

‘Nothing like it has been tried before’

Historic federal election gets unique analysis in essay collection by political experts

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Working at the academic equivalent of warp speed, almost 40 political experts have produced the first published analysis of Canada’s 42nd general election.

Samara Canada and the University of British Columbia Press released on Monday the open-access *Canadian Election Analysis 2015: Communication, Strategy, and Democracy*.

“To our knowledge, nothing like it existed or has been tried before in Canada,” wrote editors Alex Marland, a political-science professor at Memorial University in St. John’s, and Thierry Giasson, a Laval University political-science professor.

Samara Canada’s goal is to reconnect citizens to politics—a realm that, for good reasons and bad, Canadians have increasingly disdained and ignored in recent decades.

Since 2009, with exit interviews of MPs and other studies, the research and education charity has produced insights into what has estranged such large numbers from the political system and rendered it ungratifying for many of those elected.

The latest publication, with essays in French and English, is a virtuoso performance in which experts from 38 Canadian universities and organizations produced their take—in less than 96 hours—on the Oct. 19 election.

(The project was inspired by a similar exercise in the U.K. after the 2015 election in Britain.)

Among the conclusions: the costs of a long campaign were worth the price to voters; any party adopting, as NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair did, a “government-in-waiting” approach courts trouble; and—policy aside—there’s no overstating the visceral appeal of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s optimism, openness and palpable affection for people, evident from the day of the election call in his attendance at a Vancouver Pride parade.

The collection’s overview essay, written by Chris Waddell, a Carleton University journalism professor, is threaded with optimism that the long campaign and surprising results of the Oct. 19 election might foretell a healthier season in Canadian politics.

This time, negative advertising “failed miserably,” he wrote.

Young people, in particular, seemed unswayed by such attacks, he said, if, in their move away from mainstream media, they were even seeing them.

This time, he said, the almost universal print-media endorsement of the Conservatives was widely seen as “anachronistic bordering on ridiculous.”

And this time, the costs associated with a protracted election campaign forced media outlets to abandon the national tours and provide a greater range and depth of coverage on issues and local interests.

“Accepted wisdom about campaign strategy and communications was steamrolled by a demand for change in 2015,” Waddell wrote.

“The enticing possibility is that the result is a reversal of what seemed to be unstoppable declines in political engagement and Canadian democracy itself.”

One of the intriguing aspects of campaign 2015, the editors wrote, was what polls were used for.

“Poll aggregators and seat-projection sites became more familiar to Canadians who consulted them frequently,” they said.

Polls had already shown that the desire for change was widespread and the only question seemed to be which of the challengers had the best chance of ousting the governing Conservatives after almost a decade in office.

To that end, the aggregators and projections helped guide the vote. But the data is a double-edged sword.

Steve Patten, a political scientist at the University of Alberta, said Campaign '15 confirmed beyond doubt the arrival of “the era of database politics in Canada.”

“All of the country’s major parties now rely on massive databases, data analytics and predictive modelling, and data-driven micro-targeting to maximise their opportunities for electoral success.”

Patten was concerned that “the loss of transparency and the manipulative character of targeted persuasion, and privacy concerns suggested data-driven micro-targeting is not making a positive contribution to Canadian democracy.”

For Jamie Gillies, a public policy professor at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, the 2015 election continued the trend—Stephen Harper’s protests that it was not about him notwithstanding—toward the “presidentialization of executive leadership in Canada.”

And perhaps, as a caution to the victors and consolation to the also-rans, the last word should be his.

“The same presidentializing tendency that builds up leaders can also knock them off their pedestal.”