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## **THE NATIONAL ANGUS REID/SOUTHAM NEWS POLL**

### **- THE FEDERAL POLITICAL SCENE - - THE PUBLIC AGENDA -**

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This National Angus Reid/Southam News Poll was conducted by telephone between January 21st and 27th, 1997 among a representative cross-section of 1,519 Canadian adults.

The actual number of completed interviews in each region was as follows: B.C. - 202; Alberta - 151; Manitoba/Saskatchewan - 121; Ontario - 523; Quebec - 401; Atlantic - 121. These data were statistically weighted to ensure the sample's regional and age/sex composition reflects that of the actual Canadian population according to the 1991 Census data.

With a national sample of 1,519, one can say with 95 percent certainty that the results are within  $\pm 2.5$  percentage points of what they would have been had the entire adult Canadian population been polled. The margin of error will be larger within regions and for other sub-groupings of the survey population.

## THE FEDERAL POLITICAL SCENE

The federal Liberals' popular support is holding up at 45 percent of the decided vote, although many voters say their opinion of this government has worsened in recent months, pointing largely to the GST issue and the Liberals' record on other promises. The latest National Angus Reid/Southam News Poll also shows that the Charest Conservatives remain on the move, and are now 8 points ahead of any other opposition party.

These findings emerged from the January National Angus Reid/Southam News Poll conducted between January 21st and 27th among a representative cross-section of 1,519 Canadian voters. The highlights of the poll findings on the federal political scene include:

### ***The Parties' Support***

- The federal Liberals begin this likely election year with 45 percent of the popular vote. This continues a gradual downward trend in the Liberals' support (from 57% last July, 52% last October, 47% in November and 46% in December), but it still places the Liberals above their 1993 election showing and solidly within majority government range. The Charest Conservatives are back in a solid second place with 19 percent of the decided vote – their highest support level since the 1993 election. This leaves 11 percent for Reform, 11 percent for the Bloc Quebecois (nationally, 41% in Quebec), 10 percent for the NDP and 4 percent for all other parties combined. (This poll finds a total of 9% of voters are currently undecided/refused or not sure they would vote in a federal election – a figure which was 15% before a follow-up "leaners" question.) (Table 1A)
- The Conservatives are now at double digits in all major regions of the country, but it is the Ontario numbers that are most encouraging for the party: this poll shows the federal Tories at 25 percent in Ontario, one key regional contest that is heating up in the run-up to the coming federal election. The Liberals remain in the lead in all major regions except Quebec where the BQ edges them out (41% versus 37%). Reform remains a solid second in B.C.

and Alberta, but now trails the Tories in all major regions east of here, and the NDP in all other regions except Ontario where these two opposition parties are tied. (Table 1B)

### ***Party Approval Ratings***

- As for the parties' current approval ratings, this poll finds: (Table 2)
  - For the federal Liberals, a total of 55 percent of voters currently approve of their overall performance in government (7% strongly approve, 48% moderately) while 41 percent disapprove (22% moderately, 19% strongly). This margin was a few points wider last July, but the same spread was recorded a year ago; the Liberals' approval ratings were highest at their one-year anniversary in October of 1994 (69% versus 24%). Their approval ratings remain highest in Ontario (61%) and Manitoba-Saskatchewan (60%), and most modest in Quebec (where 47% approve versus 50% disapprove).
  - The two main opposition parties' approval ratings are also much as they were last summer. The Bloc Quebecois receives 74 percent disapproval nationally – including massive disapproval outside Quebec (84%) and a split assessment from their Quebec constituents (47% approve versus 47% disapprove). The BQ's ratings were similar last summer but had been higher earlier in this mandate – especially within Quebec. For Reform, national disapproval is nudging the two-to-one level (57% disapprove versus 31% approve), the most negative margin yet recorded for Reform. Reform's numbers are fairly split in B.C. and Alberta but they receive majority disapproval east of here.
  - The Progressive Conservatives – assessed for the first time in this Angus Reid/Southam News Poll – receive a more positive performance appraisal than any other opposition party: 43 percent of the voters surveyed said they approve of the Tories' performance versus 42 percent who

disapprove. Ontario voters (50%) and Atlantic Canadians (55%) are the most impressed with the Conservatives. Finally, the NDP's performance meets with 50 percent disapproval and 30 percent approval (with the remainder unsure). Their numbers are most negative in the two western-most provinces and rise to a split verdict in Manitoba-Saskatchewan and Atlantic Canada. (Table 2)

### ***Change in Views of the Liberals***

- While the federal Liberals' popular support levels remain basically intact, the results of this recent Angus Reid/Southam News Poll suggest that voters' overall opinion of the government has eroded somewhat in recent weeks: fully one in three (35%) of those surveyed said their opinion of the federal Liberals had "worsened" over the past couple of months versus only 5 percent who reported an improved opinion and 59 percent who said their views had not changed. (Table 3) Further analysis reveals that one in four (24%) current federal Liberal voters reported a deteriorated opinion of that party, evidence that the Liberals' image has indeed been hurt by recent events and also of the fact that a great many current Liberal supporters remain unimpressed with the political alternatives.
- Asked why their opinion of the federal government had worsened recently, fully one in four (24%) of this group pointed to the GST – either the Liberals' failure to axe it, Jean Chretien's apology, etc.; 13 percent pointed to the Somalia Inquiry and/or other problems with the Defense Department; 9 percent complained about the Liberals' failure to deliver on their promises generally; and another 9 percent mentioned a failure on the jobs front specifically. A number of other reasons were offered by smaller numbers of those reporting a worsened opinion of the Chretien Liberal government. (Table 3)

### ***Jean Chretien's Approval Ratings***

- Finally, Jean Chretien's personal approval ratings stand at 57 percent approve versus 40 percent disapprove. This level of approval is down 6 percentage points from November,

but is on par with Mr. Chretien's ratings last summer. The Prime Minister remains much more popular in English-speaking Canada (63% approval versus 34% disapproval) than in Quebec (58% disapproval versus 39% approval). (Table 4)

## THE PUBLIC AGENDA

The January National Angus Reid/Southam News Poll included an ongoing monitor of Canadians' public issues agenda. Those surveyed were posed an "open-ended" question at the beginning of the interview asking them to name the most important issues for Canada today. This probing yielded the following responses, presented here in descending order of their level of total mentions (Tables 5A & 5B)

- Jobs/Unemployment - Jobs remain at the very top of the public's agenda as 1997 begins, with "top-of-mind" mentions at 46 percent (unchanged from recent months). Quebecers and Atlantic Canadians continue to express the most concern about unemployment (mentions approach six in ten in these regions).
- National Unity/Quebec's Future/The Constitution - The issue of national unity/Quebec's future occupies a somewhat distant second place on Canadians' policy issues agenda: one in four (26%) of those surveyed named this issue "top-of-mind" as one of the most important concerns presently facing the country, down from 35 percent in late 1996. Concern about national unity remains relatively higher among more affluent Canadians (33% versus 18% among the lower income group).
- Deficit/Debt - One in four (24%) survey respondents also pointed to Canada's fiscal situation as a priority for the country today, on par with this issue's placement for the past several months. Residents of B.C., men and those with higher household incomes express higher unaided concern about the deficit/debt.
- The Economy in General - The overall state of the Canadian economy was cited by one in five (19%) of those polled (and by one in three Quebecers).

- Health Care/Medicare - Almost one in five (17%) surveyed Canadians singled out the availability and/or quality of health care as an acute issue presently facing the country. Unaided concern about health care has been in this range in recent soundings, but mentions are higher now than they were a year ago. "Top-of-mind" concern over the health care system is higher among residents of the prairie and Atlantic provinces and among women.
- Education - One in ten (9%) Canadians surveyed named issues concerning education, double the mentions recorded a year ago.
- Poverty - Eight percent of respondents cited issues relating to poverty.
- Taxes - The same number (8%) said taxes/taxation are critical for Canada today.
- Other Social Services - Six percent mentioned other social services as a critical issue for the country right now.
- Defense/Military/Somalia - A total of 6 percent pointed to problems concerning the armed forces and/or those being raised at the Somalia Inquiry, higher than recently recorded.
- Crime/Justice Issues - Five percent pointed to crime or the justice system.
- Government/Politics - The same number (5%) singled out issues involving government/politics in this country.

A number of other issues were mentioned by smaller numbers of survey respondents, including: trade (4%); the environment (4%); immigration/refugees (2%); among others mentioned by fewer respondents.

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