



#elxn41: PROCESS TRUMPS POLICY & HOCKEY TRUMPS POLITICS...

As the 41st general election reaches its symbolic (if not actual) mid-point with the respective party leaders' tours gearing down to prepare for this week's televised leaders' debates (English on April 12th; French now on April 13th thanks to the Montreal Canadiens/Boston Bruins playoff opener), the moment is opportune for us to examine what has transpired to date and what to expect coming out of the debates as Campaign 2011 moves toward Election Day on May 2nd.

At TACTIX, we cannot recall a recent election campaign that seems as disconnected from voters as this one. Coupling a disconnect from an electorate already predisposed to disinterest with the Parties seemingly content to engage in drive-by war-room smears as opposed to sustained engagement on key policy differences makes Election 2011 an oddity. Sadly, process stories – ranging from questionable campaign volunteers in far flung ridings to poorly vetted candidates and staffers with checkered histories; from taunting tweets on Twitter to who can attend and who is barred from managed photo-opportunity rallies – have dominated most media coverage. In the vernacular of the media, the campaign narrative of [#elxn41](#) (the campaign's Twitter hash tag) is the process.

... BUT CANADIANS WANT POLICY, AND MORE OF IT

Amidst the barrage of process stories, the three major national parties ([Conservative](#), [Liberal](#) and [New Democrat](#)) have all released policy platforms which, frankly, have not received the attention and scrutiny they deserve. This is disconcerting, particularly when one considers that annual Government of Canada expenditures are approaching \$250 billion. While the media continues to report the top-line, horse-race polling numbers of who is up, who is down and who has that most coveted polling quality of all – momentum – they continue to negate the importance of policy to the voting intentions of Canadians. But is this what the electorate wants?

According to respected pollster Nik Nanos, the answer is a resounding “no!” In his national nightly tracking for CTV and the Globe & Mail, Mr. Nanos has found that Party positions on questions of policy are twice as important to Canadians as a vote driver. This is followed a distant second by impressions of the Party leader, 50.2% compared to 22.8%. And it is from the respective Party policy platforms that we can draw the most direct link to the messaging, the tactics and the campaign tour stops that lie at the heart of the electoral strategy each Party is executing.

CONSERVATIVEMESSAGING: MAJORITY ENSURES RECOVERY

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has been consistent since Day 1 of the campaign in framing the choice facing Canadians. That choice is starkly clear: Canadians can vote for a stable, national Conservative government – sometimes uttering the once verboten “M” word for majority – to continue to manage the fragile economic recovery in an affordable manner or choose a “reckless coalition” led by Official Opposition and Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff propped up by the NDP and Bloc Quebecois.

Even though Mr. Ignatieff moved swiftly during the first weekend of the campaign to clearly state his views on election outcomes – and rule out a coalition – and who gets the right to form government, Mr. Harper has been relentless in continuing his “narrative”. Never skipping a beat, he quickly pounced on quotes from both Mssrs. Ignatieff and Layton that they would vote down a new Conservative budget in the next parliament if it was the same one tabled last month as evidence of the unstable and reckless coalition that would harm Canada’s economic recovery.

The Conservative’s strategic intent is to keep Canadians focused on their favoured ballot question: managing the economy and so-called pocketbook issues. So far, this strategy seems to be working.

Mr. Harper’s Conservatives have held a consistent eight to ten point lead in most national opinion polls since the campaign began. From tax credits for gym memberships to income splitting for families (with the caveat that they kick-in only when the budget is balanced in 2014 or later) along with a host of other immediate and admittedly re-announced measures from dead-on-arrival Budget 2011, the Conservatives policy strategy is clearly focused on solidifying their rural base while capturing ex-urban and suburban seats in vote-rich Ontario for the most part.

CONSERVATIVE TOUR: WHAT AREA CODE ARE WE IN TODAY?

The aforementioned policy target assessment is borne out in the Conservative’s tour strategy for leader Stephen Harper. Week 1 of the campaign saw whistle-stops in all ten provinces, moving from the west coast to the east coast. Meanwhile, Week 2 was classic Conservative micro-targeting riding-by-riding with stops only in Ontario (area codes 416, 613, 519, and 905) and Quebec (450 and 819).

These two provinces, more than any other region of the country, hold the key to the Prime Minister’s drive to move from 143 seats (at dissolution) in Parliament to 155 or more after May 2nd, giving him a majority government. The Conservatives are looking to pick up a few suburban Toronto and Mississauga seats right along the 401 west into the Kitchener-Waterloo, Guelph and London areas. At the same time, they also need to hold their suburban and rural seats around Ottawa and defend their Quebec base around Quebec City and in key ridings on both sides of the St. Lawrence River along Autoroutes 20 and 40 between Montreal and the provincial capital. These roads lead to the coveted majority.

LIBERAL MESSAGING: TIME FOR CHANGE, TIME FOR TRUST

Many Liberals outside the Leader’s circle came into #elxn41 with a sense of great trepidation: they had been down in the polls since the 2004 election and the Conservatives had been outflanking them on every tactical play they had tried to run in Opposition. That, coupled with some false starts and serious personnel changes, had many observers wondering if Michael Ignatieff would be an even bigger disaster on the campaign trail than his predecessor.

After two solid weeks with virtually no unforced errors, those fears have been allayed. Mr. Ignatieff is proving to be a solid campaigner and a united Liberal Party (or a Party as united as the Liberals ever can be) has lined up squarely behind him.

Canadians have demonstrated over the years that they will abide by a great many things in their politicians, but scandal – real or imagined – is rarely one of them. Rather than focusing on the traditional Liberal narrative over the last several campaigns painting Mr. Harper as “mean spirited” or having a “hidden agenda”, the Ignatieff team has put the Conservative government’s ethical standards in the cross hairs and juxtaposed them against the promises they made both in opposition and in government.

Mr. Ignatieff has to weave his list of malfeasances together in a compelling narrative for his message on the Conservatives’ conduct to resonate with Canadians. While no mean feat, if he can convince a significant number of voters that the governing party has become too comfortable with the spoils of power, that would go a long way towards dislodging Mr. Harper’s increasingly steadfast support.

LIBERAL TOUR: SHOW ME THE DEMOGRAPHICS!

The Liberal campaign tour has been more strategic than in recent past campaigns. The Liberals seem to have a much stronger sense this time round of what a winning electoral coalition (not to be confused with the Parliamentary variety) needs to look like. Their focus is on previously fertile ground in Southern Ontario, BC’s Lower Mainland, the Atlantic and the region around Montreal. Little time has been wasted in areas that are unlikely to be receptive to what seems to be a very well-tuned message this time.

Blending demographics and geography, the Liberal’s target package is pretty clear: female voters of all generations; the sandwich generation worried about kids and parents at the same time; second generation new Canadians; and, the Party’s traditional geographic redoubts. These groups are all, conveniently, located in similar areas and should allow the Liberal campaign to focus in more concentrated bursts for the final two weeks of the campaign.

NDP, GREENS et BLOC

As for the other three parties running in Campaign 2011, each has adopted a traditional strategy in appealing to their core base, fighting holding actions against potential gains by the Conservatives and Liberals and sticking to very traditional messages.

For the NDP, the campaign has focused on classic messages around working families, social justice, emphasizing social programs like healthcare, education and childcare, and taxing big corporations. The tour has been fairly ambitious in its breadth and smart in its execution: unlike the Liberal and Conservative leaders, Jack Layton (who began the campaign on crutches and has now progressed to using a cane) has visited regions for extended periods – one and two days at a time – and then travelled through the evenings and overnight. This has allowed the NDP Leader – a considerable asset to his Party – to spend more time in smaller centres and maximize his time in front of cameras during the prime hours of the media cycle. These extended stops have included areas like Northern Ontario, Hamilton, the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and, last week, four full days on the Prairies and in British Columbia.

The Bloc always have a significant advantage in their campaign in that they are only focused on one province and therefore have significantly less travel time between venues. The Bloc continues to present itself more as the regional party to represent Quebec’s interests in Ottawa more so than a party dedicated to separation from the rest of Canada. Recent polls have suggested that the Bloc are in some tough fights to hang on to their 15

years of dominance over Quebec's 75 seats in the House of Commons. However, few doubt that they will come out of the election holding more seats than the federalist parties combined.

And, finally, the Green Party. While leader Elizabeth May has received some additional media exposure through her desire – unsuccessful this time – to participate in the televised leaders' debates, the Green campaign is clearly focused on getting Ms. May elected. Accordingly, resources are being directed largely to her riding of Sannich-Gulf Islands, BC. This riding is currently held by Conservative junior Minister Gary Lunn and has been a three or four-way split for the last several elections. Anything seems possible in this riding, including the possibility of electing the first Green Party MP to the House of Commons.

THE TALKING HEADS

Now that the television network consortium that controls leadership debates in this country has made it clear that playoffs – or at least playoff revenue – trumps watching those who would run the country, political junkies can get their fix twice this week. Here is TACTIX' take on what the respective Parties aim to do in the leaders' debates on Tuesday and Wednesday this week.

Conservatives

Like any Prime Minister in a leaders' debate, particularly one who is running a classic frontrunner's rope-a-dope campaign, Mr. Harper simply needs to survive. While in this campaign the appearance of the three opposition leaders focusing much of their attacks on the PM will help with the Conservative's "coalition" narrative, it still makes for an unpleasant few hours. The way to make the time pass more comfortably is to focus as much as possible on the issue of sound economic management. Conservatives tend to enjoy a natural advantage with the electorate in most western democracies on the question of managing the public purse, much as left-of-centre parties tend to cleave to a similar advantage on questions of social justice. While evidence suggests this advantage may not always be in keeping with facts, it is nevertheless a significant part of the Prime Minister's home court advantage during economically uncertain times.

Liberals

The debates offer Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff the opportunity to define himself for the millions of viewers who will not have seen much of him other than what has been portrayed, and not in a positive light, in effective Conservative pre-writ advertising. He gets the chance to recast the portrait that has been painted of him.

Despite running a solid campaign so far, Mr. Ignatieff does not have the electorate flocking to his corner. Public opinion polls unanimously show the Liberals gaining ground from previous polls and the 2008 election, but they remain anywhere from six to ten points behind Mr. Harper and the Conservatives. This reality puts incredible pressure on Mr. Ignatieff heading into his very first election debate. And he did not do himself any favours by speaking publicly about the importance of the debates to his electoral chances. If he has any chance of swinging the 4-5 points from the Conservatives that he needs to rival Mr. Harper for the most seats in the House of Commons on May 2nd, Mr. Ignatieff needs to outperform against expectations.

Trouble is, expectations will be set high by media and by his opponents. If Mr. Ignatieff is perceived by his opponents as having performed well, the immediate post-debate "spin" period will be filled by the other Parties poking holes in his performance. It is certainly not in Mr. Layton's interest to have Mr. Ignatieff declared "the winner" of the debate in the media, as voters who do not tune in to the debates themselves can be influenced

by what the media says. On the other hand, if the Liberal leader does not hold up well in the debates, it will exacerbate the challenge the Liberals face in picking up momentum in the closing weeks of the campaign.

NDP

Jack Layton faces a terrible dilemma. If he focuses most of his attack on Prime Minister Harper, he will reinforce the PM's narrative that the "reckless coalition" is alive and well. On the other hand, if he fiercely attacks the Liberal leader Mr. Layton runs the risk of confirming the growing suspicion – reinforced by some recent poll results – that support for the NDP is bleeding to the Liberals in an attempt by left-leaning voters to cast their ballots strategically to block a Conservative majority government. How Mr. Layton directs his attack will give viewers an insight into how the NDP brain trust believes the election is going.

Bloc Quebecois

Although Jack Layton is a native Quebecer who learned his French on the street, home-spun Gilles Duceppe will always be the star attraction in the French debate. Some would say he even plays the role of incumbent in this debate given that his Party holds the vast majority of seats from Quebec. Moreover, to the consternation of his opponents, in past elections Mr. Duceppe has frequently been cited by focus groups as the winner in English debates even though he has absolutely nothing riding on that outcome. All he needs to do is jab at his three federalist opponents, portraying himself as the only trustworthy protector of Quebec's political, economic and cultural interests in Ottawa.

INTO THE HOME STRETCH

Come Thursday this week, with their platforms in the public domain and the leaders' debates out of the way, each of the Parties will be heading into the home stretch of their respective campaigns. Some say the "real" election begins now. From here on in the campaign will be about repeating, repeating, repeating key messages to try and shape what voters think about as they enter the ballot booth, shoring up core support, and going after ridings where competitors are considered vulnerable. Where the leaders spend their final two weeks will reveal much about how each Party views its electoral chances two weeks before E-Day.

TACTIX will continue to provide our readers with our daily [Campaign Pulse](#) up to May 2nd, and in the final week of the campaign we will offer you our analysis of what the contestants will need to do to meet their electoral goals. Stay tuned for Volume 3 of our Election Watch 2011 series. And until then remember, campaigns matter.

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