

Values: this election's turning point

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The 1991 gubernatorial race in Louisiana pitted Edwin Edwards, a Democratic candidate who had gained a reputation for corruption, against David Duke, a neo-Nazi and Ku Klux Klan member. Although Mr. Edwards was unpopular and distrusted, many Louisianans agreed that anyone was better than Mr. Duke. Bumper stickers registered grudging support: "Vote for the crook. It's important," and "Better a lizard than a wizard."

Canadian voters now face an incumbent governing party whose corrupt behaviour in the uncomfortably recent past is well known. Of course, no federal party in Canada is subjecting voters to any candidate remotely resembling David Duke -- I share the above anecdote only to illustrate the fact that, much as voters don't like a leader with his or her hand in the cookie jar, values remain a powerful force even in campaigns where corruption is on the table.

Canada's politicians seem to get it. Liberal corruption isn't off the table in this campaign, but it's not the main dish. Indeed, Canadians appear to be so deadlocked by a combination of values and regional interests that even Conservative Leader Stephen Harper's promise of a GST cut -- an idea that had slam dunk written all over it -- has thus far failed to nudge him ahead in the polls. In the interest of better understanding the values landscape in Canada as it relates to this election, Environics has created profiles of self-described supporters of each major party in Canada.

Beginning with those long-reigning Liberals, we find values that show why this centrist party has been so hard to topple: Liberal supporters look remarkably average. Strong on some of the small-c conservative values we measure, such as community involvement and everyday ethics, these Canadians sound like nice neighbours. Liberal supporters' values show why their party's flag-waving seems so effective: Liberals are strong on the patriotic values we measure, saying they feel proud of their Canadian identity and want Canada to hold a strong position in the world.

Paul Martin's tough talk about softwood lumber and America's rejection of Kyoto should play well to the choir, and Mr. Harper appears too wary of having his Conservatives seen as Republican-lite to protest very loudly. Liberal nationalism doesn't mean xenophobia: These Canadians tell us that they think people are enriched by interactions with diverse others, and that they wouldn't be unhappy if their child married a partner of another ethnic background.

Canada's two largest parties share many of the values they embrace most strongly: In their values profile, Conservatives also look like nice neighbours, strong on the everyday ethics and community involvement we found among Liberal supporters. A third value Conservative supporters share with Liberals is legacy: They want to leave the world better than they found it, and make sure their families are provided for.

Although they may want lower taxes and less government, Conservatives don't want to abandon their fellow citizens: They report a strong sense of social responsibility. Some probably exercise this social

responsibility through faith communities, as Conservative supporters are the strongest of all parties on the value religiosity. But this strong responsibility to society is not sentimental communitarianism: Conservative supporters are the most likely of all Canadian voters to believe that people who fail in life are probably getting their due. These are the folks who are most likely to own the bumper sticker, "Work harder: Thousands of welfare recipients are counting on you."

If, in the Canadian political family, the Liberals are Edith Bunker and the Conservatives are Archie (frequently at odds but sharing some fundamental values), the New Democrats are the son-in-law Meathead. The values of NDP supporters are strikingly idealistic. A major strain in the NDP values profile is a sense of openness to and connectedness with the world. NDPers are more likely than average to say they feel personally connected to the "global village" and not just to their own country, that they believe people are enriched by intercultural encounters (including marriage à la Jack Layton and Olivia Chow), and that they see interactions with people different from them as opportunities to learn and grow. NDP supporters also register considerable flexibility on matters of gender and family. The NDP profile includes concern for the environment, a willingness to question traditional authority, and a sense of social responsibility toward others.

Many might expect that the Bloc Québécois, in light of their left-leaning social and economic policies, would cleave more or less to the NDP values. In fact, we find among Bloc supporters a much more hedonistic and less idealistic world view. The Bloquistes' values profile registers an attraction to pleasure and intensity most often found among youth (Bloquistes outscore all other Canadians on the value sexual permissiveness).

No surprise: Bloc supporters score high on the value regionalism (in this context, the nation of Quebec). One fascinating finding is that Bloc supporters' single strongest value is need for status recognition. For example, 65 per cent of Bloc supporters (as compared to roughly half among the other three parties) agree that it's important "to feel one is held in esteem and respect by others."

With the values of most politically affiliated Canadians accounted for, there remain two additional groups: abstainers and the undecided. One of the greatest differences between these two groups (and a key underlying theme of the current campaign) is cynicism. Two thirds of abstainers (67 per cent) agree with the statement, "It doesn't matter what our political, economic or business leaders propose, I absolutely do not believe them," as compared to a national average of just under half (48 per cent). The undecided are considerably less cynical, and so may yet be swayed by one of the promises that are flying like machine-gun fire in this campaign. The Liberals are the most trusting of all -- which may be one reason why the Gomery commission findings haven't been more devastating; Liberals remain willing to hear their leaders' explanations, apologies and promises of a less sleazy future. Bloc supporters, second only to abstainers in cynicism, are having none of it.

Remarkably, while values remain important, most Canadians in Quebec and the Prairies seem to be in the midst of a revival of one or maybe two of the three Rs that once defined politics in this country: religion (Catholic/Protestant), race (French/English), and region.

As Stephen Harper struggles to establish more outposts in Ontario and British Columbia to complement his Prairie base, and as Quebec exiles the Liberals, federal elections in these regions are increasingly a matter of regional divisions and, to a lesser degree, the French/English divide.

Values remain of particular importance in Ontario and B.C., where serious three-party races are still the norm. Atlantic Canada, meanwhile, manages to reconcile its rich regional identity with an affection for traditional federalism Liberal-style.

Will the revival of race and region in the Prairies, Quebec and rural English Canada lead to a damaging (even nation-busting) balkanization of Canada or to a new, more mature federalism? That will depend on whether Canadians and their leaders can find their way to a thoughtful autonomy that acknowledges our interdependence -- or whether some will mistake individualism for autonomy and hit the road.

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