

Poll puts Ford ahead of Smitherman

Voters say their biggest concerns are debt and taxes

ANNA MEHLER PAPERNY

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A new poll has revealed a tight two-horse race for Toronto's mayoral office: Outspoken councillor Rob Ford has emerged as a key challenger to long-time front-runner George Smitherman, thanks to Mr. Ford's focus on such hot-button issues as taxes and the city's ballooning debt, which are top-of-mind for Toronto voters.

A new [Globe and Mail/CTV/CP24/Nanos poll](#) puts Mr. Ford in first place, edging out Mr. Smitherman, who left his provincial post as deputy premier and energy infrastructure minister to run. The lead, however, is quite slim – 17.8 per cent of the 1,000 Torontonians polled said they would vote for Mr. Ford if the election were held immediately, compared with 15.9 per cent for Mr. Smitherman – and well within the margin of error of 3.1 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

The poll also revealed an electorate dissatisfied with the status quo and overwhelmingly concerned about taxes, transit and the city's ability to manage its debt – issues that align with Mr. Ford's single-minded campaign. He has pledged to cut council in half, from 44 councillors to 22, and to trim municipal fat such as the jobs of plant waterers at City Hall – an example he repeatedly brings up as indicative of the city's profligacy.

“The only poll that matters to me is on Monday, Oct. 25,” Mr. Ford said Sunday afternoon. “[But] our message is resonating with people. People are sick and tired of spending down at City Hall, and when I'm mayor, I'm going to get control of the spending. And that's the first and foremost priority. ... Someone has to lead by example.”

When voters were asked what issue they think is the most pressing, money came first: 20.5 per cent named the city's budget and debt; another 16.7 per cent named high taxes.

Stefan Baranski, George Smitherman's spokesman, said the poll results are a “wakeup call.”

“It's clear we need to do a better job of sharing [Mr. Smitherman's] vision with voters, and that is exactly what we will be doing. This is shaping up to be a two-horse race, and with Mr. Ford now as the front-runner, we expect he will face the scrutiny his views and record deserve.”

The poll results expose deep fissures between different areas of Toronto: While Mr. Ford garnered a commanding lead (27.6 per cent) in Etobicoke and came out ahead in North York and Scarborough, in pre-amalgamation Toronto he polled well behind both Joe Pantalone and Mr. Smitherman: 12.9 per cent named him as their first choice, compared with 22.1 for Mr. Smitherman and 14.9 per cent for Mr. Pantalone.

He also trailed in support from women and younger voters – segments of the population Ryerson University politics professor Myer Siemiatycki said are more likely to be leery of the bombastic and

often controversial councillor. Mr. Ford has come under fire for his comments about homosexuality and HIV/AIDS; last month city council formally reprimanded him for revealing confidential real-estate information on talk radio and at council.

But in a campaign without an incumbent, Mr. Ford appears to have tapped into the concerns of a financially anxious electorate on the heels of the deepest recession in decades.

“There’s a perception that things aren’t working,” said Prof. Siemiatycki. “The candidate who is the loudest and most forceful with an alternate expression of how they will make it better for residents of Toronto is going to resonate. ... It’s kind of an echo of the Tea Party phenomenon in the U.S.: Voters are grumpy; they want a politician who is going to be an anti-politician.”

Mr. Ford appears to have also tapped into an insular anxiety, and the divide between Toronto’s core and its outer reaches: A dozen years after amalgamation, many voters outside the city core have the sense their local views aren’t being heard. Mr. Ford has pledged to make the concerns of individual neighbourhoods and their residents paramount, putting them ahead of broader, citywide desires emanating from City Hall.

But, Nik Nanos points out, while Mr. Ford seems to have hit voters’ fiscal responsibility concerns right on the money, he has yet to come through on the other dominant campaign issue: transit. He has yet to unveil a comprehensive transit platform, an issue that 16.4 per cent of voters said is in dire need of attention.

“The polling suggests no one can avoid that issue,” Mr. Nanos said. “Although [Mr. Ford] might look strong on fiscal issues, having a weak transit plan would seriously affect his campaign in a negative way. ... It’s relatively easy for any politician to stand up and say they’re going to control costs. But when there’s another public policy priority that actually requires money, that’s a completely different story.”

Although Mr. Ford is now neck-and-neck with Mr. Smitherman, 38.9 per cent of voters polled are still undecided. That level of indecision isn’t unusual this early in a municipal race, Mr. Nanos said, but it means the campaign is still anyone’s to lose.

The test now is who can win the biggest share of the undecided voters. “The fact that we have such a high percentage of undecided would mean that any of the candidates can grow at this point,” Mr. Nanos said. “On election day, the percentage of undecided will be zero.”

The Globe's Anna Mehler Paperny and Marcus Gee will take your questions on the impact of the poll on Toronto's mayoral race at 1 p.m. ET.

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