

DATA DIVE WITH NIK NANOS

ELECTION UNCERTAINTY

Although the polls suggest a positive environment for the federal Liberals to call an election, campaigns remain double-edged swords. And despite stronger numbers for the Grits, that gap could close quickly

OPINION

Nik Nanos is the chief data scientist at Nanos Research, a global fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, a research professor at the State University of New York in Buffalo and the official pollster for The Globe and Mail and CTV News.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau recently mused that the House of Commons was toxic. He pointed to the difficulty in passing legislation, as well as the unprecedented parliamentary admonishment of Public Health Agency of Canada president Iain Stewart, a public servant, for not turning over unredacted documents involving the firing of two scientists at a government laboratory in Winnipeg. Mr. Trudeau's solution seems to be to call an election.

In a twist, the view that Parliament has been dysfunctional is unlikely to align with a probable Liberal campaign strategy to run on the government's record. Even facing a minority Parliament, the Liberals have been able to push significant stimulus out the door to help individuals and businesses weather the pandemic. More importantly, after some fits and starts, the vaccination campaign has been a success, with Canada among the top countries in the world administering COVID-19 jabs.

Is "toxicity" in Parliament reason enough to call an election? If the government had not been able to pass the legislation it needed to respond to the pandemic, an election would be in order. That is clearly not the case.

Has it been a rough-and-tumble time in Canadian politics? Yes. Are there differences of opinions between the federal political parties? Absolutely. Are the opposition parties working to put a spotlight on the inadequacies of the government of the day? For sure. But that is their job. If Parliament was all sunny days, some would view that as a marker that we are not in a well-functioning democracy.

The risk for the Liberals is that they may very well be too clever by half as they stand in judgment of the electorate.

Canada's last federal election was a "joyless outcome." The Liberals were disappointed at not winning a majority. The Conservatives could not believe Andrew Scheer. The NDP could not recapture the excitement from the Layton-Mulcair era.

But a clever strategist would push for an election.

A look at the most recent election suggests that the Liberals were a whisker from winning a majority in the House and losing the popular vote at the same time. Out of 17 million votes cast,

they were only about 21,000 votes short in 13 ridings of winning a majority.

Meanwhile, the polling numbers currently look exceptionally strong for the Liberals. In the latest Nanos tracking poll, they enjoy a double-digit lead over Erin O'Toole's Conservatives (Liberals 38 per cent, Conservatives 24 per cent, NDP 20 per cent, Greens 8 per cent, Bloc 5 per cent, People's Party 4 per cent, nationally). The most dramatic shift in public opinion since the last election is against the Conservatives. A look at the weekly ballot trends since the last election suggest the Conservatives have dropped to 24 per cent from 34 per cent — a withering level of support for a party that held power for almost a decade under Stephen Harper. However, campaigns matter

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and the best laid plans can quickly turn awry.

First, calling an election will effectively reset media coverage. Since the pandemic started, the government has enjoyed a massive advantage over the opposition leaders and parties when it comes to attention. The day the election is called, the opposition leaders will have more media profile, and the advantage the Liberals have enjoyed will be eliminated.

Second, the true impact of the pandemic on the economy has been masked by the stimulus. Research suggests there is an increasing anxiety among Canadians about the future. More than half of Canadians (52 per cent) believe the next generation will have a lower standard of living than the current generation.

Negative views in May were up seven points compared with February, 2021, while positive views were down about 10 points. The stimulus halo is thin and wearing out.

Third, the reality is that the true support for the Conservatives is likely much higher than their current poll numbers indicate. Liberal support is overpriced and is due for a correction. One should not be surprised if the big Liberal advantage turns into a more modest advantage, and a narrative emerges in the first part of the campaign that the Conservatives are starting to close the gap. Likewise, the People's Party of Canada's support at 4 per cent likely comprises disaffected Conservatives temporarily parking with the PPC. They may be unhappy with the Conservatives, but the spectre of another potential Liberal win may bring them back into the blue column.

Early election calls have been known to yield different-than-expected outcomes. Quebec Liberal premier Robert Bourassa lost a snap election in 1976 to separatist René Lévesque. Ontario Liberal David Peterson lost an early election call that put Ontario NDP leader Bob Rae in power. Federal Liberal leader John Turner went early in 1984 and the outcome was a sweeping majority for the Mulroney Progressive Conservatives. But an early election is not all risk. Federal Liberal leader Jean Chrétien, after winning in 1993, went early to the voters in 1997 and was rewarded with a second majority government.

The Liberals should not get too comfy. They do enjoy an advantage today, but it is likely overstated. The gap between the Liberals and the Conservatives will close. Anxiety about the future will grow as the stimulus winds down and awareness of our debt levels rise.

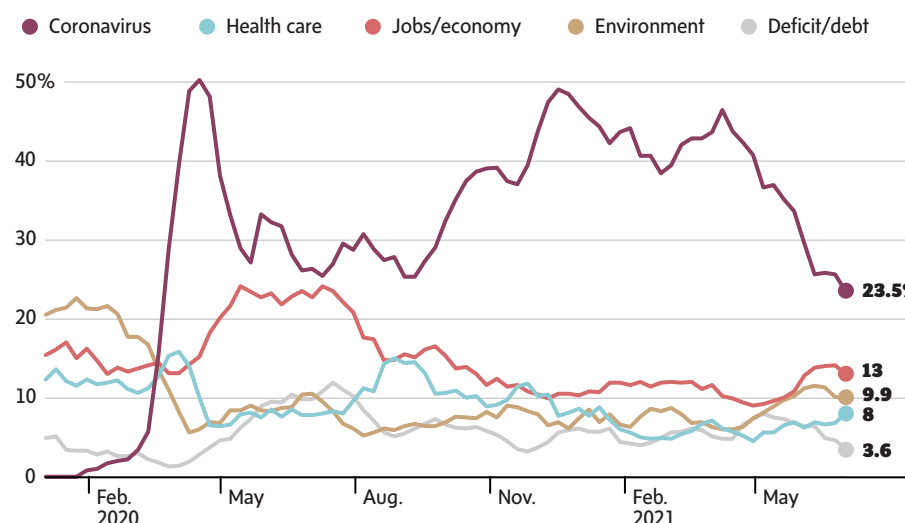
It will be an election of mixed emotions — the relief that comes with vaccinations, hope for an opening of the economy, anxiety about the real jobs fallout from the pandemic.

These will place intense scrutiny on all the political leaders. For the Liberals, the decision to call an election now carries both risk and reward.

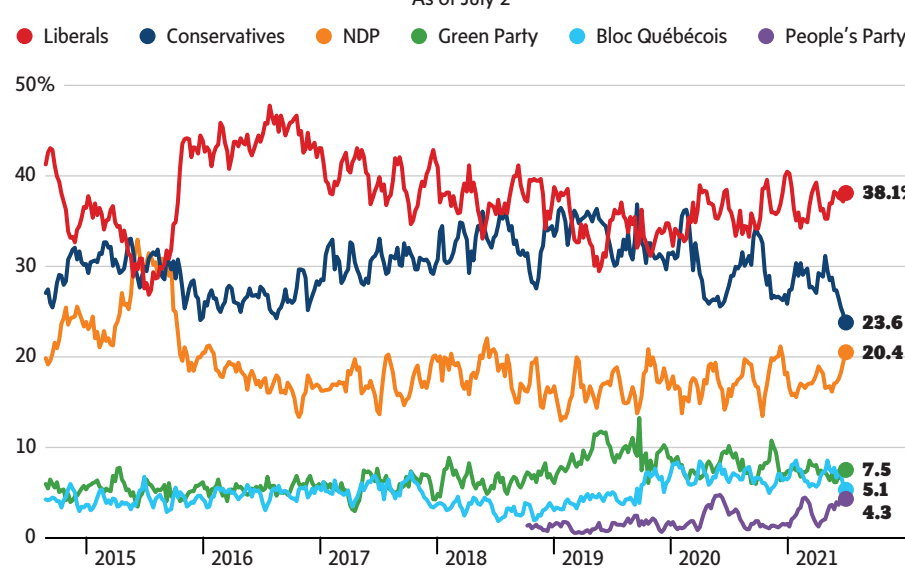
Nanos conducted an RDD dual frame (land- and cell-lines) hybrid telephone and online random survey of 1,029 adult Canadians. Fielded between May 30th and June 2nd, 2021, it is accurate ±3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Ballot numbers are based on RDD dual frame (land- and cell-line) telephone survey ending July 2nd, 2021. It is accurate ±3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Canada's pre-election mood

MOST IMPORTANT NATIONAL ISSUE, ACCORDING TO RESPONDENTS As of July 2



POLLING NUMBERS As of July 2



MURAT YÜKSELİR / THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: NANOS RESEARCH

By abandoning our Afghan civilian employees, we're leaving them for dead

STUART MCCARTHY
DEREK BODNER

OPINION

Stuart McCarthy is a former Australian Army officer whose 28-year military career included two tours of Afghanistan.

Derek Bodner is the president of Invictus Bellator Media Corp. and a veterans' advocate.

Over the July 4 weekend, a group of retired U.S. military officers wrote to President Joe Biden and Congress with an urgent message: Act now to save Afghan interpreters. The group, which included David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal, urged the government to take emergency action and protect the almost 18,000 interpreters and their immediate family members before the coalition troop withdrawal is complete.

As the Sept. 11 withdrawal deadline approaches and the Taliban continue their advances, which have seen almost half of Afghanistan's districts come under the insurgents' control over the past six weeks, veterans' advocacy groups in coalition member countries are

making similar pleas.

At stake is the fate of thousands of Afghan civilians who worked as interpreters, security guards, drivers, aid workers or in myriad other roles essential to sustaining a large-scale military force engaged in complex and dangerous counterinsurgency warfare in a foreign land with unfamiliar cultures and languages.

Although the U.S. government has drawn much criticism for its apparent lack of urgency in assisting these people amid a disorderly rush to the exits, other countries haven't done much better. These include Canada and Australia, which contributed similar numbers of troops to the mission over a similar period in neighbouring provinces of southern Afghanistan. While the policy responses of these two countries vary slightly, the practical outcomes are largely the same: Hundreds of civilians whom these countries are obliged to protect under international humanitarian laws are literally being left for dead.

Since the bulk of Canadian and Australian troops withdrew from southern Afghanistan eight years ago, scores of their civilian employees have been targeted by vengeful Taliban tactical commanders for brutal reprisals, in-

cluding death threats, kidnappings, murders, or, in some cases, ritual executions. Locals who assisted foreign forces or their governments are considered by the Taliban to be not only traitors to Afghanistan but "slaves" to the infidel. As the security situation has rapidly deteriorated in recent weeks, there is every indication that these reprisals will gather pace. Hundreds of these civilians are now literally in hiding or on the run, pleading for assistance that may never come.

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Since 2001, Australia contributed almost 40,000 troops to the war in Afghanistan, with 41 killed and more than 250 wounded in action. As the majority of troops were withdrawn from Uruzgan

Province in 2013, the Australian government established an employee visa program for those who were directly employed by the departments of Defence, Foreign Affairs and Trade or other agencies, as well as their immediate family members.

Over the past eight years this program saw as many as 1,200 former employees and family members resettled to Australia. However, it is believed that a similar number remain in Afghanistan, fighting a bureaucratic visa system described as "nightmarish" and "dysfunctional." Political pressure via the media over the past month has seen an additional 160 reported resettlements to Australia, mainly among applicants who had initially requested visas as long as six years ago. Those who remain have been told by officials that the visa application and vetting process will take as much as 12 months, while some have been informed that their applications were rejected on the basis that they were subcontracted rather than directly employed by the Australian government. Their lives are being put at risk over a question of semantics.

Canada's troop contribution to the war amounted to more than 40,000, mostly stationed in the

neighbouring southern province of Kandahar. One hundred and fifty-eight were killed in action and more than 1,000 were wounded before the entire contingent was withdrawn in 2014. Canada ultimately resettled approximately 850 of its former contractors. The number of "left-behind" contractors isn't entirely clear, and the Canadian government has put little to no effort into helping them escape death at the hands of the Taliban. In fact, a recent Human Rights Watch report noted that Canada had no relocation plans for its former contractors.

For the Australian and Canadian governments, there is much more at stake here than humanitarian concern for the loss of Afghan civilian lives. This unfolding fiasco could cause lasting and irreparable damage to both countries' national security and foreign policy interests unless emergency action is taken along the lines being proposed by retired U.S. generals Petraeus and McChrystal. Prime Ministers Justin Trudeau and Scott Morrison of Australia would be well advised to initiate urgent military evacuations for the hundreds of Afghan civilians they are morally and legally obliged to protect. The world is watching.