



101 Gordon Road, Toronto, ON, M2P 1E5  
Tel 416 733 2320 Fax 416 733 4991  
info@vectorresearch.com www.vectorresearch.com

---

## **Do you believe in the strategic voter?**

By Marc Zwelling  
President  
The Vector Poll™

Do you believe in strategic voting? How about Big Foot and crop circles?

NDP campaign managers and activists believe there is such a thing as strategic voting and that it matters.

In Canada's federal elections, according to believers, a substantial number of NDP-leaning voters who are afraid of a majority Conservative government vote Liberal – strategically – to block the Conservatives. They do that because strategic voters believe the Liberals have the best chance of keeping the Tories out. Or so the legend says.

But when you have the research, it turns out that strategic voting is a chimera, an urban myth that political junkies tell to explain the riddle of NDP defeats.

Unlike the Loch Ness Monster, there really is something out there. Millions of people say they voted for a candidate they didn't like to prevent another candidate or party from winning.

Of course if a pack of NDP supporters all vote Liberal to defeat a Stephen Harper candidate, they might change the results in a riding the NDP could win.

But strategic voters don't vote as a bloc. Strategic voters cancel each other. They split their votes among all the parties.

Thanks to polls, you can determine the number of strategic voters, how they vote and what effect they have, if any. In Canada's 2006 federal election the impact of strategic voting was zero.

The Conservatives got 36% of the votes in 2006, the Liberals 30%, and the NDP 17%. But people voting strategically voted the same way as voters who didn't vote strategically.

All the parties won and lost strategic voters. There were NDP-leaning voters who called themselves strategic and voted Liberal to thwart a Tory. But there were also philosophically-

inclined Conservatives who voted Liberal to defeat a New Democrat. In Québec practicing Liberals voted Conservative to harm the chances of a Parti Québécois candidate.

**As the table shows (based on two studies by the Vector Poll™) if only strategic voters had gone to the polling stations, the outcome would have been the same.**

Considering the three-percentage-point margin of sampling error in the polls, the survey and the election outcomes are the same.

<b>2006 federal election</b>		
<b>How they voted...</b>		
	Strategic voters	All voters
Conservative	38%	36%
Liberal	29%	30%
NDP	17%	17%
Bloc Québécois	9%	11%
Green	4%	5%
Others	3%	1%

Strategic voters look numerous enough to affect the election. One in four voters in the last federal election was a self-described strategic voter – 24%!

- 24% means that out of the 14.9 million voters, 3,556,118 claim they voted strategically. There were nearly a million more strategic voters than NDP voters.

The Vector polls show that practically identical portions of each party's usual supporters voted for other parties to hamper a candidate they didn't like.

Some 22% of Conservative voters and 23% of Bloc supporters said after the election they had voted "strategically to stop another party or candidate from getting elected." Some 24% of NDP voters said the same. So did 28% of Liberal voters.

For these 3.5 million strategic voters the 2006 election was a distasteful exercise in negative options. Some 54% told Vector Poll™ interviewers afterward that their vote didn't make much difference to the outcome.

But the polls reveal more surprises. The reason strategic voting doesn't matter is that most "strategic" voters don't really change their vote.

**For most strategic voters, marking their ballot "to stop another party or candidate" is just another good reason to support their favourite party. In 2006, six in 10 self-identifying NDP supporters who called themselves strategic voters supported the NDP. Eight in 10 faithful Conservatives who said they were voting strategically voted for a Conservative. Nine in 10 Liberals who said they voted strategically support a Liberal.**

True strategic voters, the kind candidates and campaign workers lose sleep over, are defectors. But in 2006 only 15% of self-identified strategic Liberal voters were defectors from other parties. The NDP actually did better than the other major parties in attracting strategic voters who wanted to block a party or candidate. Strategic voters made up 26% of the NDP's 2006 support.

But remember strategic voting doesn't change election outcomes because strategic NDP voters were annulled by strategic anti-NDP voters. People leaving the Liberals to vote NDP were annulled by NDPers voting Liberal.

For example, the Bloc lost 5% of its support to the Conservatives because strategic Bloc sympathizers defected. The NDP lost 3% of its voters when NDP sympathizers voted strategically for Conservatives. The Liberals lost 2% of their supporters to the NDP for strategic reasons. The Conservatives lost 11% of their would-be voters to other parties through strategic voting.

**Overall, just 6% of all the votes cast in the 2006 election were true strategic votes, meaning voters supported a party other than the one "closest to my views." To put it another way, 94% of strategic voters supported their home team.**

(Remember that a quarter of all voters voted strategically. Among strategic voters, however, 24% actually voted for other parties, not their own. Do the math.)

Sure, a six-point shift in support would often change the outcome of an election. But because strategic votes annul one another, they don't alter the results.

In a sense, all voters are strategic voters. Everyone believes "my vote counts" and that one ballot magically affects the results, though logically that can't be so. Almost no elections, and certainly no national elections, have been tied or decided by a single ballot. And whether we're voting for Canadian Idol or class president, we want to stop a rival as much as see our own candidate win.

**The polls show that in terms of influence, strategic voting is as ineffectual as editorial endorsements or a slate of candidates recommended on a website.**

The data mean it's a distraction to try to start or stop strategic voting. You can't build a party with one-night stands. Renting other parties' supporters is bad strategy. The secret of electoral success is in transforming other parties' supporters – and independents – into your party's loyalists by forging an emotional connection with the voters.

(This article first appeared in the news website [www.straightgoods.ca](http://www.straightgoods.ca))

Marc Zwelling is a political advisor. The Vector Poll™ provides phone, mail and on-line polls and focus groups ([www.vectorresearch.com](http://www.vectorresearch.com)).