

## NOT TO SAY WE TOLD YOU SO, BUT ...

Just over two weeks ago in Volume 2 of Election Watch 2011, we made two observations which now seem a touch prescient. First, we noted that Canadians usually begin to engage in a federal election campaign during and after the debates, which it appears they have done in spades. And second, we reminded readers that from our collective political experience of being on the ballot, the leader's tour, the party war room and all imaginable points in-between ... campaigns matter. Just ask Jack Layton and the NDP!

As the three major national parties (Conservative, Liberal and NDP) along with the Greens and Bloc Québécois sprint, fly, drive, and attack ad their way to the finish line next Monday, from our perspective, we encourage you to look beyond the national poll numbers and focus in on the regions as #elxn41 will truly be won and lost poll-by-poll, riding-by-riding and region-by-region — a theme to which we will return shortly.

## IT'S STILL ABOUT PROCESS, HOCKEY AND POLITICS ... IN THAT ORDER

While there have been some fascinating, if not historic, changes in the polls, sadly, the main broadcast media narrative of this campaign remains the same. Stories of vandalism of signs, candidates' staff stealing a rival's pamphlets and shady characters endorsing candidates, continue to drown out any substantive discussion about policy and what each Party would do to continue our economic recovery, address the looming health care crisis, or solidify the public pension regime amongst a host of pressing national issues.

To make matters worse, early first-round, nail-biting playoff series involving the Montreal Canadiens (heading into Game 7) and Vancouver Canucks (now into the second round) have, let's be frank, likely commanded far more attention than the election campaign. The political parties have tried, mostly in vain, to punch through with big television ad buys on CBC, TSN and RDS during playoff telecasts. But our best guess, based on personal experience, tells us that most diehard hockey fans have been "replenishing" during commercial breaks.

## POLLS, DAMNED POLLS AND EVEN MORE CONFUSING POLLS

With apologies to former British PM Benjamin Disraeli (although some assert it was Sir Charles Dilke) we have badgered the famous phrase "lies, damned lies and statistics" for our own #elxn41 purposes. The last week has seen a flurry of conjecture-driven headlines and fantasy-based from the Conservatives winning a 200-plus seat majority to Canadians sending 100 New Democrats to the House of Commons.

These variations stem from the different polling firms (Nanos, Harris-Decima, Ipsos-Reid, Ekos, Abacus, CROP and Leger, just to name a few) and methodologies employed to generate their "snapshots in time" analyses of voter preferences and trends. On the TACTIX Campaign Pulse website ([www.tactixcampaignpulse2011.ca](http://www.tactixcampaignpulse2011.ca)), we have highlighted the nightly tracking of Nanos Research, a firm with an excellent track record for predicting the outcome of the last three federal elections.

Coming out of the Easter weekend, Nanos had the Conservatives at 37.8%, the NDP at 27.8%, and the Liberals at 22.9%. With the NDP now firmly in second place, some political observers are engaged in a morbid watch as to the extent of the Liberal decline and whether it reaches a tipping point of free fall into the teens. As pollsters are fond of saying, *the trend is your friend* so the NDP surge and ensuing media coverage may become a self-fulfilling prophecy when the polls close on May 2<sup>nd</sup>.

However, these polling numbers are national while Parliament is composed of 308 seats from coast to coast to coast. Each of the national parties, along with the Greens and the Bloc Québécois, has regional strengths which will factor into the final seat tally and composition of the House of Commons in the 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament.

## **MESSAGING AND RESONANCE: ONE NEEDS THE OTHER**

Canadians perceive Prime Minister Stephen Harper, to use the most neutral of terms, as decisive and disciplined. Even his critics will usually concede this point. And throughout the election campaign, he has exhibited these qualities in spades, bordering on what partisan opponents have described as a stubborn, “Robocop” monotone delivery. From his haunting calmness and delivery during the English language debate to his campaign stump speech which most reporters have memorized word by word and backwards, Mr. Harper has not changed his message and pitch to voters by any substantive measure since Day 1 of the campaign.

The Conservatives have not wavered on framing the ballot question as who is best positioned to continue to manage the fragile economic recovery: a stable, majority Conservative government or a reckless coalition of left-of-centre parties buoyed by support from the Bloc Québécois. Even with the NDP now supplanting the Liberals from second place, Mr. Harper has seen no need to change his message: a coalition is a coalition is a coalition regardless of whose head is on this beast.

While Conservative support seems stuck just below the coveted 40% threshold which usually signals a majority government, the Party’s base remains committed and it’s regional strengths combined with crucial three-way vote splits (given NDP strength) may yet yield the majority the Prime Minister desires. The Conservative message has resonated with the key voters and regions for which it was designed.

Turning to the Official Opposition and Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff, this has been a frustrating campaign for the Liberal faithful. In terms of his national tour, everything has gone exceedingly well. Crowds at rallies have been large, policy photo-ops have been ideal to deliver platform plank messages, local campaigns have delivered up spirited volunteers and Mr. Ignatieff has taken to the microphone (without the aid of a teleprompter like Mr. Harper uses) with aplomb, interacting and empathizing with voters and quickly shedding the “just visiting” professor moniker with which he has been unfairly saddled courtesy of two years of Conservative Party attack ads.

The downfall for Mr. Ignatieff may have been the debates, with the media commentariat pegging him with finishing second or third in both English and French. But for all his hard work, Liberal Party messaging has been inconsistent – from trust and transparency to learning passports to health care to attacking jets and prisons.

Furthermore, Mr. Ignatieff’s obsession with correctly intellectualizing the functioning of a Westminster parliament during a CBC interview with Peter Mansbridge landed him back in the coalition morass (to the glee of Conservative strategists) after he effectively nullified this weakness during the first weekend of the campaign back in late-March.

Moreover, his 30-minute English language town-hall on Global TV this past weekend, a successful stint on RDI’s influential *Toute le monde en parle*, and the addition of former Prime Minister Jean Chretien to the campaign mix are likely all too little, too late in terms of turning Liberal fortunes around. The Liberal message just has not resonated with voters.

Look for the Liberal tour over the next five days to concentrate on holding key, and once soundly secure, seats in Toronto, the west-Island of Montreal, Atlantic Canada and the Lower Mainland in British Columbia.

## THE RISE OF THE NDP: HISTORIC? YES. GAME-CHANGING? TBD ...

At the outset of the election campaign, the only folks who believed the NDP would make an impact were NDP strategists and even they were likely a bit skeptical of their own prospects. Leader Jack Layton's health was in question – after difficult prostate cancer treatment over the fall and winter and recent hip surgery – and most pundits envisioned a two-horse race between the Conservatives and Liberals. Early projections had the NDP losing up to one-third of their seats due to the aforementioned two-horse dynamic and potential strategic voting that would bleed support away from the NDP to Liberals in the sort of “stop Harper” appeal that saved the Paul Martin Liberals in 2004 and nearly did so again in 2006 when Conservatives were perceived to be on the cusp of a majority.

The intense national media focus on the leaders has benefited Jack Layton the most. His performance in both debates was very good and the NDP tour strategy has been markedly different than the two-event, sometimes two-provinces per day pace of the Conservatives and Liberals. Instead, the NDP has opted to use nighttime and time zones to their advantage by keeping Mr. Layton's tour in one region for a day (sometimes more) and a series of smaller events along with a daily message/news conference to positive effect, especially with local media. Ironically, this pacing was likely designed to accommodate Mr. Layton's recovery rather than help drive NDP numbers to unprecedented levels.

And then there is the Quebec dynamic, where the NDP is now leading the Bloc Québécois in the polls and where Mr. Layton is clearly the most popular and trusted leader in that province. The NDP's vault to second place nationally and first place in the polls in Quebec is truly historic. The question remains to be seen how much of a game-changer their support becomes in Quebec and the rest of Canada and to what heights it may still climb. The answers to these questions will play out differently in various regions of the country.

## #ELXN41 WILL BE WON IN THE REGIONS

As we noted earlier, this election will be won and lost in the regions which we have arbitrarily defined as Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, The Prairies, and British Columbia. Below we identify regional trends and how the issues and polls will likely manifest themselves into results and seat counts on election night.

### ATLANTIC CANADA

The chart below shows the distribution of the 32 House of Commons seats across the four Atlantic Provinces at the dissolution of Parliament on March 25<sup>th</sup>.

PARTY STANDINGS							
Province	CPC	LIB	BQ	NDP	Ind.	Vacant	Total
New Brunswick	6	3		1			10
Newfoundland and Labrador		6		1			7
Nova Scotia	4	5		2			11
Prince Edward Island	1	3					4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>			<b>32</b>

While the Atlantic results cannot make or break the election outcome, we look to this region to inform us of any national trends that may develop across the country on election night. Nanos' numbers have the Conservatives comfortably in front across the region given their strength in rural New Brunswick and core support across the four provinces. One key indicator to watch for on May 2<sup>nd</sup> is whether the Conservatives can break through in Newfoundland now that former premier Danny Williams is out of the electoral picture and not spearheading the ABC (Anybody But Conservative) effort as he did in the 2008 election.

The other unknown factor so far is the national NDP surge. It is a three-way race statistically across Atlantic Canada. Should the NDP pick up a few more seats in and around Halifax or St. John's, it could signal an urban trend to occur in other parts of the country (Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver) which would hurt the Liberals most.

## QUEBEC

The chart below shows the distribution of Quebec's 75 seats in the House of Commons at the dissolution of Parliament.

PARTY STANDINGS							
Province	CPC	LIB	BQ	NDP	Ind.	Vacant	Total
Quebec	11	14	47	1	1	1	75

Quebec is the province poised to answer the question of whether or not the support the NDP is enjoying in the polls will translate into a substantive number of seats ... or not. Quebec is also the province where the traditional federalist options, Liberal and Conservative, find their voter base highly concentrated in the Montreal and Quebec City regions respectively.

All the major polling firms now show Jack Layton and the NDP as the first choice amongst Quebec voters. After two decades of comfortably voting for the Bloc Québécois, Quebecers across all demographic groups and in most regions seem to be fatigued with the BQ and indicating that they will vote for local NDP candidates. The Bloc and NDP are, in effect, close relatives to each other on state-centric social policy choices and Jack Layton's debate performance and Montreal-French accent have resonated with Quebecers. Not to be underestimated is the appeal of Deputy Leader and former Quebec (Liberal) Cabinet Minister Thomas Mulcair who has carried the NDP flag in the province, especially in the media, since his by-election victory and entry into the House of Commons in 2007.

In Quebec, traditional lawn signs (outside of the west-island area of Montreal) are not deployed so highway and arterial signs on major roads in each riding can be used as a rough proxy of local campaign organization and support. Our very unofficial survey of over 20 ridings in and around Montreal and through the south shore of the St. Lawrence River along Autoroute 20 confirms the findings of the pollsters.

The Bloc arterial sign presence is vastly diminished compared to previous elections dating back to 1993 with the Liberals and Conservatives running skeleton campaigns (in terms of signage) as well. On the other hand, for the first time in recent memory, NDP candidates are competing with the other parties in ridings as diverse as Vaudreuil-Soulanges in western exurban Montreal through to south shore main streets in ridings like Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot and Drummond.

The game-changing dynamic stemming from historic NDP support in Quebec could be two-fold. First, from pure seat count perspective, two-way races with the Bloc in rural Quebec and three-way races in Montreal (BQ, LIB and NDP)

and Quebec City (BQ, CPC and NDP) point to an inevitable loss of Bloc Québécois seats. What remains to be seen – and this is changing daily given NDP momentum – is how many seats the NDP will pick up.

The second and more seismic game-changer, not only for Quebec but for the rest of the country, will occur if the NDP wins 10 to 15 or even more seats. With their support steady across the province, no regional base on which to rely/build (unlike the Liberals and Conservatives) and no get-out-the-vote (GOTV) organization to speak of, traditional commentators so far have not given the NDP much of a chance of capturing more than a handful of seats.

However, one need only recall the ADQ result in the March 2007 provincial election when Mario Dumont led his party to opposition status in the National Assembly (Liberal 48, ADQ 41, PQ 36) with a collection of unknown candidates bolstered by voter fatigue with the Liberals and PQ and a willingness to take a chance on an untested yet fresh and charismatic leader. With Jack Layton the dynamics are somewhat different, but voter fatigue with traditional and tried choices is eerily similar to March 2007. Anything above 10 Quebec seats for the NDP will be the game-changer for strategists to re-think their approaches to and the importance of on-the-ground organization, not to mention the future of both sovereignty and federalism.

## ONTARIO

The chart below shows the distribution of Ontario's 106 seats in the House of Commons at the dissolution of Parliament.

PARTY STANDINGS							
Province	CPC	LIB	BQ	NDP	Ind.	Vacant	Total
Ontario	51	37		17	1		106

Ontario is in reality a collection of electoral regions such as the GTA and Golden Horseshoe, Eastern Ontario, the Southwest, Windsor, the near north and far north which can be broken out by area codes such as 416, 905, 613, 519, 705 and 807.

Election night will probably see the Conservatives and Liberals swap a few ridings in the 519 and 613 regions given the strength of local candidates and campaigns. And interestingly enough, Ontario is the one region where the orange surge of the NDP is not as pronounced as it is in other regions. Nonetheless, strong NDP campaigns in and around the Beaches area of Toronto from Scarborough in the East to Etobicoke in the West – where three-way races are possible – could make for an interesting night of election results on May 2<sup>nd</sup>.

The GTA region contains 47 ridings where the Conservatives must break-through if they are to increase their numbers from 146 seats to the coveted number of 155 or more House of Commons seats to win their majority. By the same measure, fortress Toronto (especially those seats south of Steeles Avenue in the 416 and 905 area codes) is the region where the Liberals must stop the Conservatives from winning in ridings like York-Centre (currently held by Liberal Ken Dryden) and Mississauga-South (held by Liberal Paul Szabo).

Both of these seats are considered as bellwether ridings and if they change on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, then others in and around Toronto could also move into the Conservative category. However, if the Liberals hold seats such as these, it is a safe bet that the Liberals could deny Mr. Harper a majority result.

## THE PRARIES

The chart below shows the distribution of the 56 House of Commons seats across Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan at the dissolution of Parliament.

PARTY STANDINGS							
Province	CPC	LIB	BQ	NDP	Ind.	Vacant	Total
Alberta	26			1		1	28
Manitoba	9	2		3			14
Saskatchewan	13	1					14
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>3</b>		<b>4</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>56</b>

While no region should be taken for granted in an election campaign, the Conservatives should come out of election night with their Prairies seats intact given present polling numbers. Again, the urban fight here will be in key downtown city-centre ridings in Winnipeg between the Liberals and NDP such as in Winnipeg North-Centre where the Liberals took a seat off the NDP in a recent by-election, Winnipeg South where the Liberals are hoping to take back what should be fairly safe turf, and in Saskatchewan's Saskatoon-Rosetown-Biggar where the NDP rise combined with a poor Liberal result could see the NDP steal this seat from the Conservatives. Moreover, Edmonton is a city to keep an eye on if the NDP rise in the polls plays out on election night.

## BRITISH COLUMBIA

The chart below shows the distribution of British Columbia's 36 seats in the House of Commons at the dissolution of Parliament on March 25<sup>th</sup>.

PARTY STANDINGS							
Province	CPC	LIB	BQ	NDP	Ind.	Vacant	Total
British Columbia	21	5		9		1	36

British Columbia is arguably the most interesting and least predictable region of the country in terms of political machinations. With a plurality of three-way and a significant number of four-way races, the perennial complaint that a federal election is decided before the results from the western side of the Rockies are tabulated will likely not hold water on May 2<sup>nd</sup>. Coupled with the fascinating provincial political scene – including a looming referendum on the HST – three distinct regions (the Lower Mainland, Vancouver Island and the Interior) reveal some interesting races on which we have our eye.

In the Lower Mainland, aside from the usual tight margins in a number of ridings, local campaigns may play significant roles in either creating problems or delivering votes for the Liberals and the Conservatives. While the NDP is traditionally strong, to date they have not seen significant growth in support (as compared to Quebec for example)

to result in real seat gains. While some ridings may flip from Conservative to Liberal or vice-versa, these changes should net each other out.

On Vancouver Island, there will be a number of hotly-contested ridings including Saanich-Gulf Islands where Green Party Leader Elizabeth May is running against incumbent Conservative MP and junior Minister Gary Lunn, as well as the riding of Esquimalt-Juan de Fuca, vacated this time around by long-serving MP, Dr. Keith Martin.

In the Interior, the fights tend to be between the NDP and the Conservatives with the Liberals historically finishing a distant third in many ridings. If the NDP's national polling surge translates disproportionately into support in their marginal Interior ridings, they could also make some gains and push their B.C. seat count to 12 seats or more.

## **THE 41<sup>st</sup> PARLIAMENT: A CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT, TO BEGIN WITH**

Barring a totally unexpected collapse of the Conservative base, we still foresee a Conservative victory once the polls close on May 2<sup>nd</sup>. However, the fluidity of NDP growth and the Liberal slide along with the regional dynamics outlined above, most notably the historic voter preference change in Quebec and the tough riding-by-riding fights in the GTA and BC's Lower Mainland, leave our team of political experts and veterans scratching their collective heads as to whether the Conservatives will vault over or come to rest slightly under the magical 155-seat majority government bar.

What started out as a sleepy, disengaging and foregone conclusion campaign in search of a story-line one month ago promises to finish as something entirely different less than a week from now. Major shifts are underway. Two million voters cast advance ballots during three days of polling over the Easter long weekend, which is 34% higher than those who cast advance ballots in 2008 and the highest advance vote turnout in Canadian history. So we know one thing for sure, Canadians are engaged.

And hanging in the balance from the May 2<sup>nd</sup> election result are a litany of questions about the potential for a Conservative Throne Speech and Budget to secure the confidence of Parliament, not to mention the future of all five federal party leaders and ultimately the direction of our country in this second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Armed with the finality of the May 2<sup>nd</sup> result, TACTIX' post-election Commentary will start to deliver answers to these important and fundamental questions.

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