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Debunking Election Myths

Canadians let Tories move in but say, "Don't unpack"

Several myths gained popularity during Canada's recent federal election. But the polls tell the real story.

Myth 1 -- It was about corruption

Corruption was a big motivator for Québec voters, but it was the voters' passion for change that made the Liberals' behaviour seem scandalous. The Conservatives' strategy was to peel away soft Liberals by harping on government corruption. But leader Stephen Harper still moved only a scant 6.7 percentage points' worth of votes from the 2004 Liberal support despite a towering two thirds who told pollsters it was a time for a new government.

The Liberal strategy was to demonize Harper. However, Harper had become so non-threatening that 80 per cent said they wouldn't change their vote if they thought there was going to be a Conservative government.

Myth 2 -- It was about issues

The only issue the election could resolve was change. Issues were an afterthought for swing voters since in the main event--where Paul Martin fought Harper--the leaders were equals. Serious election issues require voters to feel there will be consequences from choosing one candidate over another. Martin and Harper, however, campaigned on different issues. They couldn't disagree about abortion because Harper refused to have a policy on it.

Both leaders agreed on tax cuts but disagreed on which taxes to cut, a distinction that was not dramatic enough for voters to change sides.

Leadership was the real issue The election was actually a referendum on leadership, not policy. As election day grew closer, the Conservatives' post-Christmas lead was plateauing--evidence probably of buyer's remorse as swing voters had second, third and even fourth thoughts about Harper as PM. Harper did not become the swing voters' favourite prime minister until they had made up their mind to vote Conservative to kick out the Liberals.

Myth 3 -- Canada moved to the right

Harper moved to the centre. While Jack Layton was trying to show how different his party was from the Liberals, Harper showed how much the Conservatives and Liberals are alike.

Each party had a child care plan, though Harper's would give cash to parents while Martin's would build early childhood education centres -- Tie score.

Each had tax cuts (see above). Each backed government support for industry. Martin promised to keep the country in the Kyoto Accord while Harper promised a "made-in-Canada" policy to reduce greenhouse gases -- Tie score. Harper's moderation must have driven the Martin strategists wild.

Myth 4 -- The Conservative campaign was brilliant.

It was brilliantly executed, but really it was incredible luck that gave Harper a minority government. Just before Christmas, the RCMP announced an investigation of the finance minister, and the Liberals' support began drying up.

Harper got lucky again the day after Christmas when a gunman fired into a crowd in downtown Toronto, killing a teen-aged bystander. This local crime metastasized into national proportions overnight.

Crime is one issue the Conservatives owned. The shooting let Harper defend the Canadian family from drug lords and street gangs and blame Martin for every misdemeanor committed during the Liberals' long mandate. As an election wedge, law and order was more helpful to the Conservatives in the suburbs than in the cities, however.

In an April Gallup Canada survey, a majority of voters (53 per cent) said too little was being spent for national defence and the military.

Harper announced he would use troop buildups at domestic bases as job-creation schemes in the way Liberal governments in the last century dispersed federal offices to regions of chronic high unemployment.

Harper evaded abortion debates with good reason. Most Canadians (53 per cent) say abortion is morally acceptable; only 36 per cent say morally wrong (Gallup figures).?In the end, the message the public sent to the parties was, "Don't unpack."

Harper also effectively played some dog-whistle politics, with phrases only few of us hear.

Some 43 per cent in Canada say they went to church or other religious services in the past six months. While it's not as awesome as the two thirds in America who've been in the pews in that period, only a social conservative like Harper could make a pitch for voters' souls. For his bornagain followers, Harper ended his campaign speeches with "God bless Canada." (George Bush says "God bless America" after every speech - editor)

Martin suffered all the drawbacks of incumbents. He had a record to defend. Harper had none. The Liberals dredged up awkward musings and speeches from Harper's past. But the mood for change served as a kind of protective coating for Conservative leader.

Between early December and the week before the Jan. 23 election, the Strategic Counsel poll found that the share of the electorate who said it's time for a change grew from 55 per cent to 65 per cent.

Voter amnesia helped Harper distance himself from his initial call for Canada to join America's invasion of Iraq. Canadians are ambivalent about Iraq. Some 65 per cent oppose American and

British military involvement in Iraq (only 30 per cent favour it). Only 21 per cent believe it has made the world safer from terrorism. But a 54 per cent majority told a December Gallup survey that Iraq is better off than before the U.S. invasion. Since Harper wasn't promising to send troops there now, he neutralized the issue enough to pull anti-war votes from Martin.

The Liberals waited too long to define Harper. The polls showed the Conservative post-Christmas take-off stalled as election day drew nearer, proving that had the Liberals come after Harper earlier they would have made the election tighter.

Myth 5 -- The advertising moved the voters

While the NDP, Liberals, Conservatives and Québec's Bloc Québécois bought TV time generously, there is no evidence it mattered. Nationally 62 per cent said they had seen Conservative ads and 68 per cent had

seen Liberal ads. Only 28 per cent recalled NDP ads (in a January 15-17 Strategic Counsel poll).

Among eligible voters who had seen any ads, 12 per cent said it made them more likely to vote Liberal. Among Conservative ad viewers, 22 per cent said it made them more likely to vote Conservative. Among those seeing NDP ads, 17 per cent said the ads made them more likely to vote for Layton.

The NDP gained nearly two points in voter support over its 2004 election support and gained 10 more seats. But a more significant fact for the party is that the NDP has lost 15 straight elections since it was born in 1962. It won more votes and seats and a higher share of the vote in 1988.

In an election that swept out a government in an undertow of "time for a change," conditions couldn't have been better for Jack Layton.

More than ads and Layton's gung-ho personality, the NDP benefited from a revitalized Conservative Party that sucked votes from Liberals and helped the NDP win more seats with only modest gains in votes.

While the NDP gained nearly 475,000 more votes than in the last election, the Conservatives were up nearly 1.4 million.

Probably the Liberals will want to pick Martin's successor soon, to rejuvenate the party. The Conservatives may want a snap election before the new Liberal leader connects with the voters. The new parliament might be as unstable as the 2004-05 House of Commons, meaning another election next year.

The party leaders all crafted words to get messages out to the voters. But the big message in this election was the message the public was sending the parties, which is, "Don't unpack."

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Vector Research (www.vectorresearch.com) has conducted phone, mail and on-line polls and focus groups for unions and private sector clients in Canada and the US for more than 20 years.