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[Editorial](#)
[Op-eds](#)
[Letters](#)

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The Hill Times, September 7, 2009

Political parties to focus on crucial 'swing ridings' in economic downturn campaign bid

Conservatives and Liberals to focus on 71 ridings where the margin of victory was 10 per cent or less in last election.

By Abbas Rana

The governing Conservatives and Liberals, who are in a statistical dead heat in public opinion polls nationally, will focus on the 71 swing ridings where the margin of victory was 10 per cent or less in the last federal election, say pollsters.

"Those are the ridings that are going to determine who wins the next election. Generally, in elections, very rarely do we see, what I'll call, a sea change in regards to incumbents being overturned. Usually, it's 20 per cent of the seats that are realistically in play and 80 per cent are unlikely to really change significantly. So the question is how is the battle going to shape up for those 20 per cent of those seats that all the parties are desperately going to be fighting over," said pollster Nik Nanos of Nanos Research in an interview with *The Hill Times*.

The four national political parties will focus on their held ridings and on ridings they have a realistic chance of winning.

Given the current economic situation in the country, Mr. Nanos said the political parties are unlikely to target certain demographic or voting blocks in the next campaign. Using the example of the Conservative Party, he said that they will identify certain winnable ridings across the country and then will focus on those specific ridings.

"In an economic downturn, the polling suggests that demographic factors such as race, gender, and age actually don't have as much of an influence on voting behaviour when there's an economic downturn as opposed to times when things are prosperous. The parties are just going to focus on marginal swing ridings," said Mr. Nanos. "For the Conservatives, they're just going to be looking at the electoral map and thinking where can we pick up another 10 seats, not how are we going to appeal to women or middle aged men. It's going to be much more focused and strategic where the Conservatives are just going to pick a limited number of seats, holding what they have and then picking a limited number of seats to put them over the top. That's an attainable strategy for the Conservatives. It's actually quite manageable considering the resources that they have."

Out of the 71 MPs who won by 10 per cent or less nationally in last year's federal election, 26 are Conservative, 20 Liberals, 12 NDP, 12 Bloc Québécois and one Independent MP André Arthur, who eked out a narrow victory by a margin of 1.5 per cent of the vote.

Ontario elected 28 MPs who won by a margin of 10 per cent or less, Quebec 17, British Columbia 11, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick each elected three MPs, P.E.I. and Manitoba each elected two MPs and Newfoundland and Labrador and Saskatchewan each elected one MP. The Northwest Territories and Nunavut each have one riding and both were elected with a margin of less than 10 per cent of the vote.

In interviews last week, pollsters said that based on the polls last week, it's reasonable to assume that Canadians will elect another minority Conservative or a Liberal government, but added that it's still too soon to make any substantive predictions.

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"The outcome is going to be close. How close it's going to be, we don't know yet," said Greg Lyle, managing director of the polling firm Innovative Research Group in Toronto, told *The Hill Times*.

Mr. Lyle said one of key factors to play a role in the next election is how the Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke-Lakeshore, Ont.) is defined to Canadians.

"The big issue, in terms of how close the election is going to be is: who gets to define Ignatieff. Does Ignatieff get defined by the Liberals or by his opponents," said Mr. Lyle.

The federal Conservatives ran six English and French TV and online attack ads against Mr. Ignatieff across the country in May and June. The multi-million-dollar ads attacked Mr. Ignatieff's commitment to Canada and suggested that Mr. Ignatieff is "just visiting" because he returned to Canada, after spending 34 years in the U.S. and Great Britain, just to be Prime Minister. The ads said if Mr. Ignatieff fails to win power, he'll leave Canada again.

The Liberals will release their own TV ads after Labour Day projecting a positive image of Mr. Ignatieff whose message is "We can do better."

Meanwhile, one Tory source told *The Hill Times* that considering the outcome of the next election is highly likely to be close, the Conservatives will focus on issues to target specific voter groups to win the next election. The source cited the example of the home-renovation tax credit issue.

According to the Department of Finance website, the home renovation tax credit "will provide up to \$1,350 in tax relief, reduce the cost of renovations for an estimated 4.6 million Canadian families." This tax credit is available only if the renovation cost exceeds \$1,000 and up to a maximum of \$10,000 worth of work or materials.

MPs are expected to vote on the tax credit issue soon after they return for the fall House session on Sept. 14. Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, Que.) announced last week that his party won't vote against the tax credit which means that even if the New Democrats and the Liberals vote against it, the bill will be passed unless Tories attach some item to the bill deemed unacceptable to all the opposition parties.

Currently, Conservatives hold 143 seats in the House, the Liberals 77, the Bloc 48, and the New Democrats have 36. There's one Independent MP and three vacancies. To defeat the Harper government, the three opposition parties will have to vote together, but to survive confidence votes, the Conservatives need the support of only one opposition party.

A Canadian Press-Harris Decima poll of 1,000 Canadians released in June indicated that "more than one in three Canadians plan to take advantage of the federal government's home-renovation tax credit."

Meanwhile, should the Harper government be defeated on the tax credit bill, according to a list put together by popular website Pundits' Guide for *The Hill Times*, there are 13 unheld Tory ridings across the country with the highest percentage of home ownership that the Tories are highly likely to target. Of these, six are Ontario ridings, five are B.C., one in Alberta and one in Northwestern Territories.

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