

ANALYSIS

Stephen Harper Heads a Global Org That Helps Get Right-Wing Parties Elected. What Will It Do for Andrew Scheer?

Voter suppression works. Ask the Kochs, Trump and our very own robocall fakers.



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Andrew Scheer, now Conservative leader, with then prime minister Stephen Harper, mentor and ally. Harper now chairs a worldwide mutual aid network of conservative parties called the International Democratic Union. Photo by Adrian Wyld, The Canadian Press.

“If an election is worth winning, then there is someone willing to steal it.”
— Mike Roman, Republican National Committee, and treasurer of the International Democratic Union

“Hi, it’s Sarah from the Conservative Party. Can the Conservative Party count on your support in the next federal election?”

Reply:

Yes

No”

This text, sent on July 9 at 4:29 p.m., landed on the cellphone of a person not on social media, and who does not tweet.

Reply “yes,” and the conversation begins. Reply “no” and you go into the Conservative database as a non-supporter — valuable information for the party either way. The text identified the sender as the Conservative Party. Perfectly legitimate. But how did the party get that cell number?

The same way they got mine I suppose. A few days later, the same message appeared on my iPhone. It all felt a little like a variation of something the country has seen before.

It brought to mind the Robocalls scandal (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_Canadian_federal_election_voter_suppression_scandal) that tainted the 2011 federal election, which delivered Stephen Harper’s Conservatives their only majority government. As someone who took a very close look (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/417364/party-of-one-by-michael-harris/9780143187059>) at those dirty tricks, I was reminded of two other facts we should pay attention to as a new election looms.

One, most people know little or nothing about a global organization called the International Democratic Union, which is dedicated to getting right-wing parties elected around the world.

And, two, the IDU’s new chairman is none other than Stephen Harper.

Let us commence to connect dots.

1) A dirty trick called robocalls, and the IDU

During the 2011 election, the Conservative party’s Constituent Information Management System provided useful lists for the dodgier elements of that year’s election campaign. Voter lists from CIMS were used to make robocalls supposedly coming from Elections Canada, the ones telling non-supporters of the Conservative Party that their polling booth had been moved. A burner

phone, prepaid “vanilla” payment cards and a proxy IP server that masked the originating IP address were used in an attempt to suppress the Liberal vote.

Only one person, Michael Sona, a low-level Conservative campaign worker in Guelph, was convicted of violating election laws. But the judge publicly doubted (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/michael-sona-guilty-in-robocalls-trial-but-did-not-likely-act-alone-1.2735676>) Sona had acted alone.

A knowledgeable and well-placed source close to the party spoke to The Tyee on a not-for-attribution basis about those dark days.

“Doug Finley [who ran the Conservatives’ campaigns in 2004 and 2006] learned about the robocalls technique from friends at the International Democratic Union,” the source said. “He declared at the time that Michael Sona could not be guilty because he, Sona, had not been briefed on the technique. They kept the details secret and never told anyone the full story of how they did it. The International Democratic Union is an intelligence resource for conservative parties around the world. They trade secrets on voter suppression and other dirty tricks. Then they come back and have their dupes do the dirty work.”

The Tyee contacted IDU on Friday and received no response.

Senator Mike Duffy testified (http://live.cbc.ca/Event/Mike_Duffy_trial_Day_59?Page=1) during his 2015 trial over expense claims that that Finley had said Sona couldn’t have organized the robocalls. Duffy testified Finley had said: “He hasn’t taken our courses, he wouldn’t know enough to do this.” (Duffy was acquitted.)

2) Doug Finley, the In-and-Out scandal, and Stephen Harper’s 2006 victory

Finley, closely associated with the IDU until his death in May 2013, was a key Conservative strategist and operative. He is widely credited with being the mastermind behind the federal Conservative breakthrough in 2004, and the party’s electoral victories in 2006 and 2008. Harper appointed Finley to the Senate while he was under active investigation by Elections Canada for violating the electoral rules — a sign that the PM was untroubled by any of Finley’s activities.

The case dogging Finley revolved around what came to be known as the In-and-Out (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/conservative-party-fined-for-breaking-election-laws-1.1076877>) scandal. During the 2006 election, riding funds were improperly channelled into national advertising, allowing the

party to overspend on the election by more than a million dollars in the last days of the campaign. Some people, including journalist Glen McGregor, believe that it won the election for Harper.

Finley was eventually charged, along with three other senior party members. But the charges against these individuals were dropped. Under a negotiated deal, the Conservative Party and its fundraising arm pled guilty to exceeding spending limits and filing fraudulent election records. The CPC paid a fine of \$230,198.

3) Learning voter suppression from the Republicans and their consultants

Jenni Byrne was Finley's deputy and took over as the Conservative Party's director of political operations in 2009. The party sent operatives to the U.S. to study how the Republican Party political machine works. Voter suppression (https://time.com/5455179/georgia-brian-kemp-voter-suppression-recount-republicans-trump/) was a routine dirty trick amongst U.S. politicians on the right. They understood that their chances of success went up when the number of voters went down. Historically, Democrats win when voter turnout is high, Republicans when it is low.

The Conservative Party of Canada is closely aligned with the U.S. Republican Party, and both are closely associated with the International Democratic Union. A case in point. In March 2012, the CBC reported (https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/conservative-mps-used-u-s-based-telemarketers-1.1163206) that 14 Conservative MPs in Canada had signed on with a well-connected Republican company during the 2011 federal election, Front Porch Strategies. The party initially denied any involvement.

Front Porch Strategies, based in Columbus, Ohio, boasted that it won all 14 of the races it was associated with in Canada. Front Porch worked (https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2012/03/03/robocalls_tory_mps_used_top_us_republican_firm_during_may_election.html) for the Conservative caucus, as well as individual MPs. Front Porch had worked for Republican presidential campaigns, as well as the Republican National Committee. It had also been active in trying to overturn Roe v. Wade, the 1973 ruling that gave American women the right to abortions without undue interference from government.

The Conservative Party also used the far-flung resources of the International Democratic Union, the largest organization of its kind on the planet. (The new prime minister of Britain, Boris Johnson, belongs to a party that is a member of the IDU.)

The IDU offers, for example, “election technology seminars” on a regular basis, and it conducts campaign seminars for politicians and party workers. “These involve exchanges of information on campaign technology, fund-raising techniques, opinion polling, advertising and campaign organization,” The Hill Times reported (<https://www.hilltimes.com/2012/04/17/u-s-republican-and-conservative-campaign-managers-met-last-month-in-ottawa-at-height-of-robocalls-controversy/20470>).

The Conservative Party of Canada has hosted the IDU’s standing committee on elections and campaigns in Ottawa. In March 2012, campaign directors from IDU members in 11 countries met in Ottawa.

Among the many Conservative Party of Canada politicians who have played key roles in the IDU, is former Conservative MP Tony Clement, who was elected its vice-chairman, serving in that capacity from 2011 until 2014. What might he know about campaign tactics taught at IDU events and do they include the fine points of voter suppression? Can’t say. Clement declined an interview for this piece.

4) Follow the money to the IDU, and meet Mike Roman

It is unclear who funds the IDU. But the connection to wealthy Republicans known for their financial support of conservative causes is clear. There is one outstanding example. The treasurer of the IDU is Mike Roman of the U.S. Republican Party.



Charles Koch (left) and brother David spent hundreds of millions helping Trump win, including employing Mike Roman to gather intelligence on liberal political opponents, environmental groups, and unions. Roman today works for the Republican party and is treasurer for the Stephen Harper-led International Democratic Union.

Roman is also a former employee of the Koch Brothers. According to the New York Times, the billionaire siblings broke up (<https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/04/21/koch-backed-group-disbands-its-intelligence-unit/>) their 25-person opposition research unit in April 2016 as an “efficiency measure.” According to Politico, Mike Roman ran that operation.

Before it was disbanded, the unit gathered intelligence on liberal political opponents, environmental groups and unions. Roman’s job was to oversee opposition research, deep investigations to uncover damaging information on opponents of the Republicans. Roman, who considered himself to be a private investigator, was paid (<https://www.politico.com/story/2015/11/the-koch-brothers-intelligence-agency-215943>) \$286,000 in 2016. He has kept a decidedly low profile.

5) The Kochs, and Stephen Harper’s cases of U.S. envy

Those mega-rich brothers who once employed IDU treasurer Roman invest deeply in ideological policy champions who serve their business aims. The Kochs contribute, for example, to one of Harper’s favourite organizations, the Fraser Institute. And they reportedly spent (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-05-02/koch-backed-groups-are-selling-trump-s-tax-cuts-door-to-door-ahead-of-the-midterms>) \$20 million

to get tax changes under Trump that saved (<https://americansfortaxfairness.org/koch-brothers-1-billion-tax-cut/>) them over a billion dollars. They also spent (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/27/us/politics/kochs-plan-to-spend-900-million-on-2016-campaign.html>) almost \$900 million on policy and political battles heading into the 2016 presidential election that saw Trump triumph.

The Kochs were able to do this because tax-exempt non-profit groups in the U.S. can accept (<https://www.politico.com/story/2015/11/the-koch-brothers-intelligence-agency-215943>) unlimited cash without exposing (<https://www.demos.org/testimony-and-public-comment/dollars-and-sense-how-undisclosed-money-and-post-mccutcheon-campaign>) donors or facing spending restrictions, then flow it to political groups.

Harper tried to mimic that U.S. system when he was head of the National Citizens Coalition, a right-wing lobby group promoting conservative causes. Harper took the issue of unlimited spending for third-party organizations, which makes cash king in American politics, all the way to the Supreme Court in Canada when he was head of the NCC. He lost (<https://scc-csc.lexum.com/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/2146/index.do>) .

There is another tactic we've seen in the U.S. that Stephen Harper and his Conservatives also employed — claiming voter fraud in order to mess with voting.

Which brings us back to Mike Roman. After he left the Koch brothers' intelligence operation, Roman showed up running candidate Donald Trump's "election protection." Roman oversaw (<https://www.salon.com/2016/10/19/donald-trump-taps-shadowy-gop-researcher-mike-roman-as-chief-poll-watcher/>) poll-watching efforts and voter turnout, primarily in the key Electoral College state of Pennsylvania.

Weeks before the 2016 vote, Trump claimed without evidence that dead people and undocumented immigrants were voting in the hotly contested election. Afterwards, he attributed Hillary Clinton's victory in the popular vote to fraudulent votes — three to five million of them. He said voter fraud was particularly rampant in Philadelphia, St. Louis and Chicago. No evidence for the claim was ever produced.

Trump nevertheless launched an investigation after winning the White House — which quickly folded. That's in part because 44 states refused to hand over highly sensitive and politically useful information that the commission was requesting. That information included voters' political party of choice and

four digits of their social security numbers. Mississippi's secretary of state, Delbert Hosemann, a Republican, suggested that the commission "Go jump in the Gulf of Mexico."

In 2011, the Conservative Party of Canada also tried to claim voter fraud was a big problem in Canada — a ruse that gave justification for the Harper government to bring in the Fair Elections Act — a piece of legislation that critics claimed

(<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/28/canada-stephen-harper-harder-to-vote>) made it harder to vote and easier to cheat. The Trudeau government has since rescinded major parts of the Conservative legislation.

After the 2016 election, Roman quietly went to work

(<https://www.politico.com/story/2018/02/11/trump-oppo-researcher-roman-403138>) for the White House as a special assistant, and director of special projects and research.

At the end of April 2018, Roman left the Trump administration. The Republican National Committee now reportedly (<https://electionlawblog.org/?p=104769>) is paying him \$20,000 a month for "legal and compliance services."

That would be the Mike Roman who once wrote

(<https://www.politico.com/story/2018/02/11/trump-oppo-researcher-roman-403138>) in a blog entry, "If an election is worth winning, then there is someone willing to steal it."

6) The IDU under Stephen Harper

Harper resides in Calgary and is chairman and chief executive officer of Harper & Associates, a global consulting firm. In February 2018, in Madrid, Harper was elected chairman of the IDU. Formerly based in Oslo, the organization is now based in Munich. Harper did not respond to a request for an interview.

At the time of his election, Harper released a statement saying "I look forward to working with IDU leaders and members globally to strengthen relationships, advance our political values, and share best practices for campaigning and governing."



IDU chair Stephen Harper welcomes as a new member Israel's right-wing Likud party, headed by Benjamin Netanyahu. At the 2018 Reagan Library ceremony in Simi, California, from left to right: Then Canadian MP Tony Clement, Likud director-general Tzuri Sisso, Harper and Likud foreign affairs director Eli Hazan.

The IDU website says (<https://www.idu.org/leadership/the-right-honourable-stephen-harper/>) Harper had overseen “a dramatic deepening of relations with India.” The right-wing, Hindu nationalist ruling BJP party joined the IDU in February 2016. The party saw a significant increase in support in the May 23 election, upping the number of seats in their majority government from 282 to 303. India is the world’s largest democracy, and as an IDU member it will be able to promote similar ideology around the world. (Could it be that there was a little more (<https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/trudeaus-top-advisor-accused-indian-pm-of-trying-to-screw-liberals-during-2018-trip-book-excerpt>) to Trudeau’s disastrous trip to India than a fashion faux pas?)

Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu’s hard-right party, Likud, became the 73rd member of the IDU in 2018. The party’s initiation was marked by a ceremony at the Ronald Reagan Library in Simi Valley, California, presided (<https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Likud-joins-International-Democratic-Union-567665>) over by Harper.

In July, the IDU congratulated member Nea Demokratia for that conservative party’s election win in Greece. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis immediately vowed (<https://www.dw.com/en/greeces-new-prime-minister-kyriakos-mitsotakis-vows-growth/a-49676223>) to slash taxes and accept austerity measures imposed by the European Union.

As head of the IDU, Stephen Harper also personally congratulated (<https://www.macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/why-stephen-harper-congratulating-viktor-orban-matters/>) Viktor Orbán, a man Maclean's called "one of the most alarming right-wing populists" in Europe. Harper said that he and the IDU looked forward to working with Orbán, who has been widely criticized for his anti-immigrant policies and co-option of the courts and electoral system in Hungary. The European Union has just taken Hungary to the European Court of Justice at The Hague for passing legislation that makes it a "crime" to assist asylum seekers.

7) Stephen Harper, the IDU, the message on my phone and the coming election

Here in Canada, Andrew Scheer has an important ally in his quest for a majority government — the new chairman of the IDU, his old boss, Stephen Harper.

Harper is no longer in elected politics, but more political than ever. He has roasted the Trudeau government over its alleged animus against the West's energy industry, claiming that it has no intention of building the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion that Canadians now own. He paid a "secret" visit (<https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/harper-blindsides-trudeau-pmo-plans-visit-to-white-house-1.3992079>) to the White House without the courtesy of informing the Canadian government what he was doing there. And he has already penned fundraising emails for Andrew Scheer. As Alec Castonguay reported in L'actualite, Scheer rarely makes an important decision without consulting his former leader.

Meanwhile, the high-tech stalking of voters goes on in Canada. Responsive Marketing Group, the company whose name came up during the 2011 Robocall scandal, appears to be behind current texts to people in British Columbia and Ontario. The texts ask for people's thoughts on pipelines and the carbon tax. The calls were traced (<https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/controversial-robocall-firm-behind-mass-text-messages-across-canada>) back to iMarketing Solutions Inc., founded by the directors of RMG. iMarketing has offices in Toronto and New Mexico.

That raises an intriguing question. Have the Conservatives been sending texts through iMarketing without identifying who paid for the marketing? The party did something similar for the 2013 Saskatchewan push polls sent out by RackNine, the company that made the infamous robocalls in the 2011 election. In the Saskatchewan case two years later, the Conservatives at first denied that the messages were sent by the party. Once they were outed, the

party fessed up (<https://o.canada.com/news/national/conservatives-admit-they-were-behind-push-poll-following-analysis-of-phone-message>) and paid a \$78,000 fine.

According to Elections Canada records, RMG worked on 97 Conservative campaigns across the country in 2011, as well as the national campaign. The company had even worked with CIMS as it was developed in 2003. Remember the late senator Finley discussed high in the piece? He called (<https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/tories-review-tapes-at-thunder-bay-call-centre-as-questions-grow-over-companys-checkered-legal-history>) RMG “the best in the business.” The Conservatives won one of the ridings called by RMG by just 18 votes.

Global Affairs Canada officials are worried (<https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/foreign-actors-could-use-artificial-intelligence-to-undermine-democracy-canadian-officials-warn-in-internal-reports>) that foreign countries such as Russia or Saudi Arabia could manipulate Canadians with disinformation in the 2019 federal election using artificial intelligence. Divisive tactics include theft of private data for publication, fake news, personalized propaganda, micro-targeting ads and trolling.

A question, then, for you and me. Are Canadians about to see a bag of dirty tricks in the 2019 federal campaign, similar to what went on in the last U.S. election? Elections Canada rules can’t keep up with technology, especially if people are going to push the boundaries of what is legal. As events in the past have shown, the people pushing those boundaries often have more money and technology than election bureaucrats.

One more question, this for Andrew Scheer and Stephen Harper. That message on my cell leaves me wondering.

Steve and Andy, do you know who Sarah is and how she got my phone number? 🙄