

Most Canadians support international access to safe abortions: poll

But maternal health not a foreign-aid priority for respondents

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Canadians believe that women in countries that receive aid from Ottawa should have access to safe abortions, according to new polling data which hints at a political risk for the Harper government in promoting a maternal health initiative that omits abortion.

In the poll by Nanos Research 67.7 per cent of respondents said women in countries receiving Canadian aid should have the same access to safe abortion as Canadian women.

The polling data also suggests that Prime Minister Stephen Harper's emphasis on maternal and child health as a centrepiece of this week's G8 summit has not caught on with the voting public. When offered four choices for allocating foreign aid, maternal health was placed last by respondents in every region except Atlantic Canada, where it came second last.

When world leaders meet in southern Ontario this week, they are expected to endorse the "Muskoka Initiative" – a push to improve maternal and child health in the developing world. The governments are expected to pony up billions (with at least \$1-billion from Canada) to support an initiative which, according to a draft of the summit communiqué, will focus on "better access to strengthened health systems, and sexual and reproductive [health care](#) and services, including voluntary family planning." There is no reference in the draft text to abortion services, reflecting the Harper government's previous wariness of including it specifically among programs and procedures that would be supported by the new foreign aid dollars.

"It's pretty clear from the polling research that the views of Canadians are not really aligned with the government on this," said pollster Nik Nanos. "What the research suggests is that Canadians expect an alignment between how we do international aid ... and our policies at home."

Support for abortion access crossed geographic and party lines: majorities in all regions, age groups, genders and political affiliations supported the right of Canadian women to have an abortion.

Mr. Nanos said the numbers suggest political danger for the Tories, noting that the government is already on the defensive over the cost of hosting the summits. Canadians are being asked to bear that cost to advance a signature initiative, maternal and child health, which they don't consider urgent and which is being handled in a way in which they disagree.

"We're not interested in that [abortion] debate," Mr. Harper's spokesman Andrew MacDougall said.

“We can bring resources without bringing the debate to those countries. We can make the interventions that save lives.”

Liberal health critic Carolyn Bennett said the government is turning its back on expert advice.

“Canada needs to be part of access to the comprehensive spectrum of services available,” she said. “I believe the number-one Canadian value is fairness and I think Canadians have trouble with people in the developing world not having the same access.”

In the random telephone survey, pollsters contacted 1,008 Canadians between May 29 and June 3. The poll is considered accurate within 3.1 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

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