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Gomery verdict carries weight

Voter reaction to sponsorship inquiry report might determine next election

22 per cent say they'll change their vote to Conservatives, NDP or Bloc

SUSAN DELACOURT
OTTAWA BUREAU CHIEF

OTTAWA—A significant number of Canadians may base their vote in the next election on how they react to tomorrow's much-awaited report on the Liberal sponsorship scandal, a new poll shows.

Almost one in five people surveyed by SES

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Research for the *Toronto Star* said they were unsure how their vote would go once they have seen the findings of Justice John Gomery's exhaustive inquiry into abuse of the

federal advertising and sponsorship program by the federal Liberals.

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The report will land in Prime Minister Paul Minister's lap tonight at 6, about the same time he's opening the doors at 24 Sussex Drive to greet Halloween ghosts and goblins.

Gomery's report, this new poll shows, will probably be the biggest spectre on the minds of Martin and his shaky minority government. The report becomes fully public tomorrow.

Nationally, 22 per cent of poll respondents said their votes would probably move to the Conservatives, New Democrats or Bloc Québécois because of the Gomery report.

But not all the vote-shifting was bad for the Liberals. SES reported 7 per cent saying they would change their vote to support the governing party.

In Ontario, 10 per cent said they'd switch to the Liberals, though 10 per cent also said they'd change their vote to the Tories and 9 per cent said they'd go to the NDP.

When broken down by region, 19 per cent of Quebecers predict their vote will move to the Bloc because of Gomery's findings, the poll found.

"The report and the reaction will be a critical juncture in determining the outcome of the next election," says Nik Nanos, president of SES.

Across Canada, 9 per cent of respondents said they would change their vote to support the Conservative candidate in their riding because of the way the advertising and sponsorship scandal was hired. Another 9 per cent said their vote would move to the NDP.

The poll was conducted by SES from Oct. 21 to 27 through telephone surveys with 1,059 Canadians across the country. Its national findings are considered accurate within 3 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Though the poll also showed just 51 per cent of Canadians had made up their minds about how to vote in the next election, the current minority in Parliament means that even slight shifts can change the balance of power.

Martin has vowed to call an election within 30 days of Gomery issuing a report of recommendations in early February. But all bets are off as to

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whether the government can hang on that long, especially if the opposition senses that Tuesday's report has given them enough momentum to force a quicker election.

Their first opportunity to do so will be Nov. 14 in the Commons, which means Canadians would be faced with a Christmastime election unless Martin stretched the normal 36-day campaign period into the new year.

The Liberals now have 133 seats in the Commons, the Conservatives have 98, the Bloc has 54 and the New Democrats have 18. There are four independents and one vacant seat.

The SES poll shows the governing Liberals are still hovering at about 40 per cent support in the polls, with the Conservatives at 28 per cent and the NDP with 15 per cent.

But the number of undecided has jumped to 20 per cent, an increase of six percentage points since an SES survey in August.

"There has been a noticeable jump in those voters who are undecided and could be indicative of a wait-and-see approach on the part of Canadians towards the Gomery report," Nanos said.

Moreover, Nanos is finding that a lot of movement is taking place in Ontario, where the NDP's numbers are declining at the expense of Liberals and Conservatives. Liberal support now stands at 49 per cent in Ontario, compared to 35 per cent for the Tories and just 12 per cent for the NDP.

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