

Canadian Muslims Must Use Their Votes This Election

Canadians are about to witness one of the longest election campaigns in the country's history as Stephen Harper asked the governor general to dissolve parliament last Sunday. This leaves room for a prolonged 11-week campaign -- the lengthiest since 1872, in fact. Predictions are already dropping regularly, and seem to oscillate between the Conservative Party and the New Democrats as the most likely winner, though such forecasts are always speculative in nature.



Imam Syed Soharwardy and fellow muslims

One significant element of a lengthier campaign season is the new election laws that the Tories have pushed through. The Fair Elections Act stipulates that if the election campaign lasts more than 37 days, then each party is allowed to spend over the usual \$25 million limit at a rate of \$675,000 (roughly 1/37 of \$25 million) per day. The Conservatives amassed over \$19 million in donations by the end of last year, which dwarves the amount raised by the Liberals or the NDP by several million. That they're probably the most moneyed party in Canada means that the Tories are certainly placed to benefit most from these new spending laws.

In fact, in their latest election forecast, the Globe and Mail, using a formula that incorporates both recent polls as well as historical data, calculates that the Tories have a 61 per cent chance of winning the election, as compared to 40 per cent for the NDP and 0 per cent for the Liberals. This is a stunning figure, though, depending on the day, the percentages do fluctuate. Regardless, a 61 per cent chance for the Conservatives seems to contradict several recent forecasts that have the NDP on top, including the recent Ipsos poll released this Tuesday, which still puts the NDP a smidge above the Tories.

Canadian polling can be notoriously inaccurate, but any talk of possible change is bound to elicit more talk of what the future might look like. Democracy is based on how much these changes mirror the popular will, and each community has always had to fight for their own vision, and this year's election is of particular importance for Muslim Canadians, who have been put under the spotlight in many ways in post-9/11 Canada. The Canadian-Muslim Vote (TCMV) is a grassroots community organization that's fighting for a more inclusive Canada by getting Muslim Canadians more engaged in politics, primarily by pulling the Muslim vote for this October. There's no message on what party issue to vote for, as long as the vote is cast.

TCMV took this message to over 20 mosques this past Ramadan, asking for attendees to pledge that they will vote this fall. They also attended virtually every significant Muslim event this past year, from the popular Halal Food Fest in Mississauga to MuslimFest, one of Canada's largest Muslim arts and entertainment festivals. The non-sectarian nature of TCMV's vision and method reflects the group's willingness to work with anyone interested in increasing Muslim civic engagement. The group's coordinators range in political stripe and allegiance, and came together in an understanding that the organization's vision would be one of inclusivity. This election may very well be a milestone for Canadian Muslims, and a possible end to Conservative power will certainly change the political circumstances that have ossified in Canada's post-9/11 era.

Right now, there's a lot of talk that the NDP may be poised to dethrone the Harper Conservatives, yet the very thought of the NDP as winners in a general election is quite novel for Canada. So far, the polls suggest that the NDP are the more popular alternative for anyone looking to move away from Conservative dominance, though a good percentage of those surveyed are still undecided. Nonetheless, Darrell Bricker, the CEO of Ipsos Public Affairs, says that this year's election is a "new-school two party race, with a distinct right and a distinct left." It's a pretty strong way of framing the contest, since it shuts out the Liberals, who seem to be on a real decline lately (according to the polls, anyway).

If such a framing of this year's election turns out to be correct, then the Muslims of Canada are faced with a pretty stark choice -- for those who tend to vote strategically anyway. By no means are all Canadian Muslims enemies of the Conservative Party (12 per cent of Muslims voted Tory in 2010), but those who aren't fans tend to want "ABC," or "anything but Conservative," which means that they'll vote for whoever has the best chance at defeating Stephen Harper. This is a popular sentiment among certain Muslim Canadian circles, and it'd be interesting to see which way the community swings -- especially since most Muslim voters have traditionally leaned toward the Liberals, like they did last time in 2010 (46 per cent).

Either way, this year's election will probably mark a watershed when it comes to how the Muslims see themselves politically. Different narratives animate various camps within the community, but there seem to be sizeable movement on both ends of the spectrum. If the end result of this year's election really turns out to be a race to the finish between the NDP and the hard-right Conservatives, then it's going to be very interesting to see how a win by either party will affect the nature of Muslim political organizing in the years to come.

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