

Harper's mass x his velocity = victory?

The science behind political momentum

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ANDREW CHUNG

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Elections are all about political calculus — except when they're about physics.

Momentum has become a byword in every campaign, but it is borrowed from a scientific concept described by English physicist Sir Isaac Newton and his famous laws of motion. In simple terms, all moving objects have momentum, which refers to the quantity of motion they have, measured as a product of their mass and velocity.

Since moving objects tend to continue moving, the term is perfect for fields other than science. In sports — and blood sports like politics — it has become cliché to describe recent success as "momentum."

The moving object is the political party or the leader. As their fortunes rise and fall, pollsters take the place of scientists and try to gauge just how much momentum they have.

In this case, their mass is their polling numbers, and their velocity is how quickly those numbers are rising or falling.

The concept serves to dramatize the campaign in a way other measurable parameters cannot, pollsters say.

"Momentum is like a freight train," says Nik Nanos, president of SES Research, which is doing nightly tracking of voter intentions before the Jan. 23 election for the political channel CPAC. "If you see a trend, it can be very difficult to stop."

Polling firms all agree that momentum is vital in predicting the direction a campaign is taking, but not on how to measure it.

That's because asking people how they would vote if the election were held today — the typical poll question — might not reveal that their opinions on leaders or policies are changing, which could lead to a switch in vote, says Paul Adams, executive director of EKOS Research, which has done extensive polling work for the *Star*.

In other words, they don't agree on how to measure a candidate's velocity.

"The impression of a particular leader, or the general feeling about the direction of the country, might go up or down before a voting intention changes," Adams says.

"So you try to look at other measures that might be predictive."

It has become a mantra in this election that Stephen Harper's Conservatives have the momentum. From lagging behind the Liberals before the new year, they now enjoy a double-digit lead in some

polls.

But there were clues to this happening. "What we saw in the first part of the campaign was the Liberals maintaining their lead, but Paul Martin's lead over Harper as the best leader was shrinking," Adams says.

Now, in poll after poll, Harper is seen as the best leader. In Quebec, he is even ahead of the Bloc Quebecois' Gilles Duceppe as the choice for best prime minister, according to SES.

But how do voters tell who has the most momentum?

For the most part, they don't think in those terms, Nanos says. "They tend to focus on who they think could win the election, and evaluate the campaigns based on that."

Voters consume the news of the day, view the ads on television and, perhaps most importantly, listen to those closest to them. Pollsters then ask "momentum questions" such as, "Has your opinion of the Liberals gone up or down?" or "Who would make the best prime minister?" and a pattern emerges. That pattern reveals momentum.

One polling firm, The Strategic Counsel, actually asks voters which party is gaining the most "popularity and momentum." In a poll last week, it found that 58 per cent of Canadians said the Tories had momentum compared with 14 per cent for the Liberals.

But Nanos says such a question could "amplify" the results because people are asked to make a subjective judgment on what they think may be happening in the campaign. Adams notes another problem: "If you ask, 'What is political momentum?' they wouldn't necessarily agree what it was." (A Strategic Counsel representative declined to be interviewed.)

Harper may be riding the wave of momentum in this campaign, but he also was in 2004 before crashing when the Liberals demonized him as a scary neo-conservative.

The momentum this time is different, pollsters say. For one thing, it is felt not just outside Quebec, but also inside.

Perhaps most ominous for the Liberals is that polls are showing the momentum slowing for both parties, with the Tories way ahead of the Liberals.

"That pattern is solidifying," says Adams.

It's why the Liberals have launched their negative attack ads to try to turn things around.

"If they don't do that in the next two to three days," Nanos warns, "it's just going to run its course."

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