

Greens urged to become more relevant to Canadians

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OTTAWA -- If the Green party can get organized and diversify its message beyond protecting the environment, it stands a real chance of attracting more voters in the next federal election, according to one of the country's top pollsters.

But first the party needs to choose a leader with charisma, Nik Nanos, president of SES Research, told reporters after speaking on Friday at the Green party's convention.

"Leader charisma really goes a long way, especially in attracting younger voters and mobilizing voters and I think that should be one of the key factors the Green party considers when it's electing a new leader," he said.

Today, Elizabeth May, David Chernushenko or Jim Fannon, will be chosen to replace outgoing leader Jim Harris.

Nanos, who is considered by some as the most accurate pollster in Canada, said the Greens are still considered too much of a movement and not enough of a political party. To change its tree-hugger image it needs to develop a platform beyond environmental issues so it is more relevant to more Canadians, he said.

Even within the Green party, health care outranked the environment as the top national issue of concern according to Nanos' research from the 2006 election. It's a sign Green party members have diverse interests, said Nanos, and they need to drive that point home with voters.

In the last election, Green party candidates collected 665, 940 votes and they were the second choice for 36 per cent of those who voted Conservative and 29 per cent of those who voted NDP.

"There's a good chunk of Canadians at least open to the idea of voting Green," said Nanos. Those "accessible" voters should be taken advantage of, especially because the current political landscape is so volatile, he said.

He predicted the NDP has the most to lose if the Greens gain ground, followed by the Conservative party.

"It might be counterintuitive but I think the reality is there's a big chunk of that Conservative vote that is a protest vote that were angry at the Liberals. If the Conservatives can't deliver, grumpy voters are going to be looking for alternatives," said Nanos.

He suggested the Green party focus its efforts first in British Columbia and Alberta, followed by Ontario and Quebec, where he thinks it would be able to steal away some votes from the Bloc Quebecois.

"Bloc voters are very similar to Green party voters. They are international in their view, they are more likely to identify (with) the environment and they are younger," said Nanos.

That younger demographic is key for the Green party -- 62 per cent of its supporters in the last election were under 40 years old. Voter turnout among young people tends to be low but if more of them got out to the polls, the Green party would likely benefit which is why civic engagement should be a priority for the party, said Nanos.

Developing a full set of policy issues and simple organization are the other conditions necessary for growth, Nanos told a room full of delegates. "Without organization, it's just not going to happen," he said.

Nanos' advice to the convention attendees came after an earlier session with Joe Trippi who told the Green party to harness the power of technology to grow from the grassroots. Trippi is considered a digital democracy expert who raised millions of dollars on the Internet during Howard Dean's campaign for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination. Following an afternoon of discussion over policy resolutions, delegates listened later in the evening to speeches by the three leadership candidates.

About 400 people from across the country are at this weekend's convention.

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