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Poll undermines notion of PM's 'mandate'

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The Ottawa Citizen

Thursday, August 08, 2002

Prime Minister Jean Chrétien says he holds a mandate from the Canadian people -- his leadership endorsed by the voters in the November 2000 election -- but a new poll sheds serious doubt on that claim.

Only 15 per cent of people polled by SES Canada Research Inc. said they think the Liberals won the last election because of Mr. Chrétien's leadership. And only slightly more -- 17 per cent -- said the 2000 election results were a shared victory for the "team" of Mr. Chrétien and former finance minister Paul Martin. Just seven per cent said the Liberals won because the party had the right vision for Canada.

Meanwhile, though, a whopping 40 per cent of Canadians said the Liberals won their third majority government 20 months ago because there was no appealing alternative among the opposition parties. And 21 per cent said they were simply "unsure" why the Liberals won.

That's almost two-thirds of Canadians who seem to believe that this country is being governed by default.

This hindsight glance into the meaning of the last election -- viewed through the responses of 1,000 people polled across Canada -- could serve to further fray the tattered reins of Mr. Chrétien's leadership. Faced with growing calls to resign and pave the way for a new Liberal leader, Mr. Chrétien has repeatedly stated that his authority to govern comes from the Canadian people and the confidence they expressed in him in 2000. This poll flies in the face of that interpretation, demonstrating that the personal victory wasn't really that personal at all. "Ironically, it shows that while most onlookers and observers place a high premium on leadership in politics, it seems that leadership is almost irrelevant when it comes to the Liberals," says Nikita Nanos, managing director of SES Research. As things stand, Mr. Nanos points out, the Liberals stand to win -- and stood

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to win in 2000 -- regardless of the leader.

For Mr. Martin, who is now engaged in a virtually open campaign to push Mr. Chrétien into resigning, the poll is a mixed blessing. His supporters can point to this poll as proof that the prime minister is taking too much credit for Liberal victories, but the results also indicate that Mr. Chrétien could win a fourth majority if a vote was held now.

"Although Martin may have convinced party members that the Liberals can only win under his leadership, the polling data clearly shows that Liberal success is fundamentally predicated on a vote split and unappealing alternatives," Mr. Nanos declares in the press release accompanying the poll results, which will be released today on the SES Research Web site (www.sesresearch.com).

It's a poll worth examining because, unlike most political surveys, it examines voting intentions after the fact. Most polls ask how people would vote in the future -- this one asks people to reflect on what their last vote meant.

Much of the Liberals' current internal strife, in fact, can be tracked back to the rewriting of history that took place after the 2000 vote and how it was "spun" as a personal triumph for Mr. Chrétien. In reality, Mr. Chrétien's leadership was a thorny issue during that campaign. Many MPs were reporting high levels of antipathy toward him when they knocked on doors in their ridings. Many Liberal candidates played down the prime minister and played up Mr. Martin in their campaign literature. Mr. Martin himself spent almost the entire campaign touring the country and he was drafted to appear in TV ads alongside Mr. Chretien. Around the final weeks of the campaign, Mr. Chrétien obviously felt pressed to say that he wouldn't likely run for a fourth term, presumably to placate voters. (Liza Frulla, one of the new Quebec Liberal MPs elected in this spring's by-elections, recalled this promise this week.)

But almost immediately after the 2000 election results were in, Mr. Chrétien's supporters started to talk up the notion that the prime minister had personally carried the country for a third time. They are still saying so today, arguing that this should be what Liberals remember as they cast their votes in the leadership-review process.

This new poll, though, says that they might be asking Liberals to misplace their thanks. It wasn't Mr. Chrétien -- nor Mr. Martin or even the Liberal "brand" that won the day in 2000. If thanks are in order, they should probably be sent to the fractured opposition parties, who handed the Liberals the precious "none-of-the-above" support 20 months ago.

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