






AN EXAMINATION OF VOTER LOYALTY: WHAT LIES BENEATH THE SURFACE ILLUSION OF PLACIDITY...

BY FRANK GRAVES

[OTTAWA – June 2009] - One of the more interesting analyses available from our recent data base¹ is the movement of voters from the way they voted in the last election to the way they would vote in a hypothetical election today. Because of the unusually large sample size available, we can detect shifts even across the smaller parties.

Before we even consider who went where, it is notable to just look at the overall level of voter movement. The numbers in bold and on the diagonal in the table below represent “party loyalists”. These are the voters who plan to stick with the party they voted for in the previous election. As the table shows, the overall level of “loyalty” averages a bit over 70 per cent across the parties. This can be compared to a similar figure from the United States, which shows slightly over 90 per cent of American voters vote the same way from election to election. This reflects the fact that Americans are more ideologically polarized and committed to their political parties than Canadians, who are much more politically promiscuous, and less ideologically committed.

Voter loyalty: 2008 to current

Vote intention – 2009	Vote intention 2009	Reported Vote – 2008					Did not vote n=579
		CPC n=2028	LPC n=1559	NDP n=802	Green n=473	BQ n=598	
	32.3	79.1	7.2	4.8	6.7	4.5	22.5
	33.5	13.9	79.6	18.2	17.6	9.9	35.8
	15.1	3.9	6.1	69.3	5.1	5.2	16.8
	10.4	2.2	5.7	5.2	66.7	4.7	17.8
	8.7	0.9	1.3	2.5	3.7	75.6	7.1

¹ This analysis is based on the sub-sample of 9,312 decided voters we surveyed May 7-28, 2009.

This has important implications for election strategy. The recent American elections have focussed on wedge strategies to narrowcast the less than 10% of the electorate that are truly like to change their minds. In Canada, there is a much larger and more fluid pool of swing voters (nearly 30%). It may well be that the Karl Rove-like strategies of targeting finely parsed political segments to build a winning constituency (made up of a mix of disparate smaller groups) is not a sound, long term strategy in the Canadian context. Successful Canadian approaches – particularly those aimed at a majority – must be faithful to the middle of the road and then reach outward to build success.

Focusing just on Canada now, it appears that some parties are more successful at retaining their vote than others. The LPC and CPC are the best here, but the BQ are close behind. Note that the challenge for retaining voters is higher for the Conservatives, who had a considerably larger popular vote than the Liberals in 2008. Maintaining your vote when you were reduced to a modern nadir of popular vote is a modest, but essential achievement for the Liberals.

The poorer performance for the Green Party, on the other hand, is not surprising given that they have the highest incidence of first time and less likely to vote supporters. This problem is probably exacerbated by the radical inefficiency of their vote, which must discourage potential voters. Think about it this way: roughly the same number of Canadian voters supports the Green Party as the BQ. Which party gets roughly 50 seats and which gets none? It's little surprise that there is a commitment problem with Green Party supporters.

The NDP is another issue. They have been hovering in the mid teens for a long time now and they do not have very high loyalty, despite the fact that they have exerted relatively high level of influence in this minority parliament. One gets the sense that if they were to slip even slightly they could surrender their status as the "other" party (i.e., non-Liberal, non-Conservative) to the fresher and growing Greens (who share many of the same constituency).

So who is successfully poaching who's supporters? Our analysis suggests that the Liberals are the biggest winners to date. In fact, they are the only party that has improved its standing with voters. As the pool of all votes constitutes a "zero-sum" game, where did the LPC win this support?

The actual churning of votes is a much more significant and complex than the simple shifts in overall party support. A shift of as little as six per cent of voters could explain the current differences from the last election. Notably, however, the actual levels of movement are about four times higher than that, which suggests there is a relative frenzy of mobility lurking under the surface illusion of placidity.

The biggest overall movement, by far, is Conservative to Liberal. About 14 per cent of erstwhile Conservative voters have – at least temporarily – moved to the Liberals. At the same time, a smaller (but not insignificant) group of seven per cent of former Liberal voters have defected to the CPC. Recalling the different sizes of their 2008 election result, this means that that Liberals have "gained" 14 per cent of the 37.6 per cent of votes the Conservatives received (or around

five per cent of all voters). The Conservatives, on the other hand, have recaptured only seven per cent of the 26.2 per cent who voted Liberal in 2008 (only about two per cent of all voters), for a net gain of about three per cent for the Liberals.

Other notable net gains for the Liberals are from the NDP and the Green Party (receiving, respectively, 18.2 and 6.8 per cent of the 2008 vote). As these were smaller voter bases, they constitute about 2.7 and 1 per cent respectively. Current figures also suggest that the Liberals would also lose about 12 per cent of 2008 supporters to these two parties, for a net loss of 3.3 per cent. So the net impact of these movements is about nil. The rest of the LPC's gains from 2008 come from the BQ in Quebec and those who did not vote. The net gains from Quebec are mildly surprising. The case of non-voters, however, deserves special attention.

Liberals may be encouraged by the fact that they are faring well (and decidedly better than the CPC) with those that did not vote in 2008 – which includes a heavy concentration of what may become first-time voters. On the other hand, our research over time has shown that those that “did not vote” in past elections have a disturbing tendency to continue to sit on the side lines as younger voters show stifled yawns in viewing federal politics.

One final note is worth making. The most important fluctuating phenomenon is the Conservative to Liberal voter. It is a very specific portion of the past CPC vote (i.e., not the “Tim Horton voter”, but the affluent boomers who were solidly onside in 2006 but have since drifted to the Liberals). One of the key factors was distress about the economy, particularly the meltdown in equity markets which wreaked havoc on boomer retirement plans. As equity markets recover, this segment has shown signs of moving back to the Conservatives. More recently, the burgeoning deficit numbers snuffed out some of this movement, suggesting that the timing of the election may be critical for capturing this key segment.