

Governments defeat themselves

ANDREW STEELE, MAY 1, 2009 AT 10:30 AM EDT

- Post a comment
- Skip to the latest comment
- Back to the blog

One of the misconceptions of political survey analysis is that the answers are related to the questions.

What I mean by this is the idea that asking “which party would you vote for” is related to a closed-loop discrete decision between the options then listed, based on an informed and considered weighing of the recent activities, policies and messages of the leaders, caucus and supporters thereof.

The truth is that the vast majority of people have better things to do that think about the opposition at Queen's Park, or weigh the merits of them against the government.

People are busy. Unlike you and me, most of them don't read the Globe and Mail politics hub. They have jobs, kids, mortgages, hobbies and friends, and 24 is back. All these things are more important and relevant than keeping up with the latest debate in the Legislature.

So when you ask questions about their current preferences provincially, this far in between elections, you aren't actually measuring the government party against the opposition so much as the government party against a generic alternative.

The recent Nanos Research survey of Ontario politics is a good example.

The Liberals are way out in front here, but I'm not sure I agree with the analytical framework Nik Nanos uses to explain why.

"In the absence of any opposition, the Liberals are doing well," Mr. Nanos told the Toronto Star.

"The first step for a government to be in trouble is for there to be a clear counterpoint or alternative to the government. In a way, [Dalton McGuinty] is politically coasting on the fact that the New Democrats have a new leader and that the Conservatives currently have no leader."

Typically at this point in a mandate, no opposition party is clearly defined. It's between elections. The opposition is ditching failed policy planks and developing new ones while reacting to the changing course of the government's agenda.

For years, political polling in Ontario between elections was not a measure of support for Mike Harris vs. Dalton McGuinty, but support for Mike Harris vs Jean Chretien. As overall support for the federal (Liberal) government improved, the provincial Liberal numbers went up. When the PM was unpopular or getting bad press, the provincial Liberal numbers were depressed.

An argument can be made that the sky-high support for the opposition Liberals in the 1993-95 period was a reflection of Chretien, and not then-leader Lyn McLeod, and the relative unpopularity of the NDP in Ontario, combined with a ceiling on the PC vote from the toxic legacy of Brian Mulroney.

We can see some of this in place today, but in reverse.

In Ottawa, Michael Ignatieff remains an empty vessel for voters, without significant policy or character definition. That's completely normal. And that empty vessel status allows voters to project those policies or characteristics they wish to see on Mr. Ignatieff, or any other undefined political leader.

A recent Hill Times piece finds Conservative insiders reflecting on the “empty vessel” challenge:

"The media when they cover the government, they say here's what the government is doing and here's how it deviates from perfection," said the Conservative. "It's always Harper vs. the perfect prime minister, and in that battle we always lose, but that's how the daily media coverage goes: Here's how he's not living up to the ideal image."

The source said that by running negative attack ads against Mr. Ignatieff, who has enjoyed months of positive media coverage since he replaced former leader Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent-Cartierville, Que.) in December, they think Mr. Harper will come off more favourably.

"What the negative campaigning allows us to do is it sharpens the contrast and say, 'It's not Harper versus perfection,' It's Harper versus Ignatieff. Harper may not be perfect but take a look at this guy and that's sort of [how we want to] reframe the debate from the way media frames it. It's pick one Harper or Ignatieff. Because the media can't intuitively create that dichotomy, we have to pay ourselves with the paid media," said the source.

At Queen's Park, there remains significant evidence that a low profile is actually an aide in attracting higher poll numbers.

If you look at the tracking for the Ontario polity between 2003 and 2007 in Mr. Nanos' survey, you actually see that the more voters got to know John Tory, the less they were likely to vote for his party. In fact, the PCs were polling at their best during the period (during and immediately after their 2004 leadership contest) in which they only had an acting leader, due to general disgruntlement around the Liberals raising taxes. The undefined PCs represented a reasonable option for anyone unsatisfied with McGuinty, as they could simply project what they wanted to hear onto the undefined Tory.

It is actually easiest to move a party's poll numbers up without a leader who is polarizing. Caucus rat packs exposing weaknesses can build up the government's negatives while the undefined party leader can be a neutral and safe holding position for votes.

The best between-election strategy I've seen in recent years is for the front-bench of an opposition party to hold down the fort in the Legislature, using the forum to savage the government relentlessly, while the leader ignores the House most days, touring swing seats and building up local-issue credibility that can be cashed in during the writ. The leader returns to the Legislature occasionally to swoop in and offer statesmanlike solutions to the problems exposed by his lieutenants.

This entire strategy is predicated on defining the leader through TV advertising and regional appearances, rather than through the fulcrum of Question Period. Only in those contexts can a leader define him or herself as anything other than a hectoring critic of the government.

The key is to remember that during an election, when the public shuts off *24* and *American Idol* for a couple weeks and listens to the leaders in a comparative context, solid definition is critical to success. It's hard to think of a recent election won by the candidate voters thought was "least offensive" or even "most likeable." Elections in our nation go to the quick and the hard, not the kindly or meek.

Returning to the polling at hand, the numbers seem to lead to a different conclusion.

The Liberals at Queen's Park are doing surprisingly well even when measured against an undefined "generic opposition."

The underlying numbers are remarkably strong.

On Right Track/Wrong Track, the Liberals are a plus 11, with 45% saying they are on the right track and only 34% that they are on the wrong track.

McGuinty owns the Best Premier question, with 45% compared to just 15% for a generic Conservative like Bob Runciman and a surprisingly low 9% for Andrea Horwath.

What really stood out was the job performance ratings for McGuinty. Just 16% of Ontarians described his performance as poor or very poor, in the midst of the worst recession in 80 years after he brings in a Single Sales Tax.

Clearly, there is no groundswell of anger against the McGuinty Liberals out there.

But the real risk for the Liberals is that the members of the caucus or party will take these numbers as reason to relax.

That rejigged tax is not in place yet. People are not seeing it at the gas pumps, and there is just a year to get the sales pitch finished before they do.

These numbers are dangerous to the Liberals not because they show a threat from the other parties, but because they show the complete absence of a threat.

Backing off, growing arrogant, in-fighting and sloppy work threaten to defeat the McGuinty government, not the opposition.

The old saw is that "governments defeat themselves," and that is completely true.

- [Post a comment](#)
- [Skip to the latest comment](#)
- [Back to the blog](#)

[Back to Andrew Steele](#)

© Copyright 2009 CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.

CTVglobemedia

globeandmail.com and The Globe and Mail are divisions of CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc., 444 Front St. W., Toronto, ON Canada M5V 2S9
Phillip Crawley, Publisher