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PCs pushed supporters to vote

*Kelly Cryderman, with files from Tony Seskus, Calgary Herald and the Edmonton Journal
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A powerful push by Tories get their supporters to the polls -- along with fears about serious gains by the Liberals or Wildrose Alliance -- led to Monday's Conservative landslide, agreed party insiders and political analysts.

Although voter turnout dropped across Alberta, the Conservative party boosted its overall vote by almost 85,000, going to more than 500,000 votes.

Monday's Conservative victory, their 11th consecutive majority, caught many observers off guard by the sheer scale of the Tory win -- but insiders say it was the result of a massive offensive to get party faithful to the polls.

"People finally woke up and said, 'Hey, maybe this isn't such a bad province to live in,' " said veteran Calgary Conservative strategist Alan Hallman.

"Maybe once we look at these guys over here, they scare us." Hallman said, referring to opposition parties such as the Alberta Liberals and the Wildrose Alliance.

"Fear is a great motivator."

Aside from a strong brand loyalty and a huge election war chest, several key factors were at play in the majority, observers said.

One key moment occurred last week, when Premier Ed Stelmach warned Albertans that a vote the Wildrose Alliance was really a vote for the Liberals. Wildrose Alliance Leader Paul Hinman said Stelmach's charge had a powerful effect, scaring many away from his party.

And while the Tory leader has had his troubles inside the province's largest city, Conservatives say Calgarians didn't grasp how popular Stelmach is elsewhere. "Outside of Calgary, Ed Stelmach has a great reputation. Both in Edmonton and rural Alberta," said Bill Smith, chairman of the Conservative party's Calgary campaign.

David Taras, a political analyst at the University of Calgary, said the reason why Tory voters came out in bigger numbers than in 2004, while Grit votes dropped by 10,000, is "one of the great mysteries" of the election.

"There was a sense that this was Edmonton's chance (to have power)," Taras said.

Like Hallman, he believes fear was also a factor. "The more there was discussion of the Liberals running the table in Calgary, the more it pushed Conservative voters to the polls," Taras said.

"And the reality on the ground is the Liberals had a very flimsy, shoestring operation. They didn't have databases, they couldn't track their voters, they didn't have an effective get-out-the-vote machine."

On the other hand, the Tory engine was going full out.

In Calgary-Egmont, organizers for successful Tory candidate Jonathan Denis canvassed door-to-door, identifying a core base of supporters. A team of volunteers followed up with election day calls to 5,200 sympathetic households.

Despite the Tory machinery moving at full tilt, NDP Leader Brian Mason said he believes another factor drove voters to the Tories: negative advertising.

He took aim at the a series of attack ads bankrolled by province's labour movement, called Albertans for Change, that criticized Stelmach's leadership.

"From my point of view, they helped the Conservatives more than they hurt the Conservatives," Mason said. "I can't help but think -- I don't know how much they spent, I think between \$1 and \$2 million I expect on that campaign -- if a fraction of that had been put into helping (Edmonton NDP candidates) David Eggen or Ray Martin, they would have been elected."

Ron Harry, executive director of the Alberta Building Trades Council, disagreed.

"We're proud that we helped set the tone for the campaign," Harry said.

"In the end, we hope the Conservative government will now address the issues that Albertans for Change has raised -- improving health care, affordable housing, improving schools and infrastructure."

kcryderman@theherald.canwest.com

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