

How Liberal Gains in the Polls Could Hand Thomas Mulcair Victory

Liberals have made the biggest gains in the polls since the 2011 election, but so far it is the NDP who are poised to win more seats.

Looking at the horserace numbers, it is clear the Conservatives have been the big losers dropping from 40% to 29% while the Liberals have made the biggest gains rising from 19% to 27%. The NDP are also up slightly rising from 31% to 33%, but the differences is not beyond a typical poll's margin of error.

So if the Liberals are up the most in the polls, why do we think it will be the NDP who win more seats?

It comes down to the rules. We count seats, not votes. So it doesn't just matter how many votes you have, it matters where you have those votes.

The Conservatives and the NDP ended the last election with a wide lead over the Liberals when it comes to seats. Looking at 2011 votes on 2015 boundaries, the Liberals would win just 36 of 338 seats. The Liberals must gain 144 seats to make majority. The NDP need to gain 61 seats for majority. The Conservatives can lose 28 seats and still win a majority.

To help assess what this poll means to the seat count, we have grouped ridings together based on the last election's outcome to assess the potential impact of these opinion changes on which party wins the most seats. While models take average results and apply them mathematically, we are taking advantage of our large sample to look at the actual opinions of people that live in these ridings.

When we look at ridings, we know there are 102 seats that the Conservative party won by 25% or more in the last election. Looking at the final results of our online poll of 3,631 Canadians, the Liberals have gained 16 points in the rural Conservative "blow out" seats and they are up 9 points in the urban and suburban ridings. But those gains have only dented the Conservative leads. The Conservatives still lead the Liberals by 13 percentage points in the rural races and by 19 points in the suburban and urban "blow out" ridings. The NDP trail by 17 points in the rural districts and 18 in the urban and suburban "blow outs". Vote splits should allow the Conservatives to win the vast majority of those seats. If the Liberals keep gaining, that could change, but in the brutal world of our First Past the Vote system, those Liberal gains are just not big enough to turn into seats.

How are the NDP doing in their "blow out" seats (the 22 ridings they won by 25% or more)? Like the Conservatives they are also losing ground to the Liberals. The NDP beat the Liberals 56% to 21% in those seats in 2011. Now they still lead, but the NDP have dropped to 42% (in both the initial benchmark and the tracking study) while the Liberals are up to 26%. The NDP will likely hold most if not all of these seats today so, once again the Liberal are gaining in areas where their increased support cannot turn into seats.

How about strong seats, ridings the Conservatives or NDP won by 15% to 25% of the votes?

On average, the Conservatives won their 33 "strong win" seats with 50% of the vote. That has dropped in our most recent poll to 31%, down from 35% at the start of the campaign. The Liberals and NDP are both polling at 30% in those strong Conservative ridings which means the Conservatives would likely lose two thirds of those seats if the election was today. Losing 20 or so of those ridings is a large chunk of the Conservatives 28 seat cushion, but the Liberals and NDP are poised to share the spoils equally. It

is interesting to note the Liberals had momentum in these seats in August, gaining 9 points in four weeks so they could improve their relative position in the days to come. But for now these seats will likely help the NDP as much as the Liberals.

Once again, the NDP offer a faint echo of the Conservatives in their 42 strong seats. They won these seats in 2011 with 48% of the vote but have dropped slightly to 43%. The Liberals have grown from 13% to 20%. The Conservatives are stable at 18%. So while the Liberals are up, the NDP lead seems large enough to hold all of these seats barring unusual local circumstances. Rising Liberal support does not lead to seats here.

One particularly interesting group are ridings are the 21 seats where the Bloc was competitive in 2011. While the NDP won the bulk of those seats with 39% of the vote in 2011, the Bloc was in the game with 31% of the vote and won 4 of those seats. Now the NDP is up 5 points to 44% while the Bloc has dropped 11 points to 20%. The NDP should easily hold what they have and maybe even win the last 4 Bloc seats. Again, no potential for Liberal wins.

A key battleground in this race are the 33 seats that were a tight NDP-CPC race. On average the Conservatives held 43% of the vote, the NDP 41% and the Liberals 9%. That two point lead gave the CPC 19 ridings to the NDP's 14. The Liberals are up 17 points to 26% in our latest poll. That has come almost entirely from the Conservatives who dropped 15 points to 28%. The NDP is also down a marginal 3 points to 38%, but that still leaves them 10 points ahead of the CPC and 12 points ahead of the Liberals, well positioned to win a significant number of the 19 CPC seats in this group. This is terribly frustrating for Liberals who gain 12 points in support but not likely any new seats. In fact, these ridings will likely leave the NDP even further ahead.

Before we move to the races that were competitive for the Liberals in the last election, let's recap. We see the Liberals gaining in the Conservative and NDP "blow out" seats where their gains are not enough to win seats. Same again in the NDP "strong" seats, Liberals support is up, but not enough to turn seats. In Conservative "strong" seats, the Liberals are up enough to potentially win seats, but the NDP are even with them and poised to win as many seats as the Liberals. On top of that, the NDP appear likely to pull in the last of the remaining Bloc seats. So the shifts in the 253 seats we have looked at so far deliver perhaps 10 to 15 seats to the Liberals and a few more than that to the NDP. But what about the 83 races where the Liberals were competitive last time? Surely an overall increase of 12% in the polls can deliver more than the 36 seats they would have won last time?

There are 45 seats where the Liberals were in either two way races with the Conservatives or where they won by large margins. Yet while they have been gaining votes in most other ridings, the Liberals are actually down 6 points to 33% in these seats. The Conservatives have also dropped from 35% to 27%. The beneficiaries have been the NDP which has risen from 21% to 32%. Similar to the former Conservative "strong" seats, this group is now competitive for all three parties. The Liberals may win some of the 22 Conservative ridings, but the NDP may also win some as well. Indeed, the NDP may win some of the 23 Liberal seats in this group. So in this group we see the Conservatives losing seats, the NDP gaining seats while the Liberals will be lucky to balance off gains from the Conservatives with losses to the NDP.

Our final group of seats are the 38 seats that were three-way races primarily between the NDP, Liberals and Conservatives. This is the one group that is virtually unchanged from 2015 – the Conservatives were

at 32% and are now at 30%, the Liberals were at 35% and are now at 33% while the NDP were at 28% and are now at 32%. Directionally promising for the NDP but not statistically significant. No gains for the Liberals here.

Looking across the eight types of riding level races, we see the Liberal vote is growing in seats where they were so far behind their gains are generally not big enough to turn into seats. In some cases, Liberal gains at Conservatives expense have been enough to let the NDP win seats they could not win on their own. The only type of race where the Liberal vote is down is in the group of seats that provided 23 of the 36 seats the Liberals would have won with 2011 results on 2015 ridings. Given some of the recent NDP successes against the Liberals in federal by-elections, we should probably not be so surprised by this. But it really adds insult to injury for a party that has increased its popular vote by 50% over the past four years to see potential losses from the seats they won in last election.

The election is far from over. Six weeks gives the Liberals plenty of time to build on the gains in Tory and NDP seats to the point where those gains do turn into seats. Thomas Mulcair has the most lightly held reputation of the three leaders and if Tory or Liberal ads or the campaign's events drive his reputation down, the Liberals could reverse the NDP surge in those two-way Liberal-CPC races. And while we have been focused on the Liberals and NDP this week, my early columns on Time for Change Tories shows the Conservatives still have the potential to rebound and rebuild most of the coalition that gave them a majority once before. But as things stand now, the Conservatives would be grieving their losses and the Liberals would be celebrating moral victories while the NDP celebrate electoral victories.