

## Social issues top poll

Health, education outrank economy, respondents say

Support for Liberals, Tories slips slightly as campaign begins

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OTTAWA—Social issues like health and education far outrank the economy, ethics and taxes for Canadians in this election, according to a new *Toronto Star/La Presse/EKOS* poll.

Fifty-three per cent of poll respondents said social issues are most important in the campaign, compared to a much lower 20 per cent who found jobs and growth vital, 14 per cent who said matters of ethics and accountability are key and 11 per cent favoured fiscal issues like taxes and debt at the fore.

The NDP was identified by the most respondents (25 per cent) as being best equipped to tackle social issues, while respondents thought the Liberals offered the best platform when it comes to the economy and taxes.

Nearly half of those polled — 47 per cent — feel the Conservatives best take on issues of ethics and accountability.

In terms of party support, the Liberals' frontrunner position has slipped almost five points from last week to 34.1 per cent, according to the poll conducted by EKOS Research.

Twenty-nine per cent of respondents said they would definitely not vote for the Liberals, with more than two-thirds of those non-supporters saying that corruption related to the sponsorship program is what's blocking their vote and not elements of the party's platform.

### Conservative support

Support also slipped away from Stephen Harper's Conservatives in the first days of the campaign. They dropped two points from last week to stand at 27.4 per cent.

Thirty-two per cent of respondents said they would definitely not vote for the Tories and 54 per cent of those people said it was because they disagreed with the party's platform.

EKOS polled 1,308 people across Canada by telephone from Nov. 28 to Dec. 1. A sample of this size has a margin of error of 2.7 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

The margin of error is greater when the results are broken down into smaller categories.

More than two-thirds of respondents said it's time for a change in Ottawa, but almost as many said they believe the Liberals will win the election.

"It's time for a change for a lot of these folks, but they don't see a viable change," EKOS executive director Paul Adams said.

"And that's an important element in this volatility. A lot of people are finding homes that they're not comfortable in."

### Gains made

Meanwhile, the NDP, Bloc Québécois and the Green party all made slight gains over the first week of campaigning.

The NDP stands at 18.4 per cent nationally, up from 16.9 per cent last week and the NDP outpaced the Conservatives in both the Prairies (34 per cent versus 27 per cent) and in British Columbia (30 per cent

versus 26 per cent.)

Nationally, the separatist Bloc stands at 14 per cent, up 3 1/2 points from last week.

In Quebec, the Bloc stands at 58 per cent, well outpacing the second-place Liberals, who have 21 per cent support.

EKOS' Adams said that the Conservatives' domination of the headlines during the first week of the campaign has not translated into a boost in support.

Nightly polling found a gradual decline in Tory support as the week went on, with support dropping from about 34 per cent on Tuesday to 24 per cent on Thursday.

"There has been a pattern over a couple of years that when people take a careful look at the Tories and Stephen Harper, they lose their appetite for them," said Adams. "I think there's some indication here that that's what happened this week."

### **Volatile vote**

The poll also found some evidence that left-leaning voters, whose support wavers between the NDP and the Liberals, may once again determine the outcome, Adams said.

Though the Liberals are still stuck in minority territory at 34.1 per cent, what keeps them there is the volatile 18.4 per cent of voters who support the NDP, according to the poll.

In the final days of the last election, that NDP support bled to the Liberals when many believed there might have been a Tory victory as support for the Conservatives started to grow.

If that happens again, it could push the Liberals into majority government territory.

"Right now, most people think the Liberals are going to win a minority government," Adams said.

"The more confident people are that the Liberals are going to win, the more comfortable those voters are to vote NDP. ...Once they perceive the Tories are seriously poised to win, some of those NDP voters may stampede back to the Liberals."

The Liberals have strong leads in Ontario and British Columbia, the two regions where they must do well to maintain their government status.

The Green party may have its first opportunity to win a seat in the Commons.

Support for the Greens may be strong enough in B.C. to turn some ridings from three-way to four-way races.

Nationally, the Greens stand at 6 per cent support, up more than two points from last week.

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