

Yes Virginia, there is a strategic voter.

There has been much discussion in this campaign about whether or not there is such a thing as strategic voting. It is really not a debatable point. Strategic voting is a well-documented feature of election campaigns. One of the international experts in this phenomena is Canada's own André Blais of the L'Université de Montréal.

To vote strategically, voters must meet three conditions:

1. They need to have a clear sense of how likely each party is to win in their riding.
2. They need to have clear preferences between parties.
3. They need to perceive that their second choice has a better chance of winning locally than their first choices but they cannot see the local race as a two-horse race between their first and second preference.

From what we can see, the campaign started with 18% of the electorate who could potentially vote strategically (whether they did or not) and ended with 16% potential strategic voters. That is roughly 1 in 6 voters.

Most people vote for their first choice regardless of their party's chance of winning and that include most potential strategic voters. But at both the start and the end of the campaign, 5% of the electorate were actually voting strategically. Because the Conservatives don't have many second preferences, strategic voting doesn't matter much to them. But 8% of the New Democrat's vote and 7% of the Liberal's vote comes from strategic voters.

So one in twenty voters is voting strategically in this election with a similar benefit for both the Liberals and the NDP. While that sounds like NDP and Liberal strategic voters might cancel each other out, that is not the case. We find voter perceptions of the likely winners tend to follow past behaviour. So in ridings where the Liberals were ahead in 2011, strategic voting favours the Liberals and in ridings where the NDP were ahead, strategic voting tends to favour the NDP. But given the new trends in this election, we will look again after the election to see how accurate voter perceptions actually were.

Perceptions of winning among non-strategic voters also matters. We find 7% of the electorate started the campaign voting for the party they thought would win when it was not their first preference even when they had no strategic reason to do so. That has dropped at the end of the campaign to 4%.

The NDP were the big losers in that shift as they lost 2 percentage points from their vote as bandwagon voters abandoned them.