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*Stephen A.*



*Steph A.*

Accountability

Imputabilité

# BY A 3-1 MARGIN, VOTERS RANK THE HEALTH CARE GUARANTEE MOST IMPORTANT OF THE TOP FIVE PRIORITIES



Nik Nanos

To determine voter attitudes on Stephen Harper's top five priorities list, *Policy Options* asked SES Research to find out which priorities ranked where. SES Research also asked about the Accountability Act and some of its more controversial features. What came back, from six days in the field in early May, was overwhelming support for the health care guarantee and strong support for the Accountability Act. In both instances the strongest support was found in Quebec. SES president Nik Nanos explains in this *Policy Options* exclusive.

Pour déterminer l'attitude des électeurs face aux cinq priorités de Stephen Harper, *Options politiques* a demandé à la maison de sondage SES Research de les interroger à ce sujet et d'établir le classement qu'ils leur attribuaient. Selon cette enquête de cinq jours réalisée début mai, la Garantie de soins de santé recueille un appui quasi généralisé. Les répondants ont aussi fortement approuvé la Loi sur la responsabilité, même après avoir été interrogés sur ses éléments les plus controversés. Dans les deux cas, c'est au Québec que l'appui était le plus marqué. Nik Nanos, président de SES Research, analyse les résultats de ce sondage exclusif.

**T**he health care guarantee is by far the most popular item on the Harper government's top five priorities list. In a national survey by SES Research for *Policy Options*, 46.9 percent of Canadians said the health care guarantee was the most important of the five priorities to them personally, nearly three times as many as identified cleaning up government as the top priority at 16.8 percent (question 1). Cutting the GST came in third at 14.7 percent, support for child care fourth at 10.4 percent and the crime package fifth at 9.5 percent.

The SES national telephone survey of 1,006 Canadians, conducted May 4 to May 9, has a margin of accuracy of 3.1 percent, plus or minus, 19 times out of 20.

On a regional basis, the health care guarantee as the most important priority jumps to 62.2 percent in Quebec, while it stands at 46.6 percent in the Atlantic, 42.9 percent in Ontario and 39.4 percent in the West.

The health care guarantee would allow patients to receive elective surgeries on their public health insurance, outside their province and even outside the system if the procedures are not available within an agreed-upon waiting time. The guarantee will have to be negotiated between federal and provincial health ministers.

The clear top ranking of the health care guarantee is surprising in the sense that it has been the least discussed of the government's top five priorities. All the others have been funded in the May 2 budget.

Even though the government has initially focused on the other four priorities, the health care guarantee still tops the list as the most important priority for Canadians. In a way, the support for the health care guarantee resonates strongly because of the branding of the issue. It's health care, and it's guaranteed. Of course it has strong support. But these levels of support also increase the pressure on the Harper government to deliver on this promise.

If Harper is able to deliver on the promise of the health care guarantee, as well as the other four priorities, he will be able to return to the voters and say he delivered the goods. It's the difference between a prime minister with a tightly focused agenda and the comparatively unfocused approach of his predecessor.

**T**he remainder of the SES-*Policy Options* survey asked voters for their impressions of the Federal Accountability Act, the first piece of legislation introduced by the Harper government, and its signature bill for cleaning up the way Ottawa does business.

We asked Canadians whether they thought it represented a major or minor change, or no change at all (question 3). More than three Canadians in four agreed it represented some change: 28.3 percent said it meant major change, and 48.5 percent said it meant minor change. Only 17.8 percent thought it meant no change.

Again, the numbers were most striking in Quebec, where 40.3 percent thought the Accountability Act meant

major change, and 39.4 percent said it meant some change.

This is not surprising. Quebec is the neighbourhood where the sponsorship wrongdoings occurred. It is no surprise that Quebecers support measures to make sure it doesn't happen again in their backyard.

When SES asked Canadians about the Act's long-term impact on how the government works, a strong majority of voters thought it would be positive (29.1 percent) or somewhat positive

(32.9 percent), as against only 2.6 percent who thought it would prove to be somewhat negative and only 5.4 percent who thought it would be outright negative (question 4). Stated another way, fewer than one Canadian in ten (8 percent) thought the accountability package will have a negative long-term impact. One voter in four, 25.4 percent, thought its effects would be neutral.

Once again, support is highest in Quebec, scene of the sponsorship scandal. In Quebec, 68.4 percent think

QUESTION 1. WHICH ONE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PRIORITY TO YOU PERSONALLY?

Region	Total responses (N)	Cutting GST (%)	A crime package (%)	The health care guarantee (%)	Support for child care (%)	Cleaning up government (%)	Undecided (%)
Canada	1,006	14.7	9.5	46.9	10.4	16.8	1.7
Atlantic	100	22.0	6.8	46.6	5.4	18.3	0.9
Quebec	251	11.9	9.8	62.2	7.2	7.3	1.6
Ontario	303	14.2	8.9	42.9	13.6	17.4	2.8
West	352	14.9	10.6	39.4	11.4	22.5	1.1

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com  
 Note: 1,006 Canadians, +/- 3.1% 19 times out of 20, May 4-9, 2006.

QUESTION 2. WHICH ONE IS THE SECOND MOST IMPORTANT PRIORITY TO YOU PERSONALLY?

Region	Total responses (N)	Cutting GST (%)	A crime package (%)	The health care guarantee (%)	Support for child care (%)	Cleaning up government (%)	Undecided (%)
Canada	1,006	21.7	19.7	21.4	18.3	15.9	3.0
Atlantic	100	21.5	20.1	21.4	22.3	12.0	2.6
Quebec	251	17.8	24.2	18.0	26.6	11.1	2.3
Ontario	303	24.4	18.0	23.4	10.1	19.2	4.8
West	352	22.2	17.7	22.1	18.2	17.6	2.2

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com  
 Note: 1,006 Canadians, +/- 3.1% 19 times out of 20, May 4-9, 2006.

QUESTION 3. THE FIRST PIECE OF LEGISLATION THAT HAS BEEN INTRODUCED BY THE CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT IS THE ACCOUNTABILITY ACT, WHICH IS INTENDED TO CLEAN UP GOVERNMENT. IT INCLUDES NEW STRICTER RULES ON LOBBYING AND THE PROCUREMENT OF CONTRACTS — MORE POWERS FOR THE AUDITOR GENERAL AND A WHISTLEBLOWER INITIATIVE. IN THE LONG RUN WILL THESE ACTIONS RESULT IN A MAJOR CHANGE, A MINOR CHANGE OR NO CHANGE IN HOW THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT WORKS?

Region	Total responses (N)	Major change (%)	Minor change (%)	No change (%)	Undecided (%)
Canada	1,006	28.3	48.5	17.8	5.4
Atlantic	100	24.3	47.8	25.2	2.8
Quebec	251	40.3	39.4	12.0	8.2
Ontario	303	23.2	53.0	18.7	5.2
West	352	25.3	51.2	19.1	4.4

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com  
 Note: 1,006 Canadians, +/- 3.1% 19 times out of 20, May 4-9, 2006.

the Accountability Act's effect will be positive or somewhat positive, against a national average of 61.0 percent who see positive or somewhat positive impact.

Being well supported in Quebec, the Accountability Act could prove to be an important building block for Prime Minister Harper in his bid to

graduate from a minority in this House to a majority in the next one.

The road to that majority leads through Quebec. In our ballot question in the same polling period, the national percentages of party support were: Conservatives 38, Liberals 28, NDP 19, Bloc Québécois 9, Green Party 6. In a regional breakout in Quebec,

the Bloc was at 37, the Conservatives at 35, the Liberals at 19 and the NDP at 13. Liberal support in Quebec is largely clustered in their anglophone-allophone stronghold on the island of Montreal. Outside the Montreal region, a battleground of 50 seats, the Liberals are, for the moment at least, out of what has become a two-party

QUESTION 4. WILL THESE INITIATIVES HAVE A POSITIVE, SOMEWHAT POSITIVE, NEUTRAL, SOMEWHAT NEGATIVE OR NEGATIVE IMPACT ON HOW THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT WORKS IN THE LONG RUN?

Region	Total responses (N)	Positive (%)	Somewhat positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Somewhat negative (%)	Negative (%)	Undecided (%)
Canada	1,006	29.1	32.9	25.4	2.6	5.4	4.5
Atlantic	100	32.8	25.0	27.6	2.6	10.2	1.8
Quebec	251	24.5	43.9	22.2	1.6	0.7	7.0
Ontario	303	29.8	30.1	26.2	1.9	8.4	3.5
West	352	30.6	29.8	26.5	3.9	4.9	4.4

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com  
 Note: 1,006 Canadians, +/- 3.1% 19 times out of 20, May 4-9, 2006.

TABLE 5. CURRENTLY, FORMER SENIOR OFFICIALS CANNOT LOBBY THE GOVERNMENT FOR A ONE-YEAR COOLING-OFF PERIOD AFTER THEY LEAVE THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA. THE NEW PROPOSED RULES WILL INCREASE THAT COOLING-OFF PERIOD TO FIVE YEARS. WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING COOLING-OFF PERIODS DO YOU THINK IS REASONABLE: [ROTATE] ONE-YEAR, TWO-YEAR, THREE-YEAR, FOUR-YEAR OR FIVE-YEAR?

Region	Total responses (N)	One year (%)	Two years (%)	Three years (%)	Four years (%)	Five years (%)	Undecided (%)
Canada	1,006	19.7	18.3	22.0	2.8	31.3	5.9
Atlantic	100	24.3	21.7	24.0	3.2	23.8	3.0
Quebec	251	9.9	9.1	15.7	1.9	54.8	8.6
Ontario	303	25.1	22.2	23.3	2.1	22.3	5.1
West	352	20.7	20.7	24.8	3.9	24.4	5.5

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com  
 Note: 1,006 Canadians, +/- 3.1% 19 times out of 20, May 4-9, 2006.

QUESTION 6. DO YOU THINK THAT RESTRICTING AND LIMITING PERSONAL, BUSINESS AND UNION DONATIONS REDUCES THE EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON OUR POLITICAL SYSTEM OR INFRINGES ON FREEDOM CANADIANS HAVE TO SUPPORT POLITICAL CAUSES?

Region	Total responses (N)	Reduces the external influences on our political system (%)	Infringes on freedom Canadians have to support political causes (%)	Neither (%)	Unsure (%)
Canada	1,006	55.9	30.0	6.9	7.2
Atlantic	100	56.6	31.6	8.0	3.8
Quebec	251	59.7	25.5	6.6	8.2
Ontario	303	56.1	28.8	7.9	7.2
West	352	52.7	33.8	6.0	7.5

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com  
 Note: 1,006 Canadians, +/- 3.1% 19 times out of 20, May 4-9, 2006.

QUESTION 7. THINKING ABOUT THE NEW CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT, DO YOU THINK IT WILL BE MORE LIKELY, AS LIKELY OR LESS LIKELY TO KEEP ITS PROMISES COMPARED TO THE PREVIOUS LIBERAL GOVERNMENT?

Region	Total responses (N)	More likely (%)	As likely (%)	Less likely (%)	Unsure (%)
Canada	1,006	41.3	34.1	20.3	4.2
Atlantic	100	28.8	40.2	24.8	6.2
Quebec	251	52.2	32.1	10.2	5.5
Ontario	303	35.3	30.6	30.1	3.9
West	352	42.3	36.8	17.8	3.1

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com  
 Note: 1,006 Canadians, +/- 3.1% 19 times out of 20, May 4-9, 2006.

contest between the Bloc and the Conservatives.

Next, SES asked Canadians about their views on two of the most controversial elements of the Accountability Act, the five-year cooling-off period for former officials in lobbying government and the further restrictions on donations in election and leadership campaigns.

When we asked which period of time was a reasonable restraint on former officials, rotating from the existing one-year ban to the proposed five-year prohibition, support was strongest for the five-year cooling-off period at 31.3 percent, while the current one-year ban garnered 19.7 percent (question 5). Support for a two-year ban was at 18.3 percent, for three years at 22 percent and for four years at only 2.8 percent. Perhaps significantly, cumulative support for a cooling-off period of one to three years is at 60 percent, twice the level of support for the more severe

five-year ban on lobbying activity by former officials.

On the issue of campaign finance reform, 55.9 percent of respondents agreed that restricting donations reduces external influences on our political system, while only 30.0 percent thought such restrictions infringe on our freedoms to support political causes (question 6).

Finally, SES asked Canadians how likely the new Conservative government was to keep its promises, compared with the previous Liberal government. Overall, 41.3 percent of Canadians thought the Conservatives more likely to keep their promises, 34.1 percent as likely and 20.3 percent less likely (question 7).

Again, the numbers were highest in Quebec, where 52.2 percent thought the Harper government more likely to keep its promises, 32.1 percent as likely and only 10.2 percent less likely. This is a leading indicator of

approval and a positive harbinger for Prime Minister Harper in his bid to grow to a majority at the next election.

Although the change in electoral support since the election still remains within the margin of accuracy, the Conservatives are well positioned with their five priorities. They are already on their way to delivering on cutting the GST, cleaning up government, launching their child care initiative and moving their crime package forward. However, among the five core Harper priorities the health care guarantee clearly stands out as the biggest and likely the toughest issue. Success or failure in delivering the health care guarantee may indeed show Canadians the true mettle of Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

*Nik Nanos is president and CEO of SES Research, the public opinion research firm that on January 22 predicted support for all four major parties to within one-tenth of 1 percent of the actual outcome on January 23.*

