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SO WHO WILL WIN THE 42ND FEDERAL ELECTION?

SOME CONJECTURES ON WHAT IS SHAPING UP TO BE A HISTORICAL ELECTION

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[Ottawa – October 12, 2015] Not only is this one of the longest campaigns in Canadian political history, it may turn out to also be one of the most historically significant. Only two per cent of Canadians think this election is less important than previous elections; 75 per cent think it is more important. Voters tell us they are unusually emotionally engaged and that they see this election having huge stakes. The vast majority of Canadians think both the country and their lives will not be the same after this election. All in all, we have tracked a very dramatic lean among the Canadian public, who see this election as a historically significant choice for the country – and which may well be reflected in the huge advance turnout.

So why is this election so important? We need look no further than to the realm of values to see why it has assumed such momentous stakes. For an election that started out as all 'about the economy stupid' it has become 'all about the niqab.' But the debate about the niqab may be transforming into a broader debate about values. What kind of country do we want to hand off to the next generations? How do we want to be seen by the external world? What constitutes our basic sense of right and wrong, good and bad? It is not surprising that these kinds of fundamental normative questions result in an emotionally charged electorate and especially so against the backdrop of 'two Canadas' that are increasingly incommensurable at the level of basic values. The critical fault lines are generational and class driven. Older, less well educated and dare we say 'old stock' Canada have very different value preferences than younger and university educated Canada.

Many would consider the shift to a focus on culture, race, and identity to be a terrible distraction from what the Canadian public continues to identify as much more critical issues; the economy, the healthcare system and negotiating a path to a post carbon economy. Some would also decry the focus on the niqab and related culture war issues as an expression of reckless political adventurism, blind to the corrosive impact this may have on societal well-being in the future. While these may well be compelling critiques, the initial debate appears to have triggered a much broader and important contest for the future based on fundamental values choice. This is undoubtedly why our respondents are signalling that they see this as such a historically important election which is so engaging.

We would argue that the focus on these issues, which emerged following the media focus on the Syrian refugee crisis – elevated the Conservative Party from a party losing a race on the economy, to a party squarely in contention to win. What may not have been as obvious – or even intended – is that that this debate about values has not only increased engagement amid the growing Conservative base, it may also have awoken the slumbering progressive majority.

Trying to assess who will win this values struggle is highly uncertain and why we can offer no clear answer yet as to who will win the next election. The level of engagement of the Conservative constituency really isn't in doubt. The critical question is whether the growing engagement of the center-left constituencies will translate into actual voter behaviour (turnout and choice). At this stage, we can only hazard a guess that this heightened level of engagement will be reflected in voter behaviour; but at this stage, it simply is not clear.

We do note that Stephen Harper's surprising victory in 2011 was rooted in his huge success with the senior cohort. It is important to note that there are even more seniors this time out and contrary to some claims that the Liberals and Conservatives are equally matched with this cohort, we think that is simply wrong. The Conservatives have a huge and stable lead with seniors at this time.

While we cannot clearly see the outcome of this protracted and increasingly acrimonious campaign, we do see some of the forces shaping it to date and the key issues to watch in the coming days. We are guessing by mid-week, the post-turkey discussions will have coalesced to provide greater clarity. We do predict that there will be far more talk about cultural issues than about the economy, something that was frankly unforeseeable a month ago.

Apart from the shift to a debate about identity and culture, what other forces are clear at this stage? The Liberals have definitely made significant progress and now are the clear alternative for the forces of electoral change. The NDP have been clearly in decline and if they don't show signs of life by midweek they will see their fortunes greatly diminished in the coming parliament. Ironically, they may well have considerably greater power than they did in the last parliament where they had lots of seats but almost no real power against the Harper majority. We also note that the possibility of another Harper majority is greeted with near apoplexy in our internal polling of the two thirds of the electorate that are seeking change.

Also notable is that supporters for each of the center-left options say they would be more likely to vote for their current progressive choice if they were assured that a coalition would be created if Stephen Harper were to win the most seats. These issues may well become moot if the Liberals do break away but so far we see a pretty even deadlock. Moreover, while the public tell us they see either a Liberal or Conservative minority as the equiprobable outcome of the election, we would not discount the Conservatives still securing a majority. This is by no means the most likely outcome, but the Conservatives are in the same range today as they were in our late polling during the 2011 campaign – and we all know how that played out.

Having set the stage for assessing what will shape the final outcome of this election, let's conclude with some of the polling challenges. There has been some controversy about what the current voter intention outlook is and whether this is breaking. We don't see any break at this time. We do see some modest differences in our live interviewer and IVR results with the Liberals faring better with live interviewer and the Conservatives doing better with the robot. Is this a reflection of the 'shy Tory' effect in presence of a live interviewer? That is unclear but we do

know that our IVR methods which underestimated Conservative support in 2011 and we are skeptical that they are overestimating them this time out.

There has also been some buzz about what is really going on in Quebec. Regardless of whether one weights Quebec internally or with national demographics (we don't see any significant differences either way) we see four important developments in Quebec. The NDP have declined and both the Conservative and Liberal Parties have risen into what is now a pretty stable three way tie. We also find that Quebecers are far less engaged in this election than other Canadians. The tied race is highly segmented regionally with the Conservatives doing much better outside of the Montreal area and Western Quebec. We also see the Bloc Québécois flagging and unlikely to be much of a force on the 19th. Quebec has turned into a very interesting and important race given these shifts and the fact that the Conservatives can do quite well there may offset what appear to be imminent losses to the Liberals in Ontario.

The election outcome will hinge on who is most engaged around the values issues. The higher the levels of overall engagement, the higher the turnout and the poorer Mr. Harper's prospects. Of great interest is the huge advance turnout which we have been tracking in our polling as well. Interestingly both the Conservatives and Liberals are running neck and neck there and the NDP isn't doing very well.

We conclude with a final note on the cellphone population. While this may seem like an area of technical obscurantism we think this segment will be critical to the outcome of the election. In the last election we were further off the final result for having included this segment that were less likely to vote and less likely to favour the Conservatives. Those two features are still very much in play this time with the notable difference that the cellphone only population is now at least three times larger and tells us they are much more certain to vote than they told us last time. The cellphone only population contains lots of the younger and educated respondents who tell us they are extremely engaged and motivated by the values war that seems to underlie this election. If they show up Harper loses; if they don't he wins.