

A Referendum on Electability – The 2013 LPC Leadership Race

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The day that the Liberal Party of Canada (LPC) announced its leadership results, I attempted an experiment with administering a ‘virtual exit poll.’ I set up a 10-15 minute online survey. Just when the leadership results were announced, I posted a link to the survey several times on twitter and Facebook ads began to run that were targeted at LPC supporters. Respondents were entered into a draw for one of ten \$20 Tim Horton’s cards as an incentive.

Unfortunately, the experiment did not work. Depending on where the question was placed in the survey, 200 to 330 out of the 104,000 LPC voters completed the survey. As such, the attrition rate was rather high as the survey went along. Over half of these respondents were from Ontario, while the other respondents were scattered throughout Canada. Of the 324 respondents who stated their first choice in the leadership, the breakdown was as follows: 66% Trudeau, 15% Hall-Findlay, 12% Murray, McCrimmon 3%, Cauchon 2% and Coyne 2%). Registered supporters made up approximately 30% of the sample. In this sense, the sample under-represents Trudeau voters and over-represents voters from Ontario and Hall-Findlay supporters.

When using a convenience sample, such a small sample size prevents me from presenting firm findings about voter behaviour in the LPC leadership race. On the bright side, the LPC in Saskatchewan did e-mail the survey to their members at the same time. Using this method, I got about 350 or 15% of the Liberal leadership voters in Saskatchewan to fill out the entire survey. The lesson is that you can’t do ‘end run’ around parties in surveying One-Member-One-Vote leadership races in Canada. You basically need their co-operation or you are out of luck. I will be using the 350 respondent sample of Saskatchewan Liberals for a future academic paper. However, in this blogpost I will use the other sample of 330 Liberals outside of Saskatchewan to glean some tentative conclusions about why Trudeau won in such a landslide. That is really my question. We knew that Trudeau would probably win the LPC leadership...but why did he win so big?

The intent of the questionnaire was to test what factors influenced LPC voters when they decided to choose their preferred leadership candidate. To limit the length of the survey, I asked questions concerning only the top three candidates (Justin Trudeau, Joyce Murray, and Martha Hall Findlay). The results are presented below. The sample for these results ranges from 330 LPC voters for questions placed at the beginning of the survey to 200 for question placed at the end of the survey.

While this sample should not be considered ‘representative’ in a scientific sense, it does give us some clues to the strength of the brand that Trudeau developed among LPC members and registered supporters during the leadership campaign. From the data that I have gathered, Trudeau had significant advantages over his two nearest

competitors in all areas of the campaign. However, the areas where Trudeau had the largest advantages were ideology, voter contact, endorsements, and electability. The biggest factor in Trudeau's win was his ability to convince LPC that he was the candidate that would win the party the most seats in the next election. Contributing to his image of electability, respondents felt that Trudeau was a good speaker who looked good on television and that he could provide inspiring, compassionate, and strong leadership to appeal to those who did not vote for the Liberals in the last election. When it came to electability, Trudeau seemed to be a near perfect 10 and that is why he won in a landslide.

But, I did say a 'near' perfect 10. The data does reveal some of what the Liberals who took this survey regarded to be their new leader's liabilities and it reads like a Conservative Party attack ad. We can see some of the criticism of Trudeau as 'policy lite' coming out. Despite having a much larger and better funded campaign machine, the respondents in the survey were no more aware of Trudeau's policies than they were aware of the policies of his two closest competitors. Further, the respondents in the survey were somewhat skeptical about Trudeau's understanding of the economy and his experience outside politics. Compared to Trudeau, they saw Martha Hall Findlay as the more knowledgeable and intelligent candidate who had a better grasp of the economy and superior experience outside of politics. Murray was seen as an honest and moral candidate who had good experience inside and outside politics. Though they couldn't match his style, Hall Findlay and Murray were seen as having some of the substance that Trudeau lacked.

Ideology and Policies

My data indicates that Trudeau did a very good job at positioning himself in the middle of the left/right ideological spectrum of the Liberal Party. Respondents were asked to place themselves, Trudeau, Murray, and Hall-Findlay on an 11-point scale with 0 being the far left of the LPC and 10 being the far right of the LPC. The mean placement for the LPC voters was 5.96, which was close to how they judged Trudeau who scored 6.15. The other two candidates were judged to be more on the ideological extremes of the LPC. Hall-Findlay was viewed as being on the right of the LPC with a score of 7.54, while Murray was viewed as being on the left of LPC with a score 3.87.

On two of the controversial issues of the campaign, the LPC voters seemed to side with Trudeau. For instance, respondents were asked to place themselves on the following scale: 0 = the Liberal Party of Canada needs find ways to co-operate with the NDP and Greens to prevent vote splitting and defeat the Conservatives in the next election and 10 = the Liberal Party of Canada should run candidates in all ridings in the next federal election and not cooperate with the NDP or the Greens in any way. The mean of 7.56 clearly leans towards Trudeau's position of non-co-operation. The Northern Gateway pipeline ended up being a divisive issue in the LPC leadership race with Hall-Findlay strongly supporting it and Murray strongly opposing it. As such, respondents were asked to indicate their position on the

following scale: “0 Liberals should oppose pipelines to bring raw bitumen from Alberta’s oil sands to the West coast and 10= Liberals should support the development of Alberta’s oil sands through the building of pipelines to West coast.” The mean of the respondents was 5.70 indicating that Trudeau’s wishy-washy position of supporting the Northern Gateway pipeline but not its current route was the safest position to take.

The fact the Trudeau was more ideologically in tune with LPC voters in the survey came out when respondents were asked how much they agreed with his policies that they had heard about. Of those who remember hearing about Trudeau’s policies, they were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a 1-5 scale (1=agreed with all of his policies, 2=agreed with most of his policies, 3=agreed with some of his policies and disagreed with others, 4= disagreed with most of his policies, 5=disagreed with all of his policies). Trudeau scored a mean of 2.14. When the same question was asked of other candidates, Hall-Findlay scored 2.71 and Murray scored 3.06.

Effectiveness of Trudeau’s Campaign Machine

Interestingly, the Trudeau campaign had an advantage over other campaigns when it came to contacting voters but it did not do a superior job at communicating Trudeau’s policy positions. On a scale of 1-6 (1= zero contact and 6=over 20 contacts), the Trudeau campaign scored a mean of 4.65 compared to 3.45 for the Hall-Findlay campaign and 3.44 for the Murray campaign. However, when respondents were asked if they remembered hearing about any of the candidates policies, Trudeau’s advantage nearly disappears. On a scale of 1-3 (1=hearing about several policies, 2=hearing about one or two policies, 3=hearing about no policies), the Trudeau campaign scored a mean of 1.57 that was relatively close to the means of 1.61 for the Murray campaign and 1.69 for the Hall-Findlay campaign.

Endorsements

As could be expected, the respondents were much more impressed with Trudeau’s endorsements than with the endorsements of the other candidates. Using a 0 to 10 scale (0=not impressed at all and 10=very impressed), respondents were asked how impressed they were with the candidates’ endorsements by “MPs and other notable people.” The mean for Trudeau was 7.00 which was much higher the mean for either Murray (4.89) or Hall-Findlay (3.80).

Electability

Trudeau’s largest advantage over his opponents was in the area of electability. The voters in the LPC leadership race who took the survey clearly believed that Trudeau was most able of the candidates to win more seats for the party in the next election. Respondents were asked: “On a scale of 0 to 10, during the leadership race, how did you rate the ability of the following candidates to win more seats for the Liberal Party of Canada in future elections? 0 = not very able to win more seats, 10 = very

able to win more seats.” Murray scored a mean of 4.89 and Hall-Findlay scored a mean of 5.48. Trudeau scored a whopping 9.88 which is close to a perfect 10! The media may have played a role here as 96% of the respondents choose Trudeau as the candidate that the media thought would win the most seats for the LPC in the next election. When asked on a 0-10 scale how favourable the media coverage of the candidates was (0=not very favourable and 10=very favourable), Trudeau scored a mean of 8.74 compared to the lower scores of Murray (6.41) and Hall-Findlay (6.14).

Leader Abilities and Character Traits

The respondents were given a list of things at which successful leaders of political parties much excel. The respondents were then asked how they rated the abilities of the three candidates in these areas based on 1-4 scale (1=poor, 2=fair, 3=good, 4=excellent). The mean scores for Trudeau were highest on “looking good on television” (3.84), “being a good public speaker” (3.65), and “being able to appeal to those who did not vote for the Liberals in the last election.” Trudeau’s lowest scores were “being hard for the Conservatives to attack” (2.34), “having good experience outside of politics” (2.62), and “understanding the economy” (2.65). By coincidence, the two latter themes were picked by the Conservatives in their first attack ads against Trudeau. Perhaps, voters in the LPC leadership race had some of the same concerns about Trudeau as the Conservatives’ focus groups.

As for Hall-Findlay, she beat Trudeau on “understanding the economy” (3.06 versus 2.65), “being hard for the Conservatives to attack” (2.69 versus 2.34), and “having good experience outside of politics” (2.91 versus 2.62). The only area where Murray beat Trudeau was her experience outside of politics (2.96 versus 2.62). Although, reflecting her standing as a MP, she did come close to beating Trudeau when it came to “having good experience inside politics”: Murray scored 2.91 to Trudeau’s 2.96. Finally, all three candidates scored nearly the same on “understanding social policy issues like healthcare and education” (Trudeau scored 3.03, Hall-Findlay scored 2.93, and Murray scored 2.92).

Similarly, respondents were given a list of positive character traits and asked how well these traits described the three candidates (1=not well at all, 2=not to well, 3=quite well, 4=extremely well). Trudeau scored highest on “inspiring” (3.62), “compassionate” (3.52), and “provides strong leadership” (3.37) and his lowest scores were on “knowledgeable” (2.93) and “sensible” (3.05). Hall-Findlay beat Trudeau when it came to “knowledgeable” (3.16 versus 2.93) and “intelligent” (3.36 versus 3.14) while her lowest scores were on “inspiring” (2.39). Murray narrowly beat Trudeau on three traits: “moral” (3.27 versus 3.22), “honest” (3.26 versus 3.24), and “knowledgeable” (2.99 versus 2.93). Murray’s weakest score was on “provides strong leadership” (2.34).

Conclusion

According to this data, Justin Trudeau won a landslide in the LPC leadership race because the campaign became a referendum on which candidate could deliver the most seats for the party in the next election. Trudeau was able to build up an image for himself in the party as the candidate who had the most endorsers, contacted LPC members and registered supporters the most, took positions that had broad support in the party, and was favoured by the media. He had an image of a compassionate and inspiring candidate who was telegenic, a good speaker, and attractive to traditionally Liberal voters who may have drifted away to support other parties. All of these factors led Trudeau to be seen as the most 'electable' candidate. Once he was seen this way, whatever reservations Liberals may have had concerning his experience outside of politics or his political knowledge faded. His campaign took on an air of invincibility and he steamrolled to victory.

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