



NEWS RELEASE

THE NATIONAL ANGUS REID/SOUTHAM NEWS POLL

- THE FEDERAL POLITICAL SCENE -

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THE FEDERAL POLITICAL SCENE

With the election call expected in a matter of days, the Chretien Liberals are holding steady in popular support nationally, with some interesting regional contests shaping up.

These findings emerged from a National Angus Reid Poll taken among a representative cross-section of 1,513 Canadian adults between April 16th and 22nd, 1997.

Party Standings

The Chretien Liberals are currently holding 42 percent of the decided vote, one point over the level of support they received in the October 1993 election. This is a single point higher than last month, halting what had been a steady decline in Liberal support – from 57 percent last summer, to 52 percent last fall, to 45 percent in January, down to 41 percent last month. The Charest Conservatives are at 18 percent nationally, and Preston Manning's Reform party is at 16 percent, one point back from last month but still five points up over the beginning of the year. The New Democrats are now at 11 percent and the Bloc Quebecois is at 13 percent nationally (49% in Quebec). (Table 1A) (A total of 14% of those surveyed were undecided/refused or said they would not vote in a federal election, a figure that was 19% before a follow-up leaning question.)

An interesting "battle for the regions" is shaping up: (Table 1B)

- B.C. continues to look competitive: after a dead heat last month, the Liberals have edged back up to 41 percent in this poll against Reform's 33 percent. The NDP are at 13 percent in B.C. and the Conservatives are at 10 percent.
- Alberta is also looking very competitive: the Liberals have edged up here to 36 percent of the decided vote against 29 percent for Preston Manning's Reform party (virtually half of the support Reform won in Alberta in 1993). Alberta is also a good region for the Conservatives who remain up at 27 percent. The NDP is at 8 percent here.

- The Liberals look good in Manitoba/Saskatchewan, having bounced up to 52 percent in this poll (from the 40 percent range in the last few months). The NDP and Reform are battling it out for second place (at 20% and 19% respectively), while the Tories have slipped to 9 percent across these two provinces.
- Ontario, with its motherlode of seats, remains Liberal turf, although this latest poll shows them at 46 percent here now, down from 53 percent the last couple of months and from as high as 67 percent last summer. The Conservatives are running second in Ontario with 25 percent of the decided vote, against 17 percent for Reform (showing an upward trend) and 11 percent for the NDP.
- Quebec is still Bloc country: this latest Angus Reid/Southam News Poll shows the Bloc Quebecois under Gilles Duceppe holding 49 percent of the decided Quebec vote, the same as their actual 1993 showing. The Chretien Liberals remain at 36 percent, three points up from 1993 but down from earlier in this mandate. The Charest Conservatives are at 9 percent in Quebec, the NDP at 4 percent and Reform at 1 percent.
- In the Atlantic region, the Liberals are at 42 percent (well back from "honeymoon" levels and from the 57% they received in 1993), while the Conservatives and NDP battle it out for second place (25% and 23% respectively). Reform is at 9 percent in this region. (Table 1B)

Liberals on Right Track

Some of the best news for the Liberals is the poll finding that by a margin of almost two to one (59% to 33%), Canadian voters believe the federal Liberal government is "on the right track in terms of the overall direction in which they have been leading the country". This is consistent with the electorate's earlier assessments of the Liberals' performance. Outside Quebec, the

endorsement is louder (64% right track versus 28% wrong track), while Quebecers remain evenly divided (45% versus 47%) in their overall appraisal of the Chretien Liberal government. (Table 2)

Diagnostics:

Commitment/Residual Support/Resistance

This Angus Reid/Southam News Poll included some key "diagnostics" to further examine the parties' current standings:

- A look at the current data on the commitment of the parties' support bases suggests no major advantage for any of the parties at this time in terms of the likelihood of their supporters actually going to the polls to vote and with respect to the certainty of voters' current party choice. (Table 3A)

- But the polling data regarding residual support – decided voters' second choice party – shows the Conservatives maintaining a distinct advantage. Across all decided voters, the Tories are named by 28 percent as their second choice party, followed by the Liberals at 19 percent, the NDP at 15 percent and Reform at only 11 percent. The Conservatives are well placed to pick up disaffected Liberals (40% of Liberals choose the Conservatives as their second-choice party, and only 12% choose Reform). Current Reform party supporters also tend to opt for the Tories (39%). Conservatives, for their part, are far more likely to name the Liberals as their second choice than they are to name Reform or the New Democrats (47% versus 23% and 11% respectively). (Table 3B)

- The data on voters' resistance to the parties shows Reform taking the unfortunate distinction on this front: 29 percent of all voters polled said they could "never support" Reform in the next federal election, ranging from 20 percent in Alberta to 35 percent next door in Manitoba/Saskatchewan. The NDP are written off by 21 percent of voters nationally, by over 30 percent in B.C. and Alberta. Fifteen percent reject the Liberals, including 26 percent of Quebecers. The Conservatives do well on this key diagnostic – only 14 percent say they

could "never support" them in this election. As for the Bloc, 25 percent of Quebecers explicitly excluded them from their political choices, on par with the Liberal and Reform figures. (The BQ was not accepted as a response outside Quebec.) (Table 3C)

Who Has Momentum?

A key line of questioning included in this Angus Reid/Southam News Poll asked voters whether there had been any change in their opinion of the federal parties and leaders over the past couple of months. The results suggest some possible positive momentum for the Charest Conservatives, in contrast to the Liberals and Reform who appear to be turning off more voters than they have been impressing in recent months: (Table 4)

- Just better than one in four (27%) Canadian voters have a better opinion of Jean Charest and the Progressive Conservative party than they did a couple of months ago; 13 percent, meanwhile, report a worsened opinion. (54% said their opinion of the PCs had not changed.) A "momentum score" can be used to make for easier comparisons simply by subtracting the percentage who say their opinion has worsened from the percentage who say it has improved. In the case of the Charest Conservatives, then, the momentum score is +14 nationally. The Conservatives received positive momentum scores in the double digits in all major regions of the country, and among current Liberals, Reformers and Blocquistes.
- In contrast, the Liberals' momentum score is -24: fully 33 percent of voters surveyed said their opinion of Jean Chretien and the Liberal party has worsened over the past couple of months compared to only 9 percent who said their opinion has improved (55% reported no change). The Liberals have a negative momentum score among their current supporters (-5) and among currently undecided voters (-16), and have particularly poor scores among older (55+) voters (-37) and in Quebec (-29).
- Preston Manning and the Reform party could also be doing better: 21 percent reported a worsened opinion of this choice and 10 percent an improved opinion for a momentum score of -11. Reform is almost at a break-even in B.C. but does a little worse in all regions east of there.

- Alexa McDonough and the New Democratic Party have a +4 score nationally and are impressing a lot of Atlantic Canadians (+20).
- The Bloc Quebecois and new leader Gilles Duceppe score a -4 among Quebec voters. (Table 4)

The Leaders

Jean Chretien remains out in front on the key question of which party leader would make the best Prime Minister, with 35 percent of voters naming him. But Jean Charest is not far behind at 27 percent. This compares to 9 percent who name Preston Manning, 5 percent Alexa McDonough and 4 percent Gilles Duceppe. There are some important regional differences. Regionally, Mr. Chretien has a substantial lead in Ontario and each of the three main western regions. Quebecers are far more likely to choose Mr. Charest than Mr. Chretien (38% versus 18%) and voters in the Atlantic region are roughly split between these two choices and also give NDP leader Alexa McDonough her best showing. There is also both a gender and generation gap: men are evenly split between Messrs. Charest and Chretien while women favour Jean Chretien (36% versus 22%) and middle-aged voters are split whereas Mr. Chretien has the lead among those older (narrowly) and younger (almost two to one). (Table 5A)

Which party leader would make the best leader of the official opposition? While Mr. Manning is not terribly strong on the best Prime Minister question, voters view him more favourably when they contemplate who would make the best official opposition leader. Here, 22 percent of those surveyed chose Reform leader Preston Manning, essentially tied with Conservative leader Jean Charest (24%). Fifteen percent chose Jean Chretien as the best opposition leader, 10 percent Alexa McDonough and 8 percent Gilles Duceppe. There are big regional differences. Reform leader Preston Manning is the first choice among voters in both B.C. and Alberta and is tied with Mr. Charest in Ontario. Jean Charest and Gilles Duceppe were named by equal numbers of Quebecers as the best choice for Official opposition leader. In the Atlantic region, these results show a four-way split. (Table 5B)

Strategic Voting

This National Angus Reid/Southam News Poll looked at the issue of strategic voting among those hoping to prevent the BQ from becoming the official opposition again. There appears to be considerable interest among supporters of other parties in not having the Bloc Quebecois as the official opposition in the next Parliament, and it looks like the Liberals are most vulnerable to this phenomenon while the Tories stand to benefit most.

- Liberal supporters are more likely than others to say they would consider switching to another party to block the Bloc (46% of Liberals did so). Most Liberals open to switching chose the PCs as their most likely alternative.
- Among Conservatives, Reformers and NDPers, roughly 30 percent said they would consider switching in the hopes of replacing the official opposition. Both NDPers and Reformers are also likely to favour the Tories who themselves tilt towards Reform as their strategic choice to block the Bloc.

The Election Issues

As the 1997 election campaign approaches, Canadian voters remain very much focussed on "jobs, jobs, jobs", although a number of other issues are on the election agenda. Asked what they see as the most important issues in the coming federal election campaign, the voters surveyed gave the following responses: (Table 6)

- Jobs was mentioned as a main election issue by fully 49 percent of voters polled, rising as high as 64 percent in Quebec;
- Deficit/debt was named by 23 percent of voters as the most important issue in the next campaign, including 31 percent of B.C. voters and 30 percent of Reform party supporters;
- National Unity/Quebec's future was named by 21 percent of voters, 30 percent in Quebec;

- Healthcare was highlighted by fully 19 percent of voters surveyed with significant mentions across the board, particularly in Atlantic Canada and Alberta and among NDP supporters;
- Sixteen percent of highlighted surveyed said that the economy is the most important issue;
- Education was cited as a significant issue by 12 percent of voters polled;
- A number of other issues were cited by smaller numbers of voters as important items for the coming election campaign.

Survey Methodology

This National Angus Reid/Southam News Poll was conducted by telephone between April 16th and 22nd, 1997 among a representative cross-section of 1,513 Canadian adults.

The actual number of completed interviews in each region was as follows: B.C. - 200; Alberta - 135; Manitoba/Saskatchewan - 123; Ontario - 535; Quebec - 400; Atlantic - 120. 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, and were also adjusted for respondents' past voting behaviour.

With a national sample of 1,513, one can say with 95 percent certainty that the results are within ± 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.

For more information on this news release, please contact:

Darrell Bricker
Senior Vice-President
Angus Reid Group
(613) 241-5802

Bob Richardson
Vice-President
Angus Reid Group
(416) 324-2900

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