Rossi’s Withdrawal From The 2010 Mayoral Race Is No Game Changer-Ford Still Ahead

Contributed by TNS
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With Rocco Rossi pulling out of the Toronto mayoral race, the electorate is effectively left with three serious contenders.

A recent poll conducted by TNS Canada suggests that Rob Ford retains his leadership position under this new scenario.

When those supporting Rocco Rossi are redistributed to their second choice candidate, Ford maintains the lead among total eligible voters with 36% support, followed by Smitherman at 23% and Pantalone at 12%.

Approximately 32% of eligible voters remain undecided, suggesting that there is still a great deal of ground to fight for in the closing days of the campaign.

However, the battle is still likely to be an uphill one for Smitherman. The TNS survey also investigated the effect of a withdrawal of Rossi on the preferences of decided and undecided eligible voters.

The Rossi withdrawal has no effect on the relative position of the two leading candidates; among voters decided on, or leaning towards one candidate, Smitherman support increases to 27%, and Pantalone to 12% while Ford support rises to 40%.

Approximately 19% of eligible voters express no real leaning or preference at the present time.

Anyone but Ford
As the â€œAnyone but Fordâ€• movement has emerged, speculation has also begun as to whether a withdrawal by both Rossi and Pantalone would allow Smitherman to narrow the gap with Ford. There is some evidence for this, but while a withdrawal by both Rossi and Pantalone boosts Smitherman support to 32% overall (42% among voters with a stated preference), it lifts Ford support to 42% (55% among voters with a stated preference).

Part of the reason Smitherman does not garner more lift from these withdrawals stems from the fact that much of the anti-Ford vote is already lodged with him; 30% of Smitherman supporters cite stopping Ford as the primary reason for their choice of candidate.

And, in fact, the Smitherman camp appears to have established some urgency to vote among its supporters precisely for this reason.

However, Ford still â€œwinsâ€• among those who claim that they will â€œdefinitely voteâ€• on October 25th and there is little re support for Smitherman among those less committed, meaning there is little to be gained by Smitherman through further efforts to â€œget out the voteâ€• to stop Rob Ford.

Protest and Vision
Rob Ford has been successful at galvanizing attention to the single issue of fiscal responsibility and tying this to existing grievances against the status quo at city hall and mainstream politicians. This leaves others to define a coherent vision of the future that will resonate with the electorate.

Establishing such a vision has evidently been difficult to achieve. Indeed, it would appear that Fordâ€™s candidacy and core message represent the defining themes of this race to date, leaving little room for other candidates to carve out their own turf. Recent thinning of the playing field may leave Smitherman more room to do so, however.

The survey results indicate that he has credibility on the issue of city finances and room to maneuver on issues related to transit, infrastructure and services. In the final stretch of the campaign, the key for Smitherman may be to provide voters with a strong rationale for choosing George Smitherman as opposed to voting against Rob Ford.

Red States and Blue States
A sharp divide exists between residents of the old city of Toronto (or core), and those of the surrounding suburban ring. Among decided voters choosing candidates still in the race, Ford actually trails Smitherman by a small margin in the city core (39% vs. 41%).

However, in the outer ring, Ford support rises to 59%, with Smitherman support trailing distantly at 30%. Part of Fordâ€™s success among residents in the outer ring can be traced to their preoccupation with city finances, Fordâ€™s signature issue.

Among voters decided on, or leaning towards one candidate, 43% of those in the suburban ring indicate that

management of the cityâ€™s finances is the most important issue underlying their candidate selection, compared with just 26% among residents of the city core.

The Implication
Given these results, Smitherman can certainly still challenge Ford by making strong inroads among female voters and the young (the groups most likely to be undecided at the present time) on issues related to transit, infrastructure and the preservation of key services through responsible financial management.
Unless Smitherman can manufacture such a scenario soon, it appears to be Fordâ€™s race to lose.

The fieldwork for this project was conducted using TNS Canadaâ€™s online panel. A total of 605 Canadian adults eligible to vote in Torontoâ€™s mayoral race were interviewed between October 4th and 8th, 2010.

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