

Justin Trudeau working to fashion a brand independent of his father

A politician's brand is part of what voters base their decisions on, says researcher

June 5, 2013, Victoria – A new study on political branding says Liberal leader Justin Trudeau's public image is largely shaped by people's own opinions about his father.

That's neither good nor bad, says Alex Marland, the author of the study, because if some people loved Pierre Elliot Trudeau, others hated him.

What is important, he says, is that Canadian politicians of all stripes talk about and understand branding and how it applies to the Canadian political context. Because while branding may not be the only thing that determines who people vote for, it does help voters make up their minds.

Marland is an associate professor of political science at Memorial University of Newfoundland in St. John's and is presenting his study at the 2013 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences.

"Branding is what everybody is talking about, except for political science," he says. "It's time for Canadian political science to talk about branding."

Marland's study looks at the Trudeaus – father and son – and how their images have been shaped.

Right now, says Marland, Justin Trudeau's supporters see him as a combination of his father, former prime minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier, former NDP leader Jack Layton, John F. Kennedy Junior, and U.S. President Barack Obama. (His opponents have a rather different view and are working to create a negative brand image.)

However, Justin Trudeau is famous not for what he has done himself, but for being the son of a former prime minister. His challenge is to shape an image this is his own. He will have to earn his stripes and become known not for who he is, but for what he does.

Marland says that Justin Trudeau is working hard to fashion his own brand, and create positive associations in voters' minds – which is what Layton, who died in 2011, succeeded in doing.

A brand is an imaginary construct, says Marland, and is made up of all of one's impressions of a person or thing, plus one's interpretations of those impressions. A person's socio-demographic profile also matters: Marland says people are more likely to respect people with characteristics similar to their own.

In that sense, branding is very much in the eye of the beholder.

Having a good brand does not ensure political success, he adds.

“People either love Pierre Elliot Trudeau and Justin Trudeau, or they hate Pierre Elliott Trudeau and Justin Trudeau. That’s what brands do. They attract some people and repel others.”

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