

THE “BALLOT QUESTION” IN THE 2011 ELECTION: TWO WINS, TWO LOSSES

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Framing the ballot question is the most important task of any party leader in a national election. Is it “time for a change” or time to “stay the course”? Should voters “give real change a chance,” or is it time to “throw the bums out”?

The ballot question is each party leader’s key differentiator from the others — the strategic political formulation that summarizes the “big issue” of the election and frames the choice to be made by voters. The ballot question is always a call to action, because it makes more sense to ask people choose a positive end. It also helps if a ballot question is adaptable, capable of being tweaked, refined or pivoted, subject to unexpected developments in a campaign.

Parties and their leaders devote a great deal of time and energy to defining the ballot question. It does not jump fully formed from the leader’s lips on day one of the campaign, and often takes years of preparation to be ready for deployment. The first lesson from election 2011 is that framing the right ballot question is absolutely critical in obtaining the desired outcome. The second is that the wrong ballot question can lead to disaster, massive changes in voter preference and tectonic shifts in the political landscape.

The ballot question crafted by Stephen Harper for the 2011 election was an appeal for a “strong, stable, national,

majority Conservative government,” and it was based on four key elements:

- His government’s record of economic stewardship;
- Fear of the opposition coalition (the Bloc Quebecois and high-tax policy alternatives);
- Minority fatigue and the “unnecessary” election;
- All leading directly to the appeal for a majority to reward performance, end the uncertainty of minorities and prevent the coalition.

For the Conservatives, creation of the ballot question for 2011 began immediately after the 2008 election, which had occurred in the midst of the global economic meltdown that fall. While Canada avoided the brutal financial collapse experienced in the United States, our economy shed more than 400,000 jobs. In the January 2009 federal budget, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty announced a two-year \$40 billion economic stimulus package to support jobs and growth. While many Conservatives winced at the resulting deficit, the stimulus was ultimately delivered on time and as promised, and Canadians came to credit the government with helping to ease the economy out of recession and back into recovery. By the spring of 2011, all of the lost jobs had been recovered, and then some.

The Harper Conservatives’ record of economic stewardship thus became the bedrock on which their ballot question

was based. Without that, nothing else was possible. It enabled the Prime Minister not only to claim credit for helping the country emerge from the global recession, but also to keep the focus on the economy; hence, the appeal for a stable majority to support

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his “low-tax plan to complete the economic recovery, create jobs now and keep taxes down for Canadian families.”

The second element of the ballot question was the opposition coalition. In the wake of his party’s failure to win a majority in 2008, Mr. Harper’s Conservatives had inserted a sucker punch into the 2008 fall economic update, a proposal to end the \$2 per vote political party subsidy created by the Chretien government in 2003. The opposition parties acted with predictable fury and led by Stéphane Dion, announced they had negotiated an agreement through which the Liberals and NDP would displace the Conservatives and govern with the support of the Bloc Québécois.

While this short-lived opposition coalition was a near-death experience for the Conservatives, it also provided them with some positive lessons for the future. The first was that while the voters had just denied Stephen Harper a majority, many Canadians clearly believed that with the largest number of seats, he had “won” the election. Many were upset that the mandate just delivered was about to be denied and hijacked by a “coalition of losers” as Mr. Harper effectively described Mr. Dion, Mr. Layton and Mr. Duceppe.

The second lesson was that any future involvement of the separatist BQ in an alternative government scenario was poisonous in the minds of many Canadians. The inclusion of Gilles Duceppe in the three leaders’ signing ceremony in the fall of 2008 did irrevocable damage to the notion

of a coalition. Harper clearly understood that earnest and existential arguments over whether coalitions or other less formal arrangements were natural or legitimate in the Canadian context would be swept aside by this fear. In his hands, the term “coalition”

became a proxy for any or all of the options — merger of two parties, an actual coalition of two parties supported by a third, a written agreement of any number of parties covering a set time period, or case by case cooperation — the details didn’t matter. “Coalition” became the ultimate proof point in Harper’s quest for a majority in 2011 — the need to prevent a situation where the federal government could be controlled in any way, shape or form by the Bloc Québécois.

The final elements of Mr. Harper’s ballot question—minority fatigue and the unnecessary election—were two sides of the same coin, but essential features all the same. That voters were tired of minority governments was obvious; with Canada in its fourth national election in seven years, it was easy for Harper to appeal for an end to the uncertainty through a stable majority. As far as the unnecessary election was concerned, the Liberals might have seen this one coming. Michael Ignatieff had received major national blowback when he proclaimed “Stephen Harper, your time is up,” in September of 2009, a mere eleven months after the previous election. Throughout the 2011 campaign, there was both polling and anecdotal evidence that voters resented the election and were angry at its \$300 million cost, and that they saw no pressing national issue requiring an election. This was a huge misread of what was in the minds of Canadians.

Every Leader of the Opposition faces a difficult choice in the run-up to a national election. Do you get your

policy platform out several months ahead and have the time to explain it and sell it? Or do you hold the platform for the election campaign and then take it to the people during the writ period? In 2011, the Liberals opted for the latter because they thought they had a better idea. Unfortunately for them, it was a really bad one.

The Liberals’ central ballot question failed in 2011 because it was founded on a massive fallacy, namely that once they got Stephen Harper into a national campaign and exposed his true character, Canadians would be appalled at his “pattern of contempt, the pattern of disrespect, the pattern of abuse of our democracy,” as Ignatieff said at the start of the campaign.

Like the Conservatives’ ballot question, this particular narrative had been a long time developing. Throughout the previous Parliament, the Liberals had seized upon every mistake, embarrassment or controversial decision made by the government and trumpeted each as a world-class scandal. The media cooperated, providing breathless coverage of this “march of audacities,” as Lawrence Martin described them in *Harperland*. The Liberals came to believe passionately that they had a mountain of evidence proving that the Prime Minister was a mean-spirited control freak and unfit for office. As one anonymous Ignatieff senior advisor delicately put it in *Harperland*, “People think he’s a dictator, a nasty bastard who is power crazy.”

The first problem with this approach was that in making everything the Conservatives did a “scandal” the Liberals devalued the very idea of scandal. The fevered pitch of criticism maintained by the Liberals in the last Parliament became easy to discount as the usual “partisan bickering in Ottawa,” as the Prime Minister so effectively put it during the English-language debate. The undifferentiated strident attacks became so over the top that they helped create the Teflon that covered the Conservatives in the elec-



CBC photo

Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff in his “disastrous” interview with CBC news anchor Peter Mansbridge. Ignatieff couldn’t resist answering a hypothetical question about an opposition coalition in the event the election returned a minority House. At a critical moment in the campaign, the middle of the fourth week, this played right into Stephen Harper’s narrative that he needed a majority to avert an opposition coalition.

tion. What the Liberals missed was that everyone across the country already knew Ottawa didn’t work anymore; what they wanted to hear from Ignatieff was some positive alternatives.

The second problem was that little of this registered with the people who counted, namely the voters. Over two and a half years, the Liberals had convinced themselves that Canadians were hanging on their every accusatory question, their every mocking put down of the hapless and/or deceitful Conservatives. While the Conservatives certainly deserved criticism on some fronts — what government doesn’t — many of the so-called scandals were “inside the Queensway”

and little more than political esoterica, far removed from the everyday concerns of Canadians. And once introduced by Ignatieff into the campaign, they required a good ten minutes of description and exposition to convey the point.

At the start of the campaign, on March 28, Randy Boswell of Postmedia News presciently captured the uphill challenge the Liberals had set for themselves:

The tale the Liberal leader has promised to tell Canadian voters has a lot of minor characters and plot twists that aren’t easy for a casual observer of politics to keep straight.

Quick: Can you define prorogation? Why did the head of Statistics Canada quit his job? Who was that ousted nuclear watchdog? And why does Ignatieff’s ‘contempt’ story have chapters entitled ‘In-and-out’, ‘Not’, and ‘Bruce Carson’s girlfriend’?

Ignatieff’s...challenge will be holding the attention of his audience while he tells this complicated tale. But will Canadians see it as a masterpiece of truth-telling or a forgettable piece of pulp fiction?

As it turned out, the NDP probably didn’t need a ballot question in 2011;

they had Jack! But they didn't know this at the beginning of the campaign, so they went out with a relatively simple and straightforward proposition. As Mr. Layton put it in his campaign kick-off speech, "Ottawa is broken. And it's time for us to fix it." His fix included some very practical initiatives pitched

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directly at hard-pressed middle class families, including rewarding job creators, helping families care for sick or aging relatives, fixing the pension and retirement savings systems, and improving front-line health services.

The content was not terribly inventive but it was understandable and user-friendly, and the presentation was even more so. Once past the first couple of weeks, Jack Layton on the stump was the happy warrior with a constant smile, despite his own personal adversities. And unlike the Liberals, Layton was without a dark and complex story of Conservative misdeeds. Against this negative Liberal story, Jack Layton's narrative was upbeat. He simply repeated his mantra, "Ottawa needs to change and I'm the guy to make it better," and then quickly bridged to all of those family-friendly policies that, even if they were more expensive than the others on offer, still made a fair amount of sense.

As campaign 2011 began, Harper went out hard on the coalition issue right from the opening bell. He took some criticism for beating the issue into the ground but stuck with it because it was an essential part of the frame he was building. He was inspired by Ignatieff's strange inability in the week leading up to the fall of the government to come up with a clear answer on the issue. He talked of "red doors" and "blue doors" and "big

red tents," but it was not until the morning of the election call that he formally took the coalition off the table, but by that time it was too late. He entered the campaign having allowed serious doubts about his post-election intentions to creep into the public perception.

After the first few days of the campaign, Harper reduced the references to the coalition in his speeches and began selling the budget. The coalition question subsided as a top-of-mind issue, but then in mid-campaign, Ignatieff had a disastrous interview with a relentless Peter Mansbridge, who pressed him on his post-election scenarios in the event of a Conservative minority.

There are very good reasons why experienced politicians do their best not to be drawn into answering hypothetical questions, the principal one being that they are, well, *hypothetical*. Unfortunately, Ignatieff responded with a circuitous tour of parliamentary conventions and the Governor-General's constitutional alternatives. He was factually correct, but sounded evasive and unclear on what options he might actually entertain. The likely takeaway for most Canadians? "Maybe that Harper guy has a point about that coalition thing, after all." Ignatieff had entrapped himself again in Mr. Harper's preferred ballot question. By the time he extracted himself, someone else was leading the putative coalition.

The Liberals launched their platform at the end of week one of the campaign. The launch was a slick multi-media TV presentation involving party members from across the country, chaired by a Michael Ignatieff who was at ease, relaxed and effective in his use of the medium. Despite a

couple of minor policy glitches, the platform hung together pretty well, taking a classic Liberal "run from the left" approach. Juxtaposed against the Conservatives' "jets, jails and corporate tax cuts," the Liberals' platform had a pretty compelling narrative coming together. The Liberals set off to sell it, but the problem was that they now had two ballot questions on the go, and they would find that neither the contempt issue nor the platform found many takers.

The Liberals actually tried out a third ballot question during the campaign — "who do you trust to deal with health care post 2014?" They brought it out in mid-campaign when neither their contempt issue nor their platform was gaining any traction. But the Conservatives quickly matched the Liberals' promise of a six percent growth rate for health care post 2014; they already had quietly inserted it in the out-years of the March 22 Budget. More confounding for the Liberals was an Ipsos-Reid poll that found the Liberals to be least trusted among Canadians to manage health care at 20 percent, behind 30 percent for the Conservatives and 46 per cent for the NDP. Lesson for the Liberals: if you don't know the answer, why ask the question?

For all the ballot questions they deployed in the 2011 election, the Liberals missed a surprisingly important one, and that was their own long-established brand. Damaged as it was in Quebec by sponsorship, the Liberal brand probably still retained some heft in the rest of Canada. They had a decent target too. In contrast to Paul Martin's deficit-slaying heroics of the 1990s, the Harper government had hardly been tough on federal spending in its first five years in office. All that said, Ignatieff totally ignored the Liberal record, heritage and brand equity during the campaign, and many Liberals believe it was a lost opportunity.

In addition to pursuing three different ballot questions, the Liberals also allowed themselves to lose focus at points during the campaign. When Harper encountered some heavy weather during the first two weeks — the Carson revelations, the leaked Auditor General’s report on G8 spending, the debate about the debate, and the restrictions on attendance at Conservative rallies — Ignatieff spent days talking about these irrelevancies when he should have been selling his party and his plan.

The full story of Jack Layton’s triumph in Quebec is yet to be written, but at the risk of being simplistic, three points bear mentioning. First, under the radar and unnoticed by most observers, the NDP had been quietly building their support in that province, raising their popular vote from four per cent in 2004, to eight per cent in 2008, and to 12 per cent in 2011. That meant the NDP had a reasonable base from which to build when friendly lightning struck in 2011. Second, while signs of Bloc Quebecois fatigue were clearly evident in the 2008 election, the Conservatives had breathed new life into a faltering Bloc campaign with their cultural cutbacks and their tough approach to youth criminal justice. Gilles Duceppe knew exactly what to do with those gifts and put off what now seems the inevitable for another two and a half years.

Third, if there was a TSN turning point in Quebec in 2011, it appears to have been Gilles Duceppe’s visit to the Parti Quebecois convention on the week-end of April 16-17. In his address to the delegates, he laid out his ballot question:

We have only one task to accomplish. Elect the maximum number of sovereignists in Ottawa and then we go to the next phase — electing a PQ government. A strong Bloc in Ottawa. The PQ in power in Quebec. And everything again becomes possible.

The message could not have been more clear — a strong BQ-PQ team was planning yet another referendum to break up the country, and this threat spoke directly to the roughly 60 percent of Quebecers who are federalists. They were not the least bit interested in that, and they began the inexorable move to the NDP that culminated in their smashing victory in Quebec on election night. It wasn’t that huge a jump for many Quebec voters; once you got past sovereignty, the Bloc’s policy positions were largely social democratic at heart. But what Duceppe did not see coming was the guide these voters were following to a future without the Bloc. By battling through cancer and his hip surgery just before the election, with his

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happy disposition on the campaign and with a positive ballot question, Layton became an incredibly effective medium to sell the message.

In the end, the NDP surge in Quebec played a key role in sealing the deal for Harper and his majority. Going into the final week, the NDP were gaining on the Conservatives but were nowhere near displacing them as the front runner. But their national polling numbers were being inflated by their Quebec numbers and in the final days, this certainly made it look like they might deny. Harper his majority.

Past elections have often seen an “echo effect” between Ontario and Quebec, where a breakaway by a party

in one province causes a similar rise in support for that party in the other. As the campaign ended, the echo happened again but in the reverse. Growing NDP strength in Quebec this time prompted Ontarians to recall the Bob Rae NDP government of the 1990s and to move to Harper to deny Mr. Layton the balance of power. Here, the adaptability of Harper’s ballot question rose to the fore. It had been initially premised on the Liberals being in second place and leading the potential coalition, but it worked equally well once the NDP jumped past the Liberals. Whether a coalition was going to be organized by the Liberals or the NDP, Harper’s ballot question worked just as effectively both ways.

The 2011 election campaign is the story of four ballot questions. Duceppe’s was just wrong for the times, precipitated a massive shift in votes and brought about the collapse of his party. Ignatieff made bad choices in his ballot questions and had too many of them. Whether the problem was with the product, the salesman or the shifting focus of his campaign does not really matter; the voters were not buying. Layton proved that the right salesman with a compelling

personal narrative and the attitude of a happy warrior can take a simple ballot question and crash through glass ceilings with it. Harper’s ballot question proved that hard work and careful planning, an astute reading of the public mind, and moving forward with single-minded purpose towards the prize, can carry the day.

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