

Canadian Voters Influenced by Issues in U.S. Presidential Race

■ As Democrats and Republicans down south debate the economy and Iraq, Canadians are refocussing on what issues concern them as election rumours resurface here.

By Jeff Davis

As whiffs of an election fill Ottawa's winter air, the economy has jumped to the top of the voting issue food chain, with the mission in Afghanistan close behind.

Climate change and the environment, for now at least, seem to have fallen into third place.

Nik Nanos, CEO of polling firm Nanos Research, says that one can't underestimate the effect the dominant public discourse in the United States has on Canadian voting behavior, especially during presidential election cycles.

He says that with U.S. presidential candidates mulling economic downturn and soul searching over their military engagements, Canadian voters will be preoccupied with these issues, too.

Michael McCracken, chair and CEO of research firm Informetrica Limited, agrees.

"Our news is driven by their news," he says. "People here who ask questions are reading the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, and watching NBC and CBS. That's all part of framing the questions they're going to ask here."

Politicians know this, he adds, and can pivot off U.S. political buzz by saying "us too."

Don Drummond, former associate deputy minister of finance and currently a senior vice-president and chief economist at TD Bank Financial Group, says a slumping economy will always grab voters' attention.

Mr. Drummond says that the health of the economy tends to foreshadow a government's lifespan.

"If the economy is going well, incumbents usually get returned," he says.

With uncertainty on voters' minds, he says, the Conservatives are losing control of this issue.

"The economy is certainly not going to be as strong a selling point for the Conservatives as it had in the past few years," he says.

With this process afoot, the Liberals have a chance to lead the issue.

"Nothing makes a greater story than a weakening economy," he says, adding that this is fertile soil in which to cultivate political differentiation.

"If the Conservatives don't do some fairly large stimulus package, the Liberals will use this as fodder for their campaign," he says.

It appears, however, that Prime Minister Stephen Harper will not let this critical issue slip away without a fight.

Last week, at a large Conservative rally in Ottawa, Mr. Harper beta tested what could be his stump speech in the coming election.

"In periods of economic uncertainty, what Canadians need most is strong, steady, certain leadership that's on their side," he told the crowd of Conservative staffers, enumerating the economic credentials of his government.

He also took jabs at his opponents, the Bloc Québécois in particular, dismissing short-term aid measures and stating that "you can't spend the U.S. out of an economic slowdown."

Harper Seizing Afghan Issue

Mr. Nanos says he expects the issue of the mission in Afghanistan, fuelled by U.S. discussion of the war in Iraq, to grow in importance this session.

"As presidential front-runners look at adapting and recalibrating America's War on Terror, that's going to have an impact in Canada," he says. "Canadians are going to say 'Well, if the Americans are recalibrating, shouldn't we be recalibrating?'"

Mr. Nanos adds that changes on war policy go beyond North America. Note, he says, the recent downfall of traditional hard-line Bush allies John Howard in Australia and Tony Blair in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Nanos says these changes, in combination with the recently released Manley report on Afghanistan, have created a springboard from which Mr. Harper could take a leading role on the issue, both in Canada and abroad.

"That's why this Manley report is such an opportunity for the prime minister," Mr. Nanos says. "It's an opportunity for him to look at what's likely going to happen among our key allies, and get ahead of the curve."

Mr. Nanos compares the report to a setup pass in basketball.

"It is a bit of a recommendation for him to step forward and say 'You know what? Our allies are going to be recalibrating their missions, why can't Canada take a role in facilitating that recalibration?'"

Mr. Harper seems to be doing just this.

At a press conference Monday, Mr. Harper fulsomely endorsed the report's recommendations, saying he intends to lead Canadian diplomatic efforts to secure more NATO troops for southern Afghanistan.

At his stump speech primer last week, Mr. Harper positioned himself as an international leader on the Afghan file.

"When I travel abroad," he said, "it is to pursue Canada's interests and project our values, not to seek approval simply by going along with whatever is demanded and having no opinion of our own."

He also subtly restated his support for a muscular engagement in Afghanistan.

"You can't accomplish anything in the way of our predecessors," he said, "by talking loudly and carrying no stick at all."

Mr. Nanos predicts that both the Afghan and economy issues could become harder for the Conservatives to handle in the months ahead.

If the economy weakens further, he says, Canadians will become increasingly concerned with their jobs, their families and the safety of their retirement funds.

Also, Mr. Nanos says, unless the Taliban insurgents have fundamentally altered their tactics, the annual spring offensive will soon be upon Canadian troops.

For these two reasons, Mr. McCracken says, the Liberals might hold off an election call and let the Conservatives wear these two damaging issues.

"I think the election will be on an issue of competency," he says. "Can they run a war? Can they run an economy?"

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PHOTOS: EMBASSY FILES AND PMO

(clockwise top left) As Senators John McCain and Barack Obama fight to represent their parties in the upcoming U.S. presidential election, the economy and military efforts are becoming the dominant issues, issues Canadian political leaders like Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Liberal leader Stéphane Dion will likely also have to deal with if an election is called this year.



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