



The winner: John Tory and his wife Barbara Hackett as he wins the mayoralty of Toronto. What does the Toronto election portend for Campaign 2015 in the GTA? Shutterstock photo

Lessons From the Toronto Election For the GTA Federal Vote

Patrick Gossage

With their focused appeal to new Canadians in the 2011 election, the federal Conservatives were able to take a significant bite out of the swath of seats in the suburban Toronto 905 area code. And in the recent Toronto municipal elections, the immigrant and minority-heavy inner suburbs remained loyal to Doug Ford and his socially conservative platform. Perhaps a good sign for the Conservatives. But in an election that will be dominated by local and regional targeting, the Liberals and the Trudeau effect will be an important factor.

The recent municipal elections in Toronto and the wider Greater Toronto Area were closely watched in Ottawa, and rightly so. There are 23 federal seats now in Toronto—the 416 area code—and 22 in suburban 905. What voters responded to going to elect their mayors is an indication of issues and strategies that may move them in October 2015 federal election.

The Conservatives' focus on new Canadians in the 2011 federal election—in the GTA and especially the 905—con-

tributed in large measure to their achievement of a majority. Where the Conservatives held 11 seats in 905 at last dissolution, they won 21 out of 22 in 2011. And where they had no seats in 416, and hadn't won a seat in the city since 1988, they won nine out of 23 seats in Toronto itself. In the new 338-seat House of Commons, there will be 15 new seats from Ontario, 10 of them from the GTA, including seven from 905 and three from 416.

In an Ipsos-Reid/Global News poll published in early December, the Liberals were ahead in Toronto's 416 region with 46 per cent of the vote, with the NDP at 26 per cent and the Conservatives at 25 per cent. In the 905 region, the Conservatives were at 41 per cent, with the Liberals at 37 per cent and the NDP at 20 per cent.

So what were the positive and negative signs for federal parties in the latest Toronto municipal vote? In Toronto, the Conservatives might take some comfort in the fact that a right-of-centre establishment figure, John Tory, squeaked a victory over Rob Ford's brother, Doug, a social conservative who was a late arrival in the campaign. He came within 64,000 votes of the frontrunner. The left-leaning Olivia Chow, widow of Jack Layton, was a distant third.

On the other hand, in the 905 races of Brampton, Markham, Mississauga and Vaughan, mayoral candidates with backgrounds in federal or provincial Liberal positions beat out the competition.

So, it's a challenge to parse the meaning of these outcomes. But a closer look at the Toronto race reveals fascinating divisions that remain between the inner city and inner suburbs, divisions so well exploited by Ford that Tory's "One Toronto" slogan looks a bit empty compared to voting patterns in the two distinct areas. The continuing polarization between poorer immigrants and the struggling denizens of the inner suburbs and the old downtown "elites" may foreshadow trends that will echo in the next federal election. As far as Toron-

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to goes, the immigrant and minority-heavy inner suburbs remained loyal to Ford and his socially conservative platform. Perhaps a good sign for the Conservatives.

Not to be overlooked is Ford's amazingly successful campaign strategy of focusing his campaign on Tory's privileged background. This very Republican strategy was evident when Ford told those most suffering from high unemployment and reduced expectations that an \$800 a plate lunch "is more money than some families make in a week!" He went on to claim that Tory "is down there to represent the downtown elites," throwing in "the lobbyists" and "political insiders"—obviously those who don't care about the travails of the working family.

This strategy might appeal to the Conservatives in taking what's left of the Liberals' fortress Toronto. Harper tried it in a speech to a Conservative convention in the fall of 2013: "Were not the party of entitlement, not guided by power or privilege." He may not want to go that far again, but his people are watching and all the goodies and tax breaks for families is in direct line with this kind of strategy. So is Justin Trudeau's pedigree as the son of a wealthy prime minister.

Trudeau rails against divisive politics, which are so much part of the Conservatives' playlist, simply because divisions exist and can be exploited. Finding local wedge issues with which to leverage support are a fact of the new political landscape. The cheap politics of setting one sector of the population against another almost worked for Ford. Harper's appeal to the immigrant and suburban vote is more subtle, but we will see more policy directed to their specific needs and concerns in the 905 as Oc-

tober 2015 approaches. In the GTA ridings won by Peter Kent and Joe Oliver, Harper's unrelenting support of Israel ensured support from the large Jewish vote.

The Toronto election was also a policy victory for continuing avoidance of raising taxes. This feeds the Conservative playlist. Public sector austerity is now received wisdom at every level of politics in Canada. Take the absurd counter claims made by Tory and Chow promising various versions of "no new taxes." This will be echoed in the federal campaign as Mulcair and Trudeau fight over who is the best guardian of the public purse. Harper has likely already won this debate.

However, in a federal election that will be dominated by local and regional targeting, the Liberals and the Trudeau effect will be an important factor. In the October 27 by-election in Whitby-Oshawa, a "safe" Conservative seat occupied by the late Jim Flaherty, the Liberal candidate came within 8.5 points of the Conservative and the NDP was reduced to a very distant third with only eight per cent of the vote. The Conservatives need the NDP to do much better than that in vote-splitting with the Liberals across the 905.

Overall, recent municipal and by-elections results have been bad news for the NDP. In Toronto, the "progressive" left was well represented by Chow. She talked after-school programs for kids, youth employment and social housing and was well ahead in polling in the spring, only to see her lead dissolve as Tory's slick transit-centred appeal and disciplined campaign seized the "anybody but the Fords" vote. She started 20 points ahead, and finished 20

points behind. It's clear that old style NDP rhetoric, and its focus on the less advantaged members of society, increasingly falls on deaf ears. And Trinity-Spadina, her old downtown Toronto seat, fell in a by-election to Trudeau Liberal recruit, former city councillor Adam Vaughan.

Unfortunately for the NDP, in this environment, "have-nots" get left behind as income gaps grow. A guaranteed annual income – recommended in 1985 by the Macdonald Royal Commission—is a long dead issue. Federally, we will be left with tinkering at the edges of major national issues like child poverty, social housing and the plight of aboriginal peoples. If Barack Obama—who once called income inequality "the defining issue of our time"—has barely mentioned it since, can we really expect any of our politicians to dare address this division in our society? And the NDP, as it tries to become a centrist party, is unlikely to make this even a rhetorical plank.

The "average Canadians" most affected by budget balancing and tax reductions are those that rely most on the services that get cut as a result. This connection between reduced services and tax cuts has been poorly exploited by other parties for obvious reasons.

A critical policy that helped Tory win in Toronto poses a huge challenge for federal parties. His multi-billion "Smart Track" for new above-ground transit requires major federal and provincial funding. The Conservatives' piecemeal and short-term approach to infrastructure funding shows little promise of coming to his rescue. So far, Trudeau has not released any more generous urban agenda. However, Adam Vaughan was lured into running by a Trudeau promise to address housing and transit in his platform. He is spearheading a social housing strategy that will be part of the Liberal pitch to urban voters.

Both Conservatives and Liberals will be looking riding by riding in the GTA to see how many votes there are

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in enhanced urban goodies.

Degraded infrastructure and unsustainable levels of social housing pose a far larger conundrum for cities. They are unable alone to solve the social and transportation issues that so affect their working poor due to one of the most troubling current realities. The federal government has so many ways to generate revenue and cities have so few. However much cities and provinces (particularly Ontario) continue to rail against Ottawa's unwillingness to more fairly divide the revenue pie, it's doubtful any federal government would willingly meet these demands. Hardly a ballot question federally, in any case.

So, on balance, the results in the GTA overall—short of major and daring pro-urban policy moves by Trudeau—demonstrate that big new spending may not garner votes, that stability and good management still

trumps social spending, and that "wasteful government" spending and a feeling of disconnect between voters and "elites" can still be exploited politically.

It's somewhat shameful that the major fiscal challenges facing cities are unlikely to light up the next federal election. And that suburban, inner urban divisions will be exploited rather than bridged, as I vainly hoped in a spring article for this magazine. John Tory ran on the slogan of "One Toronto". We are still a long road away from any federal party running on "One Canada". **P**

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