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## UNDERSTANDING THE PROSPECTS FOR THE NDP

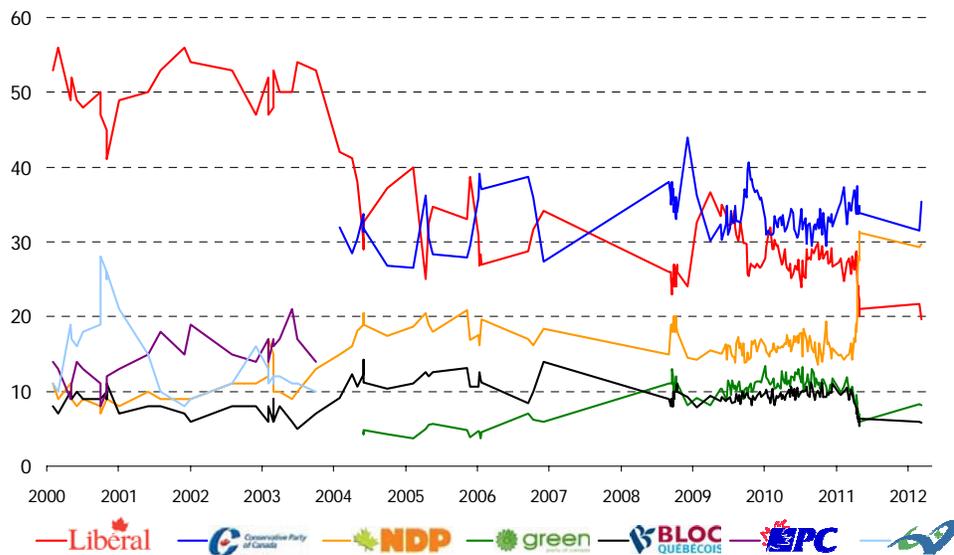
*DISENTANGLING MYTHS AND REALITIES*

[Ottawa – March 23, 2012] The two most remarkable features of our current political landscape are the Stephen Harper-led majority government and an NDP opposition. Both of these phenomena are inextricably connected in ways many do not recognize. These shared connections and forces also define the limits and opportunities for the future of these two movements. Our focus here is the NDP but let's quickly note that the received wisdom of the inevitability of the Conservative Party's ascendance to majority status, and that they are on the cusp of a stable political dynasty, was decidedly not the conventional wisdom at the time he assumed power of the newly unified Conservative. At that point, the Liberals had handed off power to a seemingly invulnerable Paul Martin whose three times majority Liberal party was sitting at over 50 points in the polls. Meanwhile, the struggling NDP appeared ticketed to political oblivion in the low teens. Those who would have forecast a Stephen Harper majority, and an NDP opposition within 7 years, would have formed a very small club, with credibility on par with the flat earth society.

### Tracking of federal vote intention



Q. If a federal election were held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?



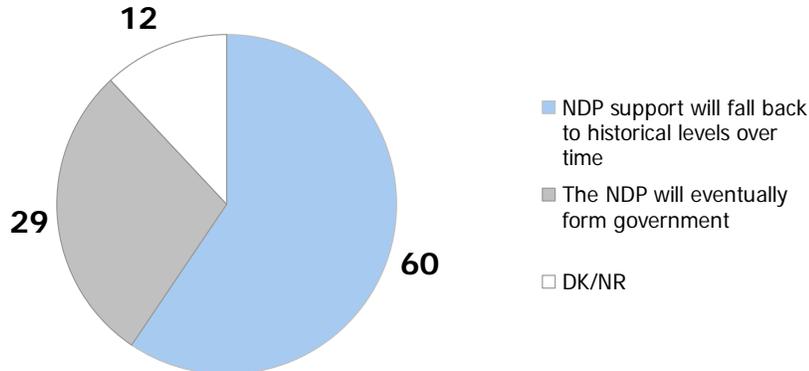
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BASE: Decided voters; most recent data point March 6-11, 2012 (n=1,894)

## NDP government?



*Q. As you may know, in the May 2nd federal election, The New Democratic Party won the largest number of seats in their history, enabling them to form the Official Opposition for the first time. Some people say that NDP support will continue to grow and they will one day form government. Others say that this surge in NDP support is merely a "blip" and it will soon fall back to historical levels. Which of these statements comes closest to your own point of view?*



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BASE: Canadians; December 14-21, 2011 (n=2,005)

Stephen Harper's May 2<sup>nd</sup> victory may have been the most important outcome of that campaign but it wasn't the most surprising. The 100-plus seat performance of the NDP led by the ebullient Jack Layton was the most breathtaking surprise of that campaign. But as the dust settled and the tragic reality of Mr. Layton's death sunk in, the conventional wisdom was that the NDP may well have been an ephemeral blip propelled to unimaginable heights on the charismatic authority of Mr Layton and they would inevitably fall back to earth. Even our own polling of the public in December<sup>1</sup> showed most Canadians felt this regression to the mean was the inevitable fate of the NDP.

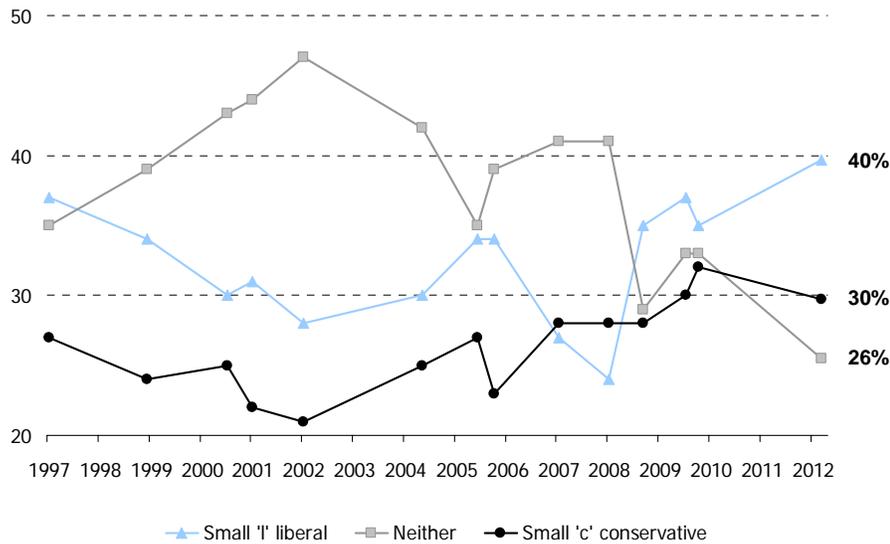
Yet here we are nearly a year later and the NDP who have been operating with a virtually unknown interim leader, supported by a caucus of virtual neophytes while the best talent is tied up in a protracted leadership battle, finds itself within range of the Conservative Party and with a comfortable lead over the newly hapless Liberals. Think of this another way. For its first fifty years, the NDP never once eclipsed the Liberals in public opinion polls. Yet for nearly a year now, the NDP have been, on average, 10 points ahead of the erstwhile natural governing party of Canada. Is this merely the inertia of the Jack-o-mania? That facile explanation becomes increasingly implausible.

<sup>1</sup> See "Beyond the Horserace", published on January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Accessible online at: [http://www.ekospolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/beyond\\_the\\_horserace\\_jan\\_14\\_2012.pdf](http://www.ekospolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/beyond_the_horserace_jan_14_2012.pdf)

## Political ideology



Q. Do you consider yourself a small "c" conservative or a small "l" liberal?



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BASE: Canadians; most recent data point March 6-11, 2012 (n=2,001)

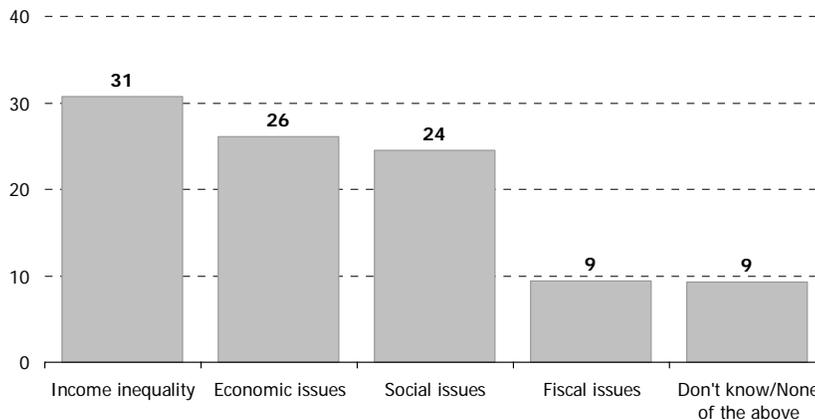
So what is driving this continued success? The answers are complex but at the top of the list of explanations are two separate forces: One is the increased ideological polarization of the Canadian electorate. The Conservatives have formed power by successfully coming from the right portion of the political spectrum. Historically, federal governments in Canada secure power by campaigning and occupying the center. This centrist tendency has also been evident in Canadian ideological orientations which have been much less entrenched than those of Americans for example. In fact, for a considerable amount of time, more Canadians selected neither than either label (separate from party choice) of small I or small c. This more pragmatic, eclectic, and centrist perspective seems to have eroded sharply over the past several years. Now the incidence of those saying neither has dropped from half to about a quarter (with roughly 40 and 30 per cent, respectively, picking the small I and small c labels). We argue that the emergence of a politically successful right wing party has produced this new polarization and it is the NDP, not the Liberals, who are the new Yin to Conservative Yang. This hollowing of the ideological middle suggests that the NDP success is far more than a reflection of the appeal of Jack Layton (who had, by the way, already been around and appealing for some time). The newly polarized political landscape was one key factor in the newfound NDP success and the second is an even more recently expressed force.



## Most important issue for discussion



*Q. Which of the following do you think should be the most important issue in discussions about Canada's future? Should it be: 1) social issues like health and education; 2) issues related to the economy like economic growth and jobs; 3) Fiscal issues like taxes and debt; 4) Issues such as the growing gap between rich and poor; or 5) none of these?*



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BASE: Canadians; February 21-28, 2012 (n=3,699)

This second force is a profound transformation of economic anxieties which now connects the stagnation of economic progress (and fears for an even darker future) to growing resentment of income inequality. For many Canadians, their lack of progress and fears about the future are made more frustrating by a recognition that a small cadre of society are doing remarkably well while they stagnate or stumble. There may even be a growing tendency to connect the unfairness of the economy with its very stagnation. Many years of severe tax reductions at the corporate and individual level have not produced either a relatively more productive or prosperous Canada, and after nearly forty years, the whole concept of trickle-down economics has been laid bare as a cruel hoax. This second force has put fresh wind in the sails of the NDP.

The NDP constituency is not only the reverse image of the Conservative constituency in terms of values and ideology, but it is also the opposite in terms of demographics, life cycle and social class. The NDP supporters are younger while the Conservatives are older; they are secular not faith-based, they are less likely to be married, more likely to be university – not college – educated and they are more economically vulnerable whereas the Conservative Party is home for the affluent voter.

So what does this mean for the future of the NDP and its new leader? It means that the NDP are a genuine new power and probably more connected to emerging trends and economic forces than other parties. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to assume that this new ascendancy will result in the next step of forming power. The NDP base is still much more fluid and less emotionally engaged than the Conservative base. The Liberal supporters are diminished, but

there is still a home for centrism which is the more natural historical tendency of the Canadian electorate.

The center and left is about where two thirds of Canada reside but they are now fragmented across four political choices. This political arithmetic highly favours the Conservative Party. If the goal for the NDP is to depose the Conservatives and provide a government which captures a greater portion of the broader spectrum, then a program of cooperation with the Greens and Liberals may be the safest route. Otherwise, Canada may well end up in the oscillating pattern of left then right wing governments that has characterised American and British politics for the past century. Canadians may have adapted to the reality of rule from the right by becoming more polarized. There is, however, no evidence that they have shown any desire to make this a permanent state of affairs (yet).