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A 'Strategic' Way to Vote 'Smart'

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A 'strategic' way to vote 'smart'

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Joanna Santa-Barbara and Erika Simpson
The Hamilton Spectator

Recent changes to New Zealand's voting system make it superior to Canada's because it allows for proportional representation. Simply put, winners in New Zealand's elections no longer take all, based on a first-past-the-post system.

One problem with the Canadian system is that the "left-liberal" vote is split at least three ways among the NDP, Liberals, Green party (and, in Quebec, the Bloc). All this means that a Conservative candidate can "come up the middle" and win. Obviously there is no time before the federal election for Canadian democracy to take an evolutionary step toward proportional representation. But there is a clever way to get a little closer to it.

A website launched less than two weeks ago already has more than half a million page views and 110,000 visitors. Apparently this website is "going viral" because it has data-based recommendations about strategic voting to prevent a Conservative majority. It tracks every riding in the country and makes up-to-the-minute suggestions on how best to fight the Conservatives.

The website -- voteforenvironment.com -- does not always offer recommendations, and voters may quibble with its suggestions. But voters can quickly retrieve recommendations for any riding by either keying in their postal code or using an interactive map to obtain recommendations about any riding in Canada.

If you are pleased with the Harper government and would like it to form a majority government, you probably won't want to read on.

(We completely support your right to choose, and no hard feelings, we assure you).

On the other hand, we know that many of you, like us, oppose a Conservative majority. We know that point of view includes a broad bandwidth of interests, and we have many different reasons. We need to find a way to make our votes count. We may not have proportional representation but we can fake it.

If we lived in Nova Scotia in the riding of Central Nova, where the Liberals have not put forward a candidate, we would vote for Green Party Leader Elizabeth May in a heartbeat. But if we lived in Nanaimo-Cowichan, to vote Green -- or for that matter to vote Liberal - - de facto gives the Conservatives another victory. The Conservatives would beat the NDP, the second-place party, and by less than the number of our "wasted" votes.

Strategic voting means that we must hold our noses and vote for our second choice in order to avoid our third choice. If in some ridings, the best way to stop the Conservatives is to vote Liberal, then we would -- with glowing hearts.

The new website offers comprehensive, riding-by-riding information on how to defeat Harper's "anti-environment" policies. Once voters zoom to their riding using an interactive map, it offers advice, like "This is a safe NDP seat. Vote your heart's desire." Or "This is a Conservative stronghold. Vote with your heart."

In tight races, such as London-Fanshawe, it recommends voting NDP because "This is a riding in which the NDP won over the Liberals by a tight margin. This election will be a tight three-way race which could split for the Conservatives. Irene Mathysen has strong roots in the riding and the best chance against the Conservatives."

In some tight races, such as London-Fanshawe, smart-thinking Conservatives need to make similar sorts of strategic calculations. The new website can help them out, too.

For example, logically, Conservatives who want a Conservative majority must try to defeat the Liberals. So that may require that they vote NDP -- their second choice -- rather than Conservative, their first choice.

Sound complicated? The new website helps to aid decision-making for all brands of voters, in an era when proportional voting is a dream not yet come true.

According to website calculations earlier this week -- which will change before the election and are being updated as you read this -- if voters were to vote today and split the vote, the Conservatives would win 130 seats, the Liberals 83, the NDP 41, the Green party 0, the Bloc 52 and Independents 2.

But if we "vote smart," the Conservatives would win 75 seats, the Liberals 123, the NDP 52, the Greens 1, the Bloc 55 and Independents 2.

So if the election were held today, voting smart could mean the difference between a Conservative-led or Liberal-led minority government.

By next week, given the financial meltdown in the United States, and the result of the leadership debates, the website will no doubt reconfigure its recommendations again -- with the end-goal being a government that has sound environmental policies. All of us can learn from this website that is going ballistic through cyberspace.

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