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Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff speaks to the media following caucus meetings in Ottawa, on Monday Jan. 19, 2009. (Adrian Wyld / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

Ignatieff still unknown, Harper too well known, poll finds

Updated: Mon Jan. 19 2009 9:40:28 AM

The Associated Press

OTTAWA — Michael Ignatieff remains a blank slate for most members of the public who don't yet know what to make of the Liberal leader, a new poll suggests.

By contrast, Prime Minister Stephen Harper is a polarizing figure who evokes strong opinions from both supporters and detractors, according to the survey done by Nanos Research and provided exclusively to The Canadian Press.

The findings mean both leaders have much at stake -- for vastly different reasons -- as Harper's minority Conservative government prepares for the resumption of Parliament on Jan. 26 and a budget the next day.

"What the polling suggests is that Michael Ignatieff is only a name at this point," said pollster Nik Nanos.

"He lacks definition and most Canadians cannot form any type of opinion about him, either positive or negative. The budget, and his response to the budget, is really the coming out of Michael Ignatieff."

The poll asked respondents to explain what they like or dislike about both Ignatieff and Harper.

Fully 58 per cent put themselves down as "unsure" and couldn't name anything in particular they like about Ignatieff. The good news for the Liberal chief was that 64 per cent couldn't think of anything they dislike about him.

Among those who got down to specifics, the leading reasons for liking Ignatieff were that he's smart (seven per cent) and he's a fresh face (five per cent).

Those who didn't like him most often said he was inexperienced (three per cent) or too cold in his attitude (three per cent).

People had a much better idea of where they stood on Harper, with only 24 per cent unsure about his attributes.

Thirty per cent said there isn't anything they like about the prime minister, compared with 15 per cent who said there isn't anything they dislike.

When it came to specifics, eight per cent said they like the fact that he's a strong leader, five per cent said he's honest, four per cent like his policies and four per cent said he gets things done.

But 11 per cent said the didn't like the fact that he breaks promises, eight per cent called him arrogant, six per cent said he's too controlling or power-hungry, and five per cent said they just don't like his attitude.

Harper's scores on all the leading indicators of personal dislike were worse in the latest poll than they were when the same questions were asked in Nov. 2007.

The total numbers of people expressing displeasure at any one trait may be modest, but Nanos said the underlying trend is clear.

"He's taken a personal hit on his image . . . The people that don't like the prime minister are much more passionate than the people who like him."

That means the coming budget is just as much a test for Harper as it is for Ignatieff, said Nanos.

The new Liberal leader's challenge is to define himself and give people a reason to like him, while the prime minister's task is to accentuate the positive -- his leadership qualities -- while minimizing the negative perceptions.



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The telephone survey of 1,003 Canadian aged 18 or older was conducted between Jan. 3 and Jan. 7 and is considered accurate within plus or minus 3.19 per cent 19 times in 20.

The same poll found, as previously reported, that the Liberals and Conservatives were in a statistical dead heat in terms of voter preference.



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