

Voters not preoccupied by scandals

Social questions ranked biggest issue in next election: Poll

Priorities found beyond Gomery, ethics, tax cuts and crime

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OTTAWA—For all the opposition clamour about government corruption and questionable ethics, the central preoccupations of Canadian voters continue to revolve around issues like health care, education and the economy, a new poll shows.

As the Liberal government prepares to unveil a series of new pre-election measures today — including tax cuts — an EKOS Research survey suggests voters' priorities lie elsewhere.

According to the poll, conducted for the *Toronto Star* and *La Presse*, 50 per cent of voters rank social questions as the most important issue of the next election, 20 per cent say jobs and growth, 17 per cent say ethics, and 12 per cent indicate tax and debt relief.

Issues such as child poverty, daycare and the environment are far ahead of debt relief, tax cuts and crime, the data showed.

That would seem to indicate, on the surface, that the opposition focus on Liberal ethical lapses is wrong-headed.

But despite numbers that give him a lead among decided voters, Prime Minister Paul Martin has plenty to worry about.

While the Liberals are seen as having better solutions to social and economic questions than the Conservatives, the NDP has pulled ahead as the most credible in terms of social policy.

"Although the Liberals enjoy a nice advantage on questions of the economy and growth, their traditional advantage on social issues isn't nearly as strong.

"They're now running toe to toe with the NDP ... they probably want to open up a little space in terms of being seen as the plausible champion of the social agenda," said EKOS president Frank Graves.

Graves believes that "if everything goes right" the NDP could make inroads in the next election.

On the question of government corruption, nearly half those surveyed said the sponsorship affair is bad, but no worse than past government scandals.

Barely more than a quarter said it was the worst they could recall.

That signals voters aren't buying the opposition's message, and despite the cynicism concerning the honesty of politicians — 45 per cent said they wouldn't want their child to go into politics — the poll also shows 60 per cent expect the Gomery inquiry will result in cleaner government.

Graves also believes that voters have already expressed their anger over the Gomery revelations, and that anger over the scandal likely won't result in any major swings.

"It's not like (sponsorship) hasn't had an effect, it's had a huge effect, it's just that it's already happened," Graves said.

He added that while the Conservatives "own" the ethics and accountability issue, it's not important enough in the minds of voters to topple the Liberals.

The poll also arrived at the conclusion that while most Canadians feel they are better off now than a quarter of a century ago and believe the country is pointed in the right direction, their faith in government is waning.

A majority would like the government to provide a bolder vision for the country's future, and 43 per cent feel the government is no longer a positive force in their lives — in fact voters rate provincial governments as the most important.

A majority of Canadians (54 per cent) feel the country is moving in the right direction, even if 49 per cent of respondents said the federal government is headed in the wrong direction.

Graves explained voters' current "sour and cantankerous outlook" shows the repeated and sustained attacks over the sponsorship scandal have tainted not only the Liberals, but the political establishment as a whole.

"When we ask them to think about the government and the future, they're pretty caustic, pretty gloomy. That leaves us this question: If Canada is up, why is the government so down?"

"There's a number of factors at play here, and one of them is the corrosive impact of this unremitting focus it seems on ethics and short-term politics," Graves said.

The negative feelings toward the government are strongest in the Prairies, where only 32 per cent believe the government is leading the country in the right direction, and in Quebec, where that figure is 34 per cent.

According to the survey, Atlantic Canada has the warmest feelings toward the government: 57 per cent said it is heading in the right direction, and 60 per cent feel the country is.

In Alberta, a national high of 68 per cent said the country is moving in the right direction — although only 44 per cent said the same thing about the government.

"It really underpins the difficulty the government has, translating a situation where people feel pretty good, but they're quite down, extremely down on the government.

"Particularly in places like Alberta and Quebec which frankly look like wastelands for the federal government," Graves said.

The poll also lent credence to the Liberal contention that voters want to wait until after Justice John Gomery has issued his second and final report into the sponsorship scandal — due Feb. 1, 2006 — before going to the polls (62 per cent agreed with the assertion, 24 per cent said there should be a vote now.)

A majority of voters (60 per cent) think former prime minister Jean Chrétien should shoulder the blame for the scandal, whereas 15 per cent fingered Martin, suggesting voters have at least partly accepted Gomery's exoneration of the current Liberal leader.

But if the Prime Minister is heartened by that finding, he will take little comfort in the fact that 59 per cent believe he should nevertheless be held accountable for the sponsorship mess.

The poll was conducted from Nov. 7-9 and surveyed 1,275 randomly selected Canadians. Its findings are considered accurate to within 2.7 per cent 19 times out of 20.

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