

How did that happen?

Why the most heavily polled, parsed and analyzed campaign in memory caught most experts by surprise

JOHN GEDDES

Nobody saw the Tory surge coming. Polls at the outset of the campaign pointed to another Liberal minority, a ho-hum status quo result. Even when they put the Conservatives within striking range, pollsters were skeptical about Stephen Harper's ability to shuck off the negatives that clung to his image. Some polls, though, did offer glimpses of the drama that was to unfold--if only somebody had noticed. They uncovered a broad desire for change among voters, and evidence that fear of a Harper "hidden agenda" had evaporated. So why didn't the statistical seers put these clues together and shout out that something big was happening? Not in the job description, they protest. "Polls are not intended to be predictors of anything," says Nik Nanos, president of the polling firm SES Research. "The electorate is an organic body, it's not a mathematical body. It changes and responds to every new element introduced in the mix."

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That blend turned out to be sweeter for Harper than most would have guessed. Nanos points to three volatile ingredients: issues, anger and execution. In a rare campaign trifecta, the Tories dominated them all. On issues, Harper's December policy-a-day strategy set the agenda. Anger came into play when the RCMP revealed it was investigating the Finance Department over the income trusts issue, reminding many of their lingering misgivings about the sponsorship scandal. When it came to execution, the Conservative machine purred, while the Liberals' sputtered--a Martin aide remarking that parents would blow money meant for raising their kids on popcorn and beer, and a bizarre TV ad, which wasn't supposed to be released at all, suggesting a Tory government would put soldiers in the streets in the style of a Latin American dictatorship.

You can't make up that sort of stuff, which means you can't predict how it will move the polls. Still, hindsight brings into focus scattered early harbingers of how the campaign turned out. At the start, Allan Gregg, chairman of The Strategic Council, said his firm's polling pointed to another Liberal minority, and even remarked, with an air of finality, that "people have made up their minds." But Gregg also said on the

campaign's very first day that "the most dramatic" change since the 2004 election was that Ontario voters had grown far less suspicious of the Tories. In about the month leading up to the election call, he noted, the Liberal lead over the Conservatives in the province with the most seats had dropped from 13 percentage points to only five.

A lot of political pros now wish they'd paid more heed to that one. But the horse-race number that dominates the news--how many people say they'd vote for each party nationally--continued to favour the Liberals until the week between Christmas and New Year's. Then Harper shot to the lead. The trigger seemed to be news of that RCMP investigation. Another factor was the fatal Boxing Day shooting in Toronto, which appeared to remind some Ontario voters that they saw the Tories as tougher on law-and-order issues. With some justification, Liberal strategists say nobody--not them, not the Tories, not the pollsters--could have factored in such "externalities."

What pollsters are supposed to do is plumb underlying tendencies and chart movement. And some did flag, with the usual hedging, Harper's upside. Darrell Bricker of Ipsos-Reid emphasized early on that Liberal support was "built on sand," stressing that more than 40 per cent of voters said they would be comfortable with a Tory minority. Innovative Research Group's Internet surveys for *Macleans*'s suggested Harper had a steep hill to climb, but found media coverage consistently helping him. The firm asked voters every week how what they read, saw or heard was influencing them. Respondents revealed that what they were learning was, on balance, making them less likely to vote Liberal, more inclined to vote Conservative. SES's rolling poll for CPAC reported Harper surpassing Paul Martin in a key personal rating on Dec. 23, five full days before the Conservatives' big bounce.

All compelling findings, but they didn't add up to a crystal ball. Even after the fact, some big changes--especially the Tory revival in Quebec--have expert heads spinning. That development was "unfathomable," Nanos marvelled. "On paper," he said, "it was very, very difficult to see the Conservatives doing anything in Quebec." Even if he had seen something like that foreshadowed in his polls, and pointed it out, probably no one would have paid much attention anyway.

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