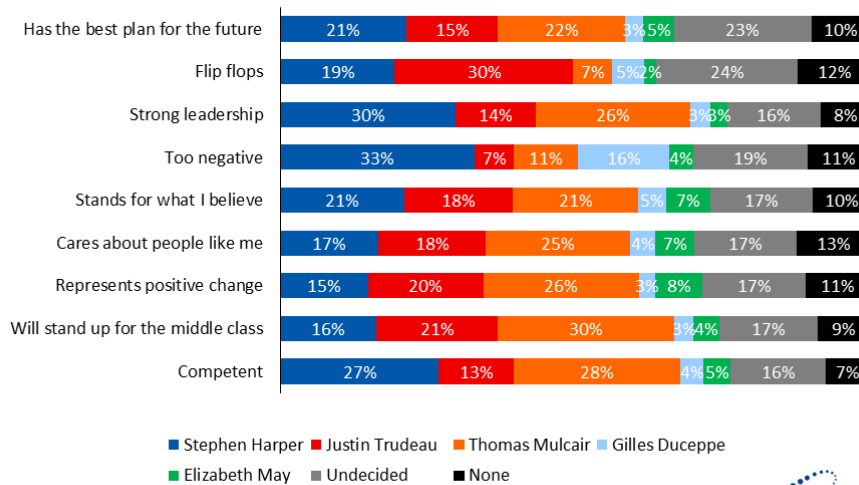


Note: 'Refused' not shown. Duceppe at 8% in QC ONLY.



Leader Qualities: Mulcair leads on best for middle class

Q Now we would like to read you a list of different words or phrases that describe some political leaders. For each word or phrase, please indicate who it BEST describes... **[ALL CANADA]**



When it comes to “represents positive change”, Mulcair has a 6 point lead over Trudeau.

The one area where Mulcair trails is on negatives. Trudeau holds a strong lead on “flip flops” and Harper holds a strong lead on “too negative”.

Mulcair’s strength on leadership numbers is turning directly into votes. Mulcair’s positives are the strongest driver of NDP voting, Trudeau’s positive are the strongest driver of Liberal voting and Harper’s is the second most powerful driver of Conservative voting. Protecting and building leader images is the single most important short term opportunity for every parties’ war room.

Strategic Voting and Bandwagon Effects

One key theme in public debate in the lead up to the election is concern over vote splitting in the centre left and the need for strategic voting to defeat the Harper government. Some observers are skeptical over the

ability of voters to make the calculations necessary to effectively cast a strategic vote.

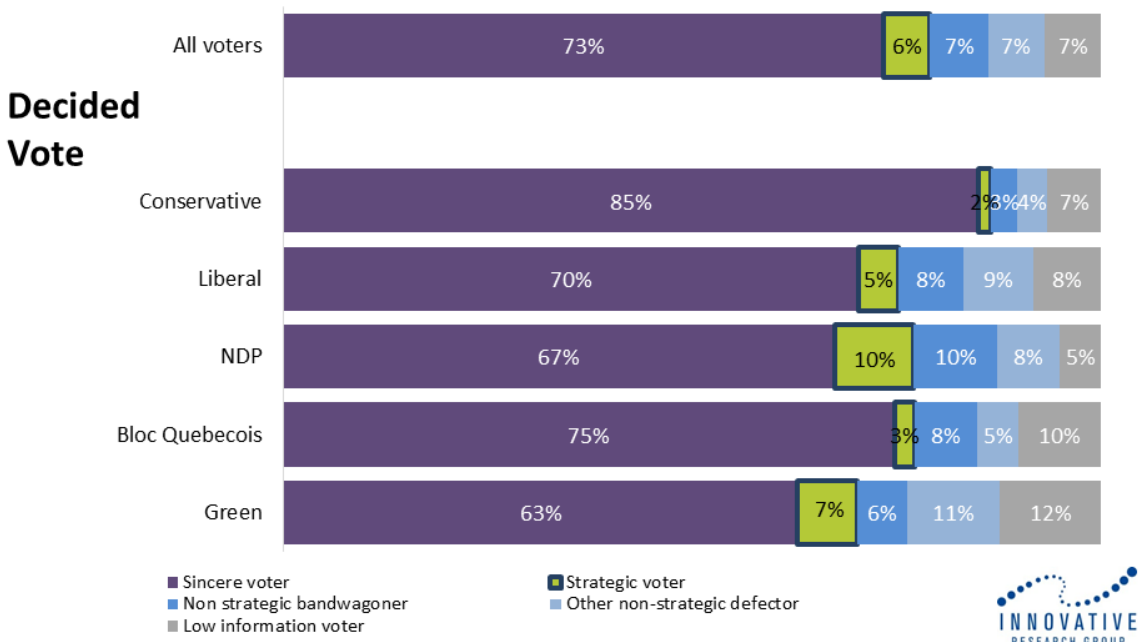
As it turns out, while there is a partisan bias in who we expect to win locally, differences in respondents’ expectations of who is likely to win in their riding do reflect the results of the last election in those ridings. So there is a reasonable degree of accuracy in perceptions.

For strategic voting to occur, you need to have a first preference and a second preference among the parties and you need to have a view of who is likely to win. Strategic voting can only occur if you believe the party you prefer is unlikely to win in your riding and your second choice is seen as more likely to win than your first choice.

We find 18% of the electorate has the opportunity to vote strategically and that 5% actually do so. While the movement of one-in-twenty voters is not a huge effect nationally, it can be a significant effect locally in close riding races.

Who benefits? The NDP benefits the most from both strategic and bandwagon voting

Incidence of strategic voting based on the vote choice the voter made.



Currently, the NDP benefit the most from strategic voting. One-in-ten current NDP voters actually prefer another party but are voting NDP because they perceive the NDP have a better chance of winning.

Bandwagon voters are voters who vote for the party they perceive as most likely to win rather than their preferred party even though there is no strategic incentive for them to do so. Once again, the NDP benefit the most with another one-in-ten current NDP voters actually preferring another party but voting NDP because they perceive the NDP are the most likely to win. The Liberals have a similar number (8%) of bandwagon voters.

Pulling It All Together

What are the current prospects for the various parties as we look across all the factors that could influence the voters? In previous columns we looked at the impact of things that are relatively stable such as past election results, time for a change and party ID and things that are more likely to change such as issue importance and party image. How does it all fit together?

The Bloc retains a strong brand image as the party best able to defend Quebec's interest. However, they are weak on almost every other set of measures. To make their brand strength relevant, the Bloc need an issue to emerge the way culture did in the 2008 election.

The Liberals continue to have a strong base of loyalists that can be rallied. They remain strongly competitive in the seats in which they did well during the last campaign, but they are not gaining in swing seats. While the Liberals enjoy a brand loyalty advantage over the NDP, the Liberals currently have the greatest number of defectors of the major parties. The Liberals pick up

many more strategic and bandwagon voters than the CPC, but considerably less than the NDP. The Liberals are challenged by a limited set of issues where they are competitive with the NDP and the CPC as well as the lack of comparative advantages in leadership numbers.

The Conservatives benefit from history. They are looking strong in the 102 seats they won by wide margins in 2011 and while they are under threat from a strong NDP surge, the Conservatives are competitive in more than enough seats to win another majority. The "Time for A Change Tory" segment offers the Tories room to grow their vote anchored by strong interest in more "Conservative" issues, a strong base of loyalists and Harper's image for strength and competence. They must manage weakness on compassion and "progress" issues to make it past 170 seats.

The NDP clearly have momentum. They retain a solid hold on the seats they won in the last election and are gaining in key groups of seats. Focusing on any issue pulls up their vote and focus on "progressive" issues gives them a significant advantage. Mulcair's net favourables are equal to Jack Layton's in the last campaign and he is Harper's peer on competence while owning a strong advantage on empathy and compassion. The NDP are the greatest beneficiaries of strategic and bandwagon voting. The NDP must protect Mulcair's image and keep the campaign focus away from "conservative" issues where the CPC benefit more than the NDP. They must also guard against the partisan defectors who currently support them drifting back to their partisan homes.

A lot can change in 9 weeks, but the early dynamic favours the CPC and the NDP over the Liberals and the Bloc.

About this study

- These are the findings of an Innovative Research Group (INNOVATIVE) poll conducted from July 24th to July 30th, 2015.
- This online survey of 2,833 Canadians was primarily conducted on INNOVATIVE's Canada 20/20 national panel. Some additional sample was also recruited through leading online sample provider SSI.
- The Canada 20/20 Panel is recruited from a wide variety of sources to reflect the age, gender, region and language characteristics of the country as a whole. Each survey is administered to a series of randomly selected samples from the panel.
- The sample is then weighted to ensure that the overall sample's composition reflects that of the actual Canadian population according to Census data and also by party identification for the major parties as estimated in Innovative's telephone research from the last two months.
- Because the sample included oversamples in some smaller provinces, the total weighted sample size was reduced to 2,000.
- INNOVATIVE provides each panellist with a unique URL via an email invitation so that only invited panel members are able to complete the survey and panel members can only complete a particular survey once.
- Since the online survey was not a random probability based sample, a margin of error could not be calculated. The Marketing Research and Intelligence Association prohibits statements about margins of sampling error or population estimates with regard to most online panels.