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## Election 2011: Viewpoints

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### Abstract (summary)

The Conservatives have powerful campaign machinery and are staying focused on their principal message (i.e. the economy), but questions about campaign workers and restricted access to events are keeping their rivals' anti-democratic theme in the headlines. DO YOU BELIEVE LIBERAL LEADER MICHAEL IGNATIEFF WHEN HE SAYS HE WILL NOT TRY TO FORM A COALITION GOVERNMENT IN THE EVENT THAT THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY NARROWLY WINS THE ELECTION MAY 2?

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WHICH PARTY/PARTY LEADER HAS MOST/LEAST IMPRESSED YOU SO FAR DURING THE CAMPAIGN?

CHARLES BLATTBERG, UNIVERSITE DE MONTREAL

Because I'm in a cynical mood, I would say that I have been most impressed by Stephen Harper. Two main reasons: His continuous harping on the (non-) threat of a coalition has been an effective way of confusing and frightening those Canadians who haven't been following events closely to vote for him. And his rendition of John Lennon's "Imagine" reveals that among the ethnic groups being effectively targeted by the Conservatives are Beatles fans and communists.

ALLISON HARELL, UNIVERSITE DU QUEBEC A MONTREAL

Michael Ignatieff's Liberals are running the most impressive campaign so far, but that's partly because expectations were so low to begin with. While the coalition question lingered over the Liberal campaign's first days, it has come out of the gate relatively gaffefree otherwise and is probably making inroads among NDP voters. The Conservatives have powerful campaign machinery and are staying focused on their principal message (i.e. the economy), but questions about campaign workers and restricted access to events are keeping their rivals' anti-democratic theme in the headlines.

ERIC BEDARD, TELUQ, DISTANCELEARNING ARM OF THE UNIVERSITE DU QUEBEC A MONTREAL

It's difficult to say which party leader holds an advantage this early on. But the most original proposal to date has probably been Jack Layton's. His party is effectively proposing to impose a cap on credit-card interest rates. However, as always, the proposals of the Liberals and the NDP in education, health and daycare do not recognize that these fields are jurisdictions of the provinces. The Conservatives have taken criticism for proposing tax credits that would only come into effect after the deficit is eliminated. But I find that qualification both courageous and responsible.

ANTOINE BILODEAU, CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

Most impressive campaign: Liberals. They are in proactive mode and trying to look like a credible government. Michael Ignatieff is probably at his best since he was elected leader.

Least impressive campaign: The Conservatives. They are in constant reaction mode. The coalition letter signed by Stephen Harper in 2004; Harper's special adviser's heavy past; students expelled from that meeting because they had been photographed with Ignatieff. Even the Churchill Falls proposal has put the Conservatives on the defensive.

DO YOU BELIEVE LIBERAL LEADER MICHAEL IGNATIEFF WHEN HE SAYS HE WILL NOT TRY TO FORM A COALITION GOVERNMENT IN THE EVENT THAT THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY NARROWLY WINS THE ELECTION MAY 2?

CHARLES BLATTBERG, UNIVERSITE DE MONTREAL

Oh, to have been a fly on the wall as Ignatieff and his team got ready for his first press conference and managed, somehow, to avoid preparing for the question that would obviously be coming about a coalition. "An answer if necessary," one of his advisers must have said, "but not necessarily an answer." When he finally had no choice, however, Ignatieff ruled it out categorically, leaving room for no more than a "formal agreement" with the NDP (i.e. no NDP cabinet ministers). That, surely, is the only way he can form a government now.

ALLISON HARELL, UNIVERSITE DU QUEBEC A MONTREAL

The coalition question was bound to be a campaign issue, and the Liberal Party should have prepared a clear response before the government fell. By waffling on the question when the opposition parties toppled the government, Ignatieff certainly gave the impression that it was an option. But now that he has ruled it out in the event that the Conservatives win more seats, it's unimaginable that the Liberals suggest a coalition after the election,

at least until a Conservative minority proves itself untenable.

ERIC BEDARD, TELUQ, DISTANCELEARNING ARM OF THE UNIVERSITE DU QUEBEC A MONTREAL

The coalition agreement of 2008 served the Conservatives' interests more than is often recognized. By adopting a conservative ideological posture (e.g. on law and order, and by being pro-Israel and pro-U.S., etc.), the Conservatives are trying to present themselves as the only alternative to centralizing big spenders who are ready at any price to impose their vision - even if that means a coalition with the sovereignists. Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff could have difficulty resisting the siren call for a new coalition effort, depending on the election results on May 2.

ANTOINE BILODEAU, CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

Yes, I believe Ignatieff. The Bloc Quebecois has been so "demonized" that neither the Liberal/NDP nor the Conservatives can think of formally associating themselves with the "separatists"; the cost outside of Quebec would simply be too big.

As for the Bloc, it could seriously demobilize and alienate its core base, namely those people who are first and foremost working for a sovereign Quebec.

The only way Ignatieff can think of a coalition is if the Liberal/NDP electoral math adds up to a majority alliance. But at the moment, it doesn't.

SENATOR JEAN-CLAUDE RIVEST COMPLAINED RECENTLY ABOUT THE "INDIFFERENCE" OF FEDERAL POLITICAL PARTIES THESE DAYS TO QUEBEC ISSUES. DO YOU AGREE WITH HIS VIEW THAT QUEBEC IS FALLING OFF THE POLITICAL RADAR SCREEN? EXPLAIN.

CHARLES BLATTBERG, UNIVERSITE DE MONTREAL

The only federal party that can be described as having been indifferent to Quebec is the Bloc. If one wants effectively to defend Quebec's interests within Canada, then one should do so in a way that, at least in principle, strives to put the common good of all Canadians first. If one wants to defend Quebec's interests outside of Canada, then one needs to win a referendum on sovereignty, and that means working for the Parti Quebecois. Anything else amounts to putting one's salary ahead of one's nation.

ALLISON HARELL, UNIVERSITE DU QUEBEC A MONTREAL

The Bloc is predicted to win the majority of seats in Quebec, and its presence virtually guarantees that the campaign will include issues important to Quebecers. The criticism that the Conservatives are not running a national campaign with a strong presence in Quebec is unfair. None of the parties are running truly national campaigns; they are instead focusing their efforts (and their messages) on competitive ridings where they feel they can pick up seats, whether they are in Quebec or elsewhere.

ERIC BEDARD, TELUQ, DISTANCELEARNING ARM OF THE UNIVERSITE DU QUEBEC A MONTREAL

For the moment, the question of Quebec doesn't seem to interest the federal parties. We're a long way from the "federalisme d'ouverture" of the Conservatives from the 2006 election. One gets the impression the party has put a big X on Quebec. The best indication of this is the loan guarantee that the Harper Conservatives made last week to the government of Newfoundland and Labrador with respect to development of Lower Churchill hydro power. In a rare show of united legislative resolve, the National Assembly unanimously denounced the Conservative proposal. Harper would surely have anticipated that.

ANTOINE BILODEAU, CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

Clearly no federal party but the Bloc is willing to address the place of Quebec within Canada. So, yes, these "Quebec issues" are falling off the political radar screen. But I'm not sure whose fault it is; these issues are also fading from the political radar in Quebec provincial politics.

Are Quebec ridings not being considered as part of the electoral strategy of the parties? The answer to this question is less clear. But if that is the case, then the Bloc is getting closer to accomplishing its ultimate objective: consolidating consensus on marginalization of Quebec within Canada.

OUR EXPERTS:

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A native of Toronto, Charles Blattberg is a professor of political science who specializes in political philosophy.

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A native of Montreal, Eric Bedard teaches history and has contributed to documentaries aired by the Historia cable network.

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A native of Montreal, Antoine Bilodeau teaches political science and is an expert in immigrant voting behaviour.

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