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WHEN THE UNDECIDEDS BECAME THE UNAFFILIATED: ONE IN FOUR QUEBECERS UP FOR GRABS PROVINCIALY AND FEDERALLY



Nik Nanos

When we wanted to drill down beyond voting intention in the Quebec election, we turned to Nik Nanos and SES Research for an in-depth look at Quebecers' attitudes on key leadership attributes and party branding issues. SES Research was in the field for two nights following the March 13 debate, and its sample of 500 Quebecers turned up some revealing numbers showing a decided Liberal advantage on leadership and on party strengths, which the Liberals never fully took advantage of as Jean Charest's campaign struggled to defend their record in office. And while the ADQ was a distant third on party issues, Mario Dumont finished a competitive second on leadership issues, just as he did on election day.

Pour analyser plus à fond les intentions de vote à l'approche des élections québécoises, nous avons demandé à Nik Nanos de SES Research de scruter les attitudes des Québécois face aux qualités des leaders et à l'image des partis. Lors d'une enquête menée dans les 48 heures suivant le débat du 13 mars, les réponses des 500 Québécois interrogés ont mis en évidence l'avantage dont jouissaient les libéraux au chapitre des qualités de leur chef et des forces de leur parti. Avantage dont ils ont toutefois peu profité au cours d'une campagne où Jean Charest a difficilement fait valoir ses réalisations. En tant que parti, l'ADQ arrivait loin derrière au troisième rang, mais Mario Dumont lui-même se classait solide deuxième en tant que leader, exactement comme il l'a fait le jour du scrutin.

The Quebec election provided a good opportunity to test the importance of leadership attributes, the strength of party brands and the degree to which voters felt affiliated with the parties, irrespective of their voting intentions.

These fundamentals — party affiliation, leadership and strength of the party brands — are important attitudinal indicators in any election.

We found (question 1) that nearly as many Quebecers (23.9 percent) did not identify with any of the major parties as associated themselves with the Liberals (25.8 percent) or Parti Québécois (24.3 percent). While the Action démocratique du Québec trailed at 15 percent, the high number of voters who were unsure or would state no affiliation turned out to be a leading indicator of how “undecideds” and “discreets” would vote on election day. A majority of these unaffiliated voters clearly broke to Mario

Dumont and the ADQ. Dumont also enjoyed a comparative advantage on election day — alone among the leaders, his name appeared on the ballot, as ADQ-Équipe Mario Dumont.

SES Research was in the field for *Policy Options* on March 14 and 15, the two nights following the leaders' debate. We conducted 500 telephone interviews over the two nights, with a margin of error of plus or minus 4.4 percent, 19 times out of 20.

Since our findings would not be published until after the election on March 26, we saw no point in sampling voting intention. Nor did we test the dissatisfaction rate with the Charest government, which all the polls put at 50 percent at the outset of the campaign, and as high as 60 percent by the end of it — very close to a tipping point, as the election results indicated.

We tested five leadership attributes — vision, trust, competence, character and shared views. Jean Charest won all five of them handily against André Boisclair. But Mario Dumont was very competitive, finishing second on all five leadership attributes. And on two of them — trust and shared views — Dumont trailed Charest within the margin of error. Boisclair finished a distant third on all five questions, showing a reverse coattail effect for the PQ.

Charest scored most strongly on competence and character — two key components of who would make the best premier. On question 2, “Which leader is the most competent,” Charest outscored both opponents by a margin of about 2-1, at 38 percent,

versus 20.8 percent for Dumont and 17.9 percent for Boisclair.

On question 3, “Which leader has the personal character to be the premier of Quebec,” Charest was again the clear

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winner at 35.6 percent, compared with Dumont at 24.7 percent and Boisclair at 18.2 percent. Again, Charest outscored Boisclair by a 2-1 margin, but Dumont narrowed the gap on character, and would narrow it even more on the other leadership questions.

On question 4, “Which leader has the best vision,” Charest came out on top at 30.5 percent, while Dumont scored 25.5 percent and Boisclair trailed at 21.4 percent.

Asked which leader they trusted the most (question 5), Charest came in first at 29.0 percent, Dumont was a close second at 25.1 percent, and Boisclair was again third at 20.6 percent.

Asked which leader had views most like their own (question 6),

QUESTION 1. REGARDLESS OF YOUR CURRENT PROVINCIAL VOTING PREFERENCE, IN PROVINCIAL POLITICS DO YOU MOST CLOSELY IDENTIFY YOURSELF WITH...

		Total responses (N)	Parti Québécois (%)	Quebec Liberals (%)	Action démocratique (%)	Québec solidaire (%)	Green Party (%)	None of them (%)	Unsure/no identification (%)
All	Quebec	500	24.3	25.8	15.0	4.0	5.0	2.1	23.9
Gender	Male	246	26.5	23.0	14.9	3.7	4.0	4.2	23.6
	Female	254	22.1	28.6	15.0	4.3	5.9	0.0	24.1

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com
 Note: 500 interviews, random telephone survey, ± 4.4% 19 times out of 20, March 14-15, 2007.

QUESTION 2. WHICH LEADER IS THE MOST COMPETENT?

		Total responses (N)	Jean Charest (%)	André Boisclair (%)	Mario Dumont (%)	Françoise David (%)	Scott McKay (%)	None of them (%)	Unsure (%)
All	Quebec	500	38.0	17.9	20.8	1.8	1.4	0.7	19.4
Associate	Parti Québécois	121	10.7	55.7	16.6	1.2	0.0	0.0	15.8
	Quebec Liberals	129	83.0	2.3	6.8	0.0	0.8	1.0	6.1
	Action démocratique	75	19.1	1.2	66.2	1.8	0.0	0.0	11.6
	Québec solidaire	20	24.6	23.5	8.4	22.9	0.0	0.0	20.7
	Green Party	25	25.3	18.3	10.7	3.7	13.2	9.3	19.7
	None of them	10	21.6	6.7	9.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	62.2
	Unsure/no identification	119	35.1	6.8	16.7	0.8	2.2	0.0	38.4
Gender	Male	246	38.1	19.2	22.0	1.1	0.0	0.9	18.6
	Female	254	37.8	16.7	19.5	2.5	2.7	0.5	20.3

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com
 Note: 500 interviews, random telephone survey, ± 4.4% 19 times out of 20, March 14-15, 2007.

QUESTION 3. WHICH LEADER HAS THE PERSONAL CHARACTER TO BE THE PREMIER OF QUEBEC?

		Total responses (N)	Jean Charest (%)	André Boisclair (%)	Mario Dumont (%)	Françoise David (%)	Scott McKay (%)	None of them (%)	Unsure (%)
All	Quebec	500	35.6	18.2	24.7	1.9	1.6	0.7	17.4
Associate	Parti Québécois	121	11.9	55.7	17.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	14.6
	Quebec Liberals	129	82.4	0.5	9.0	0.7	0.8	0.0	6.6
	Action démocratique	75	9.1	5.3	77.7	1.8	0.0	0.0	6.1
	Québec solidaire	20	24.9	15.1	11.3	31.6	0.0	0.0	17.2
	Green Party	25	28.1	18.3	18.5	0.0	16.9	9.3	9.0
	None of them	10	22.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	77.8
	Unsure/no identification	119	30.3	9.5	21.0	0.8	2.2	0.8	35.5
Gender	Male	246	35.1	19.4	26.3	1.7	0.0	0.9	16.5
	Female	254	36.1	17.1	23.0	2.1	3.1	0.4	18.2

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com
 Note: 500 interviews, random telephone survey, ± 4.4% 19 times out of 20, March 14-15, 2007.

QUESTION 4. WHICH LEADER HAS THE BEST VISION?

		Total responses (N)	Jean Charest (%)	André Boisclair (%)	Mario Dumont (%)	Françoise David (%)	Scott McKay (%)	None of them (%)	Unsure (%)
All	Quebec	500	30.5	21.4	25.5	3.5	3.1	0.9	15.2
Associate	Parti Québécois	121	5.9	65.3	18.3	2.5	1.1	0.0	7.0
	Quebec Liberals	129	81.0	2.3	9.0	0.0	1.3	1.0	5.4
	Action démocratique	75	8.2	2.2	85.2	1.8	0.0	0.0	2.7
	Québec solidaire	20	15.1	16.8	4.9	39.4	0.0	0.0	23.8
	Green Party	25	8.1	23.6	18.5	9.0	27.5	9.3	3.9
	None of them	10	22.2	0.0	9.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	68.4
	Unsure/no identification	119	22.8	11.5	19.4	2.7	4.5	0.8	38.2
Gender	Male	246	29.7	22.3	27.9	2.4	1.9	1.5	14.2
	Female	254	31.2	20.5	23.0	4.6	4.2	0.4	16.1

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com
 Note: 500 interviews, random telephone survey, ± 4.4% 19 times out of 20, March 14-15, 2007.

QUESTION 5. WHICH LEADER DO YOU TRUST THE MOST?

		Total responses (N)	Jean Charest (%)	André Boisclair (%)	Mario Dumont (%)	Françoise David (%)	Scott McKay (%)	None of them (%)	Unsure (%)
All	Quebec	500	29.0	20.6	25.1	3.6	1.3	2.4	17.9
Associate	Parti Québécois	121	5.0	68.4	19.3	1.3	0.0	0.0	6.0
	Quebec Liberals	129	84.8	0.5	4.0	1.0	0.8	4.6	4.3
	Action démocratique	75	2.5	3.0	84.6	0.0	0.0	1.8	8.1
	Québec solidaire	20	10.2	6.7	14.4	51.6	0.0	0.0	17.2
	Green Party	25	13.2	23.6	9.3	0.0	13.2	14.6	26.2
	None of them	10	9.4	6.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	83.8
	Unsure/no identification	119	17.9	7.7	24.0	4.0	1.9	0.8	43.7
Gender	Male	246	26.3	23.7	28.0	2.6	0.0	2.8	16.6
	Female	254	31.6	17.6	22.3	4.6	2.6	2.0	19.3

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com
 Note: 500 interviews, random telephone survey, ± 4.4% 19 times out of 20, March 14-15, 2007.

Charest was first at 27.1 percent, Dumont pulled to a virtual tie at 25.8 percent, and Boisclair was again third at 21 percent.

When we asked which of these five leadership factors was most likely to influence their vote, competence was by far the most important at 29.8 percent, followed by vision at 17.3 percent, views most like the voter's own at 14.4 percent, trust and understanding Quebec both at 13.2 percent and personal character at 7.3 percent.

Competence was by far the most important leadership attribute likely to influence Quebecers' vote, and Charest

enjoyed a huge 2-1 competence advantage over both his rivals. It isn't for pollsters to determine why Charest and the Liberals were unable, in the end, to capitalize on their clear comparative advantage on leadership.

When we examined the strengths of the parties, the Liberals enjoyed an even greater advantage on voter preference for their brand.

Asked which party had "the strongest team of candidates" (question 7), fully 48.9 percent said the Liberals, with 22.9 percent for the PQ and only 7.4 percent for the ADQ. These were slam-dunk numbers for the Liberals.

However, they also suggested that even Dumont's voters knew he had by far the weakest team, but they were going to vote for him anyway.

Again, when we asked which party had the strongest policy platform (question 8), the Liberals easily came in first at 36.5 percent, compared with 23.4 percent for the PQ and 15 percent for the ADQ.

When we asked "Which party is best at ensuring Quebec receives its fair share within Canada" (question 9), the Liberals were again a strong first at 41.5 percent, the PQ a distant second at 27.6 percent and the ADQ a bad third at 12.7 percent.

QUESTION 6. WHICH LEADER HAS VIEWS MOST LIKE YOUR OWN?

		Total responses (N)	Jean Charest (%)	André Boisclair (%)	Mario Dumont (%)	Françoise David (%)	Scott McKay (%)	None of them (%)	Unsure (%)
All	Quebec	500	27.1	21.0	25.8	4.5	3.6	0.7	17.3
Associate	Parti Québécois	121	3.5	66.9	14.3	4.8	1.1	0.0	9.5
	Quebec Liberals	129	82.9	2.0	9.0	0.0	2.1	0.0	4.0
	Action démocratique	75	4.0	6.0	84.8	1.2	0.0	0.0	3.9
	Québec solidaire	20	6.7	6.7	19.0	64.2	0.0	0.0	3.5
	Green Party	25	9.3	9.0	14.6	0.0	45.8	9.3	12.1
	None of them	10	0.0	6.7	12.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	80.5
	Unsure/no identification	119	14.7	10.6	23.4	2.5	2.2	0.8	45.8
Gender	Male	246	25.3	23.0	27.7	4.0	2.3	0.9	16.8
	Female	254	28.9	19.2	24.0	5.0	4.9	0.4	17.7

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com
 Note: 500 interviews, random telephone survey, ± 4.4% 19 times out of 20, March 14-15, 2007.

QUESTION 7. WHICH PARTY HAS THE STRONGEST TEAM OF CANDIDATES?

		Total responses (N)	Parti Québécois (%)	Quebec Liberals (%)	Action démocratique (%)	Québec solidaire (%)	Green Party (%)	None of them (%)	Unsure (%)
All	Quebec	500	22.9	48.9	7.4	1.1	1.8	9.1	8.7
Associate	Parti Québécois	121	66.2	21.1	3.8	0.0	0.0	5.3	3.5
	Quebec Liberals	129	3.0	83.9	1.4	1.0	1.8	1.8	7.1
	Action démocratique	75	15.4	43.7	29.4	0.0	0.0	3.6	8.0
	Québec solidaire	20	16.8	28.7	15.9	21.8	0.0	10.2	6.7
	Green Party	25	23.6	51.9	0.0	0.0	7.9	9.0	7.6
	None of them	10	0.0	46.6	9.4	0.0	0.0	43.9	0.0
	Unsure/no identification	119	7.9	45.5	3.7	0.0	4.1	21.1	17.6
Gender	Male	246	25.0	51.2	6.9	0.0	1.5	9.4	6.0
	Female	254	20.9	46.6	7.9	2.2	2.2	8.8	11.4

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com
 Note: 500 interviews, random telephone survey, ± 4.4% 19 times out of 20, March 14-15, 2007.

This question of getting Quebec's fair share is not dissimilar to the litmus test question of which party or leader is

context of negotiating enhanced funding for Quebec in the federal budget, which would address the fiscal imbalance

seen as the most important by 39 percent of Quebecers, obtaining Quebec's fair share within Canada was a close second at 36.6 percent, while the best team was a distant third at 14.6 percent.

Competence was by far the most important leadership attribute likely to influence Quebecers' vote, and Charest enjoyed a huge 2-1 competence advantage over both his rivals. It isn't for pollsters to determine why Charest and the Liberals were unable, in the end, to capitalize on their clear comparative advantage on leadership. When we examined the strengths of the parties, the Liberals enjoyed an even greater advantage on voter preference for their brand.

the best defender of Quebec's interests in Ottawa. While the PQ might have been expected to do better, the Liberal strength probably reflects the current

ance four days after we were in the field. When we asked which of these party factors was most likely to influence their vote, the party platform was

Again, as on leadership, the Liberals enjoyed an important advantage on brand preference, but were unable to use either to their advantage on election day. Indeed, a post-election poll of 600 Quebecers by Léger Marketing, published by *Le Journal de Montréal* on April 1, found that 48 percent of Quebecers thought a minority government led by Jean Charest would

QUESTION 8. WHICH PARTY HAS THE STRONGEST POLICY PLATFORM?

		Total responses (N)	Parti Québécois (%)	Quebec Liberals (%)	Action démocratique (%)	Québec solidaire (%)	Green Party (%)	None of them (%)	Unsure (%)
All	Quebec	500	23.4	36.5	15.0	1.5	2.7	11.1	9.8
Associate	Parti Québécois	121	65.8	10.2	7.7	1.9	0.0	7.1	7.2
	Quebec Liberals	129	2.0	86.2	0.7	0.0	3.2	3.3	4.5
	Action démocratique	75	10.2	17.9	61.8	0.0	0.0	5.6	4.5
	Québec solidaire	20	21.7	21.4	8.1	25.3	0.0	10.2	13.3
	Green Party	25	25.0	46.6	0.0	0.0	19.4	9.0	0.0
	None of them	10	0.0	22.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	77.8	0.0
Gender	Unsure/no identification	119	13.5	22.9	14.2	0.0	3.9	21.6	23.8
	Male	246	25.5	36.6	14.8	1.8	0.9	13.0	7.5
	Female	254	21.3	36.5	15.3	1.2	4.5	9.2	12.1

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com
 Note: 500 interviews, random telephone survey, ± 4.4% 19 times out of 20, March 14-15, 2007.

QUESTION 9. WHICH PARTY IS BEST AT ENSURING THAT QUEBEC RECEIVES ITS FAIR SHARE WITHIN CANADA?

		Total responses (N)	Parti Québécois (%)	Quebec Liberals (%)	Action démocratique (%)	Québec solidaire (%)	Green Party (%)	None of them (%)	Unsure (%)
All	Quebec	500	27.6	41.5	12.7	1.5	0.9	9.0	6.8
Associate	Parti Québécois	121	67.3	19.8	7.3	0.0	0.0	3.8	1.7
	Quebec Liberals	129	8.8	84.0	0.7	1.0	0.8	2.3	2.5
	Action démocratique	75	9.4	26.1	52.6	0.0	0.0	5.3	6.7
	Québec solidaire	20	39.9	28.1	0.0	13.7	0.0	0.0	18.3
	Green Party	25	19.9	39.8	5.3	12.9	3.9	9.0	9.0
	None of them	10	28.4	9.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	62.2	0.0
Gender	Unsure/no identification	119	18.3	32.5	11.0	0.0	2.2	20.8	15.1
	Male	246	30.2	42.8	12.6	0.4	0.0	9.3	4.7
	Female	254	25.0	40.1	12.9	2.5	1.8	8.8	8.9

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com
 Note: 500 interviews, random telephone survey, ± 4.4% 19 times out of 20, March 14-15, 2007.

QUESTION 10. REGARDLESS OF YOUR CURRENT FEDERAL VOTING PREFERENCE, IN FEDERAL POLITICS DO YOU MOST CLOSELY ASSOCIATE YOURSELF WITH...

		Federal Conservative Party (%)	Liberal Party of Canada (%)	Bloc Québécois (%)	NDP (%)	Green Party (%)	None of them (%)	Unsure/no identification (%)
All	Quebec	15.3	18.7	28.3	6.3	4.7	2.7	24.1
Gender	Male	18.2	14.3	29.7	6.8	4.6	5.4	21.0
	Female	12.4	23.0	27.0	5.8	4.8	0.0	27.0

Source: SES Research National Survey, www.sesresearch.com

Note: 500 interviews, random telephone survey, ± 4.4% 19 times out of 20, March 14-15, 2007.

be “efficace,” pretty close to the competence question.

Clearly, the Liberal campaign failed to communicate the strengths of the leader and the party. In running on the record, the Liberals risked allowing their opponents to drive dissatisfaction to tipping-point levels. And in promising a \$700-million tax cut with new equalization money in the federal budget, Charest risked reminding voters of his broken 2003 campaign promise of \$1 billion a year in tax cuts.

There was another important factor in the outcome. In a word: Mario. The fact that his party ran a bad third on all the brand equity questions was not beside the point, but helped make the point that he was the brand — indeed, he had his name on the ballot.

Inasmuch as Dumont’s supporters were voting for him rather than his party, his strong second-place showing in the leadership numbers provided a road map to his strong second-place showing on election day.

Dumont is a populist in the old-fashioned sense of the word, in that support for his leadership runs way ahead of support for his party, and even for his ideas.

We also found that Charest shouldn’t have expected to get much of a bounce from the federal

budget, no matter how much money he got out of it. Only 20.9 percent of our respondents said they would take a more favourable view of Charest as a result of gains for Quebec on the fiscal imbalance, while 38 percent said their view of him would be the same, and 37.8 percent said they would have a less favourable view. Clearly, Quebecers who weren’t voting for him anyway weren’t about to be impressed.

Stephen Harper fared somewhat better with Quebecers when we asked about the \$350-million February environmental announcement to support

and ADQ voters (20.5 percent and 27.8 percent).

Coming back to the opening questions in our poll on association with parties, we also tested this at the federal level in Quebec (question 10), and found that 28.3 percent self-identified with the Bloc Québécois, 18.7 percent with the Liberal Party of Canada and 15.3 percent with the Conservative Party. As in the question on identity with provincial parties, there was a large pool of voters, 24.1 percent, who identified with none.

In essence, one-fourth of the Quebec electorate is in play and could

There was another important factor in the outcome. In a word: Mario. The fact that his party ran a bad third on all the brand equity questions was not beside the point, but helped make the point that he was the brand — indeed, he had his name on the ballot. Inasmuch as Dumont’s supporters were voting for him rather than his party, his strong second-place showing in the leadership numbers provided a road map to his strong second-place showing on election day. Dumont is a populist in the old-fashioned sense of the word, in that support for his leadership runs way ahead of support for his party, and even for his ideas.

Quebec’s Kyoto compliance plan, as well as the expected good news on equalization in the federal budget. Here, 27 percent said they would have a more favourable view, while 33.5 percent said their view would remain the same, and 36.6 percent said they would view the Prime Minister less favourably. Not surprisingly, Harper scored more favourably with Liberal voters (36.7 percent) than with PQ

hold the key to the outcome of the next federal election in the province.

Nik Nanos is president and CEO of SES Research, which conducted this poll exclusively for Policy Options. Ottawa-based SES Research, one of Canada’s foremost public opinion research companies, has been the most accurate polling firm in the last two federal elections. nnanos@sesresearch.com