



Stephen Harper kept saying the election was “not about me.” Millennial voters were not so sure. Tumbler image

## Death by a Million Clicks: How the Tories Failed to Win Millennials

Grace MacDonald

*In this election campaign, public perceptions of leaders, especially among millennials, were shaped and shifted more than ever on social media. Youth turnout at the polls, especially in advance voting, was unprecedented. The combination of social media impact and millennial voter engagement was likely a key factor in the outcome. Montreal millennial Grace MacDonald looks at the campaign for her target demographic.*

**A**n awful lot can happen in two months. That kind of time span could be a decent chunk of a sports season or a solid childhood summer vacation. This year's election campaign took even longer, clocking in at a record 78 days; long enough for an entire battalion of young Canadians to reach voting age.

Surprisingly, one subset of the population that didn't lose steam was the youth vote (as none of us call ourselves), a group often dismissed as being unreachable due to its apathy. But apathy is the one thing that

we didn't see this year—at least not from millennials. From the Montreal protests of Printemps '15 to the highest youth turnout in recent memory, young Canadians have shown that they have plenty to say about policy. Many have chalked this up to the success of Barack Obama's 2008 campaign, which was the most successful so far in harnessing the youth demographic, and which triumphed partly because of it.

Everyone loves an underdog story. The Green Party's exclusion from campaign events such as the major debates might have earned them sympathy regardless, but Elizabeth May managed to turn it into an opportunity to sass her way into the spotlight with a parallel performance on Twitter that made her a star with young voters on social media. But it takes more than sass to win votes, and the Greens held on to May's single seat based on her policy and personality; but also made no gains.

While the NDP tried energetically to overcome the burden of the much beloved Jack Layton's popularity and relatability, Mulcair never quite connected on social media, and his efforts to do so registered among young voters—and possibly the wider electorate—as inauthenticity. While door-knocking with a group of nearly a dozen Liberal volunteers in Montreal, we crossed paths with a posse of NPD knockers only two strong.

This played out on Election Day when the former Orange Wave votes jumped ship, with moderates across the country shifting to red, and even the moderate right shifting over. The gains for the Bloc took some of us by surprise, but perhaps they shouldn't have. Nine years is an awfully long time, and even Bloc voters whose ideals align with Stephen Harper's have gotten sick of him, but they were hardly about to give more power to the Liberals; no matter how frustrated they were with the Tories.

**H**aving burned through a great deal of their goodwill, it probably would have ben-

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efitted the Tories with young voters to enter the race with a fraction more humility and self-awareness transmitted on social media. There's been an unusual amount of discussion regarding social media in this election, and it began before the campaign was launched, which should have given both the NDP and the Conservatives to plan social media strategies that were more than just an extension of their press releases.

Social media is typically deeply Americentric in both its news and the lens through which that information is ingested. And while most of it was the expected intelligent (or otherwise) discourse, there was also a surprising burst of memes and macros, most of them mocking Harper himself. No matter how many times he claimed that this election was not about him, the photomanipulations and humour posts certainly were: and once millennials started to edit cartoon sex toys into his wire photos, his fate was most likely sealed.

And right before the election itself, Harper affiliated himself with a known racist, sexist addict; and it turned out that what the public knew about Rob Ford at the time was only the tip of the iceberg. Almost immediately after Harper aligned himself with the Toronto sideshow of the Ford brothers, excerpts were leaked from *Uncontrollable*, the insider's story of Ford's spiral into abusing not only hard drugs, but the people around him. To anyone with a news-feed and a memory span longer than a week, the damage was done.

**A** lot of these gaffes can be traced to the same source, which is that the Conservatives have been the slowest to adapt. They're used to operating in a world

where it was difficult, but still possible, to control the flow of information and therefore opinion. Information is the currency of this political age, and it flows faster than ever before in human history: secrets are now an endangered species.

Mulcair was eclipsed by Trudeau on social media, but the mainstream news made up for it in defining him for politically engaged millennials: In attempting to be more appealing, the NDP leader watered himself down to the point of watering down his party's positions.

Funnily enough, Trudeau's online presence truly exploded after the win: when the rest of the world discovered that our new leader is conventionally attractive. Apparently, this is such a rare quality in a politician that global citizens had no idea how to react, other than loudly expressing their lust on Twitter. Ironically, the same young demographic that may be called shallow by opponents for helping him win a majority has been largely unimpressed by this. Personal and political blogs have decried this reaction for glossing over Trudeau's flaws; reminding us that while he might be preferable to the alternatives, that doesn't mean he's perfect.

But he is a welcome change, and one that was a long time coming. From the campaign length to the voter turnout, this year's election broke records; we can only hope that *one* of those sets a new precedent. Because if campaigns keep getting longer, the debate schedule will start looking like a hockey season. **P**

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