

What issues are working — and not working — for the federal parties?^[1]

Thanks to AI polling from Advanced Symbolics, we have insight into what's resonating most with voters

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Source: TVO

Format: Article

Publication Date: 7 Sep 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online^[2]

EXCERPTS

With two weeks to go in Canada's 44th general-election campaign, all the parties now find themselves in complicated territory.

If it's accurate that most of the electorate truly doesn't pay attention to the hustings until after Labour Day, well, we're now here. And with two leaders' debates this week — one in French, one in English — this may be the last chance the parties have to make their pitches before the reality they all face gets baked in. At some point, the voters decide, and as former cabinet minister Sergio Marchi once told me, "You can stand upside down and spit loonies, and nothing will change their minds."

Enter Polly.

Advanced Symbolics' Erin Kelly has been a frequent visitor both on air and online at TVO, because her artificial-intelligence algorithm, nicknamed "Polly" (after politics) combines old-fashioned polling with social-media engagement to deliver some fascinating data.

ASI has been doing a three-month-long deep dive into what Canadians are thinking — and whether the issues are truly sticking or are just here today and gone tomorrow.

What issues are boosting Liberal fortunes? Polly shows the uncivil, bordering on disgraceful, protests are considered so anti-democratic by large chunks of the electorate that they're creating sympathy and support for Justin Trudeau. In other words, the protesters are having the exact opposite effect that they intend. If they don't know this, maybe they should consider it before they threaten any more campaign workers, scream at children for wearing masks, or brandish signs with the F-bomb on them.

For the Conservatives, criticizing the government's handling of the Afghanistan rescue mission in the campaign's early days was boosting their numbers; however, the data shows that's now declining as an issue.

"The Conservatives need to find something else or keep the Afghanistan issue alive" to keep their numbers up, says Kelly on a Zoom meeting from her home office in the National Capital Region.

Interestingly, the economy is an issue that plays well for both major parties. The Liberals' economic measures to help people during the pandemic (the Canada Emergency Response Benefit and other subsidies) boost their numbers, while expressing concern about the cost of living help the Conservatives.

The child-care agreements Trudeau has signed with most of the provinces (but notably not Ontario, yet) are a huge boost for the Liberals. "But Erin O'Toole's position is tanking everywhere," Kelly says. The Conservative leader has been non-committal when asked whether he'd keep the current agreements in place.

The biggest drag on Liberal fortunes currently are the sexual-harassment scandals, both in the military and related to the party's former sitting member in Kitchener Centre, Raj Saini, who's been accused by four former staffers of making inappropriate sexual advances. Trudeau's answers to repeated questions on this issue have been painfully awkward and unsatisfying.

For New Democrats, hammering the Liberals on the lack of a national pharmacare program is resonating. Leader Jagmeet Singh's earlier criticism of high cellphone costs scored big engagement with the electorate earlier in the campaign, but, for whatever reason, has dropped off the grid now.

Singh's call for higher taxes on the "ultra-rich" scores well among NDP supporters, but Polly suggests the issue doesn't resonate at all with those leaning Liberal or Conservative. If that's the case, the issue isn't helping the NDP as the party had hoped, because it needs to pick off unhappy Liberals and Conservatives to improve its showing.

Finally, Polly says one of the sleeper issues of the campaign could be abortion. The recent law passed by the Texas state legislature significantly restricting abortion rights brought tremendous engagement on social media across Canada.

"Abortion wasn't an issue until Texas," says Kelly.

O'Toole was asked directly whether, as a pro-choice leader, he'd commit to not appointing one of his 40 pro-life candidates as health minister. He declined to make that commitment. In the TVA French-language debate last Thursday, Bloc Québécois leader Yves-François Blanchet scored by accusing O'Toole of being "a pro-choice leader of a pro-life party" — a charge that scores well in Quebec, where social conservatism is a non-starter with the vast majority of the electorate.

Polly discovered that only 5 per cent of Canadians are so pro-life that they want legislation banning abortion. "However, they are overrepresented in the Conservative party," Kelly says. "They're maybe 20 to 30 per cent of the Conservative party's base."

What does all this mean? It means the leaders now have hard data upon which to base their attacks in this week's leaders' debates. They know what issues will score with their bases and could help attract new supporters.

And now you know why they'll be talking about those issues, too.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/election> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-programs>