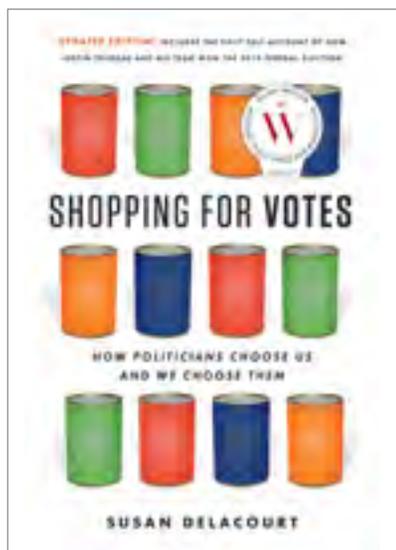


Spring List



It Wasn't the Hair: How Canadians Chose Trudeau

Susan Delacourt

Shopping for Votes: How Politicians Choose Us and We Choose Them, 2nd edition. Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2016.

Review by Geoff Norquay

Originally published in 2013, Susan Delacourt's *Shopping for Votes: How Politicians Choose Us and We Choose Them*, was a tour de force on how Canadian political parties have adopted the principles of advertising and marketing to change the relationship between themselves and voters.

Over the past 50 years, this process has gradually transformed voters into consumers and political parties into shoppers, in which the parties have come to know so much about voters, their views and preferences that they can create policies for niche sectors of the populace and market directly and effectively to them.

Stephen Harper and his advisers perfected and rode this approach to nine years of Conservative rule, but in October 2015, Canadians opted decisively for a different political brand, Justin Trudeau's, and Delacourt has added two new chapters on the 2015 federal election to explain how this happened.

That's the starting point for Delacourt's new material, which begins with the challenges faced by the Trudeau team as election 2015 began. These included a party firmly in third place and a leader being pilloried in the effective "just not ready" Tory job interview TV ad—the one that ended with the mocking line "nice hair, though."

As Delacourt describes, when Trudeau and his team took over the leadership of the Liberal Party in 2013, they found an institution that was virtually flying blind, with no voter data or analytical capability. In contrast, by election day in 2015, Liberal volunteers had knocked on more than 12 million doors across the country, delivering a gold mine of data to the party's Console system.

What happened in between was that campaign chair Katie Telford poked and prodded the party into developing both the data and the sophisticated analytics necessary to enable voter knowledge and social media to drive the leader's message delivery.

As the campaign began, the Liberals also quickly recognized that the traditional niche approach would not work for them, that they needed to cast their net much more widely. As Dan Arnold, the Liberal loyalist running their data and digital strategy told Delacourt, "...we needed a much broader message, something that would appeal to most Canadians. We also had a much larger pool of people who were open to the Liberals."

This latter point is key, because it was Stephen Harper's special gift to the Liberals. Harper had not only been elected through niche campaigning, but it had also guided the way he governed. First came the boutique tax credits, followed by a number of "dog whistle" initiatives on crime, national security, citizenship and the environment.

The problem was that this approach created a zero sum result: the more

Harper appealed to the niches that made up his base, the more he alienated large swaths of the electorate, which in turn created the significant appetite for change that was the principal backdrop for the 2015 election. This set the table for the Liberals to broaden their appeal and prospect in the much larger pool of voters willing to consider the Liberal alternative.

As Delacourt describes, it wasn't just the decision to choose broad casting over narrow casting that gave the Liberals their electoral success in 2015; it was also the huge success of their digital outreach program.

Their data and analytics ultimately enabled them to target broad societal groups with particular policy interests and predispositions: those who would benefit from urban transit investments, the middle class tax cut and the Canada Child Benefit. And their outreach on Facebook stretched ultimately to about 13 million voters—up to four million on a single day.

By far the most interesting insights in this expanded edition come from Delacourt's interview with Prime Minister Trudeau following the election. Noting that "No prime minister in 21st century politics can afford to be indifferent to the art of imagery and the science of data-driven campaigning," she argues that in a digital age, the potential to be both a consumer *and* a producer of images becomes possible.

Trudeau seized this challenge.

Armed with his unique appreciation of the importance of the data, he took Harper's studied image as prime minister—as the loner alone working late in a shadowed PMO and turning off the lights when he went home—and turned it into the sharp contrast of a leader eager to engage in the bright sunlight with new and risky ideas, building out instead of retreating inward, and ready to take Canadians on a path they were more than ready to take.

Nice hair though, indeed. **P**

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