Ballot Question 2015: Change Trumps Stability

Geoff Norquay

One of the many political clichés that's a cliché for a reason is that campaigns matter. What we learned from the 2015 federal election campaign is that—ironically for the man who called it—long campaigns matter even more. This one was so revelatory of all the principals that, by Election Day, a result that was stunning on paper also had a sense of preordainment based entirely on what had unfolded in the previous 11 weeks. Longtime Tory strategist Geoff Norquay bestows praise and lays blame on the professionals responsible.

Creating the ballot question is the most important task of the party leader in a national election. The ballot question is each party leader's key differentiator from the others—the strategic phrase that summarizes the "big issue" of the election and frames the choice to be made by voters.

With a steady 70 per cent of Canadians wanting a different government, the ballot question in election 2015 was always going to be about change. The Conservatives had a defensive take on the question; essentially, "Stick with the experienced hand you can trust on the economy and national security, warts and all, because the alternatives are unproven, scary and expensive." Quite a mouthful! The Liberals and the NDP took a much simpler approach: "Time for a change; I can do it—pick me."

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The arc of election 2015 is easy enough to describe. In the first phase, from the start of the campaign to the Labour Day weekend, Tom Mulcair and the NDP looked like a good bet to win. In the second month, the three parties were in a dead heat within two to three percentage points of each other and the "lead" changing every other day. And then in the final three weeks, Justin Trudeau and the Liberals claimed the mantle of change and first slowly, then very quickly, pulled away with a smashing and impressive victory.

As the one party that had never formed a national government, the NDP decided they needed to lower the risk voters faced in choosing them, so they joined the Conservatives in making balanced budgets the touchstone of their economic plan and a key part of their ballot question. This positioning created a "progressive vacuum" among voters who believed in an activist role for government. It opened the door for the Liberals to jump over the NDP and move to the left, to abandon the economic orthodoxy of balanced budgets in favour of stimulative deficits to kick-start the economy.

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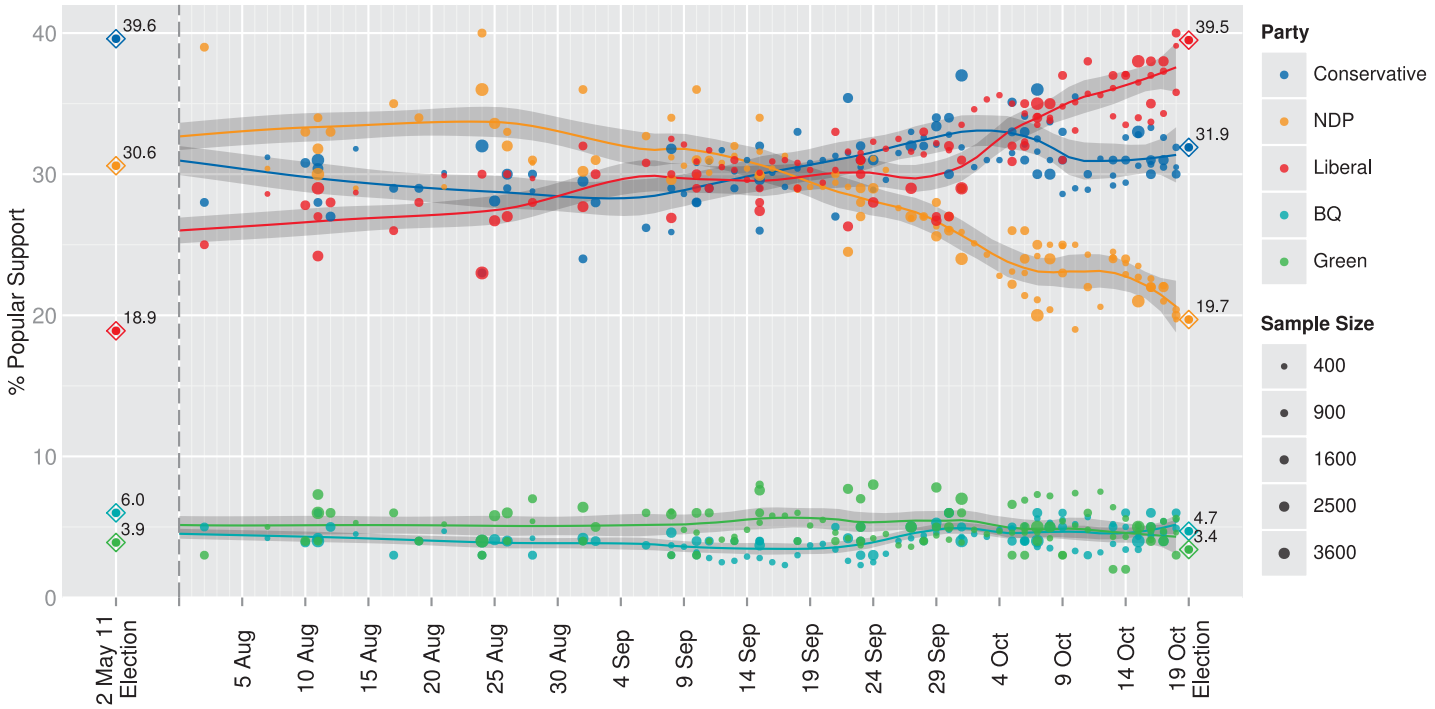
The initial positioning of the NDP sought to soften the image of its leader, and it proved to be a difficult start to the campaign. In both their TV ads and in his initial August debate performance, it was



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clear that his handlers had told Mulcair to keep "Angry Tom" in check and to smile more. Unfortunately, his campaign launch was stiff and uninspiring, and unlike even Stephen Harper's launch, he declined to take questions while Trudeau took them until they stopped coming.

The problem was that Mulcair's makeover misplaced both his passion and conviction. His smile looked far from natural, some thought "Happy Tom" was even "creepy." When the NDP began talking about the need for balanced budgets, they removed a key differentiator in relation to the Liberals, and when they piled costly promise on costly promise, the internal logic of their platform began to unravel. The NDP's campaign was joyless, devoid of hope and inspiration, and as absent of vision as the Conservatives'.

Clearly the emergence of the niqab as a campaign issue was the most decisive and damaging development for the NDP, and, for them, created a perfect storm. As the Conservatives ramped up the rhetoric, Mulcair responded with a principled and moderate position that was clearly offside with the vast majority of Quebecers, not to mention a significant portion of Canadians elsewhere.

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As a result, the party's support in its Quebec stronghold quickly began to shatter, opening the door to seat gains there by the Liberals, Conservatives and the Bloc. At the same time, the damage to the NDP's Quebec base told Ontarians that Mulcair simply wasn't going to make it, and the momentum shifted to Trudeau as the obvious champion of change. Then the echo effect took over, and Ontario's growing Liberal intentions in turn reinforced the NDP collapse in Quebec.

For Stephen Harper and the Conservatives, election 2015 was always going to be a big challenge. Any three-term prime minister seeking a fourth mandate is asking for a lot; no PM since Wilfrid Laurier in 1908 had pulled off that feat. When that government is led by a prime minister with a persona that is polarizing, partisan and seen by many as just plain mean, the odds become very difficult indeed.

The roots of the Conservative demise were put in place long before the dropping of the writ. The war with the national media, the constant playing to the Conservative "base," the abolition of the long-form census, the removal of health care benefits from failed refugee claimants, the denigration of caucus by the "kids in short pants," the insults to the chief justice of the Supreme

Court, the Duffy fiasco, the muzzling and bullying of federal scientists, the unrestrained partisanship, the Robocalls, and a remote and surly prime minister who refused on principle to communicate with the public except on his own terms—to name just a few—had all combined to reduce the possible Conservative vote to well under 40 per cent.

Despite all that, the Conservatives did actually begin the campaign with a shot at victory. It was by no means clear that Trudeau would perform as well as he ultimately did. As the campaign started, the Conservatives as well as many in the media expected that the Liberal leader might damage himself by off-hand comments or gaffes—as had happened so many times before.

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The Conservatives might also have scored better with a more visionary approach on several fronts. The economic and foreign trade successes of the last nine years were significant, but where was the bridge to the future? The PM could have invoked the need for a well-trained labour force for success in the global knowledge economy, the importance and value of immigration to the diversity of our citizenship and the promise of innovation to lead to future competitiveness and prosperity. But this was not to be; Harper had always had a strange aversion to speaking in visionary terms about anything, so his platform was static, defensive and uninspiring. Harper was focusing on the achievable, while Trudeau was focusing on the possible.

With their room for growth so limited, the Conservatives really had only one faint hope of keeping government—that neither of the two opposition parties would run away with the change vote, and that the resulting stalemate would enable the Tories to sneak up the middle and eke out a victory on the riding-by-riding splits. But then, they completely departed from their ballot question and blew themselves up.

When they deployed the niqab wedge, the Conservatives' strategic objective was limited—to knock the two opposition parties back by about 5 per cent. But in response to the wedge, the NDP began to slide in Quebec, and then kept sliding, and the Conservatives suddenly realized to their horror that they had been far too successful. And when they doubled down by announcing the Barbaric Cultural Practices snitch line, and began musing about banning the niqab in the federal public service, (yet another cure for which there was no known disease) the Conservatives' wedge circled back with a vengeance to put the final nail in their coffin.

The final few days of the campaign were painful to watch: a prime minister who had run a one-man campaign with no evidence of a team, plaintively pleading that the election was "not about me," when just about every Canadian voter had long since decided that's **exactly** what it was about. And the final weekend's Doug and Rob Ford rally in Toronto—demeaning, desperate, execrable, and hugely damaging, driving several hundred thousand potential votes away. Well done, campaign team: *coup de grace*...on yourselves.

When election campaigns fail, it is usually because the team in charge—in this case, the campaign manager and her key acolytes—have gone back one time too many to the formula that brought them to success many years before. Sadly for the Conservatives, the same clique who reduced the party's potential support to just above a third of Canadians were the true architects of this defeat.

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Theirs was a suspicious Canada and a Canada without dreams; they always preferred short-term tactics over a long-term vision. They never understood governing, so they saw no use for government. They ran a closed circle, they humiliated staff, they berated candidates, they pushed every reasonable argument far beyond its logical limit, they shut out others with a different view, and they crafted a campaign based much more on anger and fear than hope. And they weren't even competent enough to prevent guys peeing in cups from becoming candidates.

Within the Conservative Party, great will be the celebration at their well-deserved and permanent riddance.

In May of 2015, Justin Trudeau's Liberals were in third place in the national polls and his party was becoming restive. Other than the legalization of marijuana, they had for the most part kept the entire platform under wraps. But growing concerns about the lack

of policy proposals on the record finally pushed the Liberal brain-trust into beginning to lift the veil.

Trudeau promised to create a new and higher tax bracket for those earning more than $200,000 per year, committed to an alternate structure for child benefit payments, promised to close a number of tax loopholes, and released his policy packages on open government and the environment.

As a result, the concerns about policy receded, and the rest of the platform was comprehensive and well-received. Stealing a page from the Conservatives' 2006 election playbook, the Liberals used it to define both themselves and their leader substantively, and to put to rest any doubts about their readiness to govern.

As the election began in early August, there was huge pressure on Trudeau to perform, and even among his supporters there were serious doubts that he could or would. The highly-effective Conservative attack ad—the famous job interview ("Nice hair, though")—was beginning to register with Canadians. With expectations for Trudeau shaky at best, the first leaders' debate on August 6 loomed as a big test.

Prior to the debate, Conservative spokesperson Kory Teneycke tastefully observed, "I think that if he comes on stage with his pants on, he will probably exceed expectations." Well, the pants were not only firmly on, but in that debate, Trudeau also showed for the first time he had come to play with the big boys.

When Tom Mulcair repeatedly pressed him to declare his winning number for a Quebec referendum, Trudeau answered with confidence, "I'll give you a number. Nine. My number is nine. Nine Supreme Court justices said one vote is not enough to break up this country." In an important sense, that simple, smart retort was the author of much that followed. Trudeau didn't necessarily win the debate, but he started closing the expectations gap, and built on that strong beginning throughout the campaign.

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As noted earlier, Trudeau's repositioning of the Liberals in favour of deficits dedicated to spending on infrastructure and helping the middle class was pivotal in outflanking both the NDP and the Conservatives. A generation before, Paul Martin had bludgeoned Canadians into accepting that unrestrained deficits and debt were toxic to their future.

Now, Trudeau gambled that many voters had tired of austerity and micro-targeted tax breaks for favoured groups—and they were ready for the federal government to take on big nation-building projects for the benefit of all Canadians.

The attractiveness of this position to voters was not immediately appreciated; many observers thought it was at best a high-risk gambit, at worst, foolhardy in the extreme, but with the NDP now hugging Harper's balanced budget mantra, it became a critical point of demarcation—and departure—for the Liberals. It also became the Liberals' defining "take" on the position.

The Liberals got one other very important thing right. Beginning under interim leader Bob Rae, and continuing under campaign co-chair Katie Telford, they shook off the cobwebs and dragged their party apparatus and campaign infrastructure into the 21st century. They developed and matched the data analytics and volunteer mobilization programs the other two parties had long since pioneered. Their new media/online presence in the 2015 campaign was state-of-the-art.

In the final analysis, the "royal jelly" of the campaign was provided by Trudeau himself. Despite the odd gaffe—his strange comments on small business owners being in business to scam the system—he proved himself to be a natural and highly effective retail politician over the 78 days of the campaign. He grew in stature as a leader and as a communicator who obviously loved what he was doing. Clearly at ease with both individuals and large crowds, he fed off their energy and got even better, contrasting much better against the "two old stodgy guys" leading the other two parties. Most importantly, Trudeau decisively bested Mulcair on the strategic voting for change question and he won the election over Harper by convincing Canadians that they indeed wanted to try "sunny ways" for a change.

In the final analysis, the Liberal victory was all about having a flawless plan, both the time and the leader to implement it, and presenting the right answer to the ballot question. Change trumped stability. The special alchemy of a youthful and vigorous leader came together with a substantive and winning narrative to put another Trudeau in 24 Sussex. P

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