

Monday, June 28, 2004

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Many remain undecided as vote nears

Outcome impossible to predict, say polling firms

Joe Paraskevas

The Ottawa Citizen

June 23, 2004

Roman Kalarus had a lot on his mind yesterday.

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Besides chaperoning two dozen schoolchildren on a Parliament Hill visit, the Toronto teacher found himself confronting the questions many Canadians will be asking themselves all week: how to vote in next Monday's federal election, and why has it taken so long to decide.

"What made me undecided? I guess because of the scandals with the Liberal party. I don't know if I really want to give them my support. But on the other hand I certainly would not want to see the Reform party get in, in the clothes of the Conservatives.

"I will probably decide on the weekend, just before the election. Or maybe the day of."

With the election nearing the finish line, the outcome remains almost impossible to predict, pollsters say, and the reason, they add, is the volatility of the electorate. Not only are many reluctant to vote because they are angry or disillusioned, but others remain unsure of which party to support and some who have expressed their preference in polls could still change their minds, even on election day.

"I've never seen it this volatile in my experience as a pollster," Nikita Nanos, president of SES Research, and a pollster for 15 years, said yesterday from his Ottawa office.

The SES daily tracking poll has shown the twisting tracks of Conservative and Liberal fortunes in the past month, as neither party has been able to break free of the other. But yesterday's poll also showed the percentage of

POLL

Given only these four options, which type of government would you prefer to see emerge on June 28?

- ☐ A Liberal majority
- ☐ A Liberal minority
- ☐ A Conservative majority
- ☐ A Conservative minority

VOTE

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undecided voters at 21 per cent, the same number as on May 23, when the election was called.

"The share of the undecided vote in absolutely every research firm's polling is a lot smaller than the share of people who won't show up and put an X on the ballot," said Conrad Winn, president of COMPAS Inc., an opinion research firm in Toronto. "So, those who say they are undecided are only part of the picture."

The number of undecided is "at least the same amount (as those who) tell us that they are decided, but don't vote," Mr. Winn added.

Voter indecision is the result of several factors, the foremost of which is a diminished view of politicians, particularly in the Liberal government, because of the scandal over government sponsorship contracts that broke last winter, both men suggested.

At the same time, voters looking for an alternative are uncertain about Conservative Stephen Harper or the New Democratic Party's Jack Layton. Moreover, a crystallizing issue or a moment in the campaign that might have given one party unstoppable momentum hasn't materialized.


"Usually we see what I'll say is a fairly steady trend line between campaigns," Mr. Nanos said. "There's a defining moment in the campaign and then momentum moves in one particular direction."

"We've seen a lot of what I'll say are small events," he said, of the current campaign. "But the other kind of subtext for this whole campaign, and I think this also fuels what I'll say is the volatility fire, is the advertising scandal and how it turned people off. The advertising scandal brought into clarity all the things people don't like about politics."

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