

THE FEDERAL ELECTION

Dion has the most to gain tonight, poll says

STEVEN CHASE
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OTTAWA -- Canadians will be tuning in to tonight's English-language leaders' debate with low expectations of Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion and watching primarily to see which participant "understands people like me" and is the most well-spoken, a new poll indicates.

The survey suggests Conservative Leader Stephen Harper and NDP chief Jack Layton have the most to lose. That's because they're expected to perform the best, so sub-par results could especially hurt them.

The poll, conducted by Innovative Research Group for the Munk Debates, also suggests that tonight's event could have a significant impact in an election campaign that still lacks a dominant ballot-box question to galvanize voters. More than half of those surveyed said they haven't finalized their voting intentions and want to hear more from leaders before the Oct. 14 vote.

Separately, a Strategic Counsel poll of closely fought battleground ridings done for The Globe and Mail and CTV shows Bloc Québécois support surging in key Quebec ridings to levels it reached in the 2004 election. The Tory gains in Quebec during this campaign have been lost, the survey shows, suggesting the route to a majority government for the Conservatives may have to go through Ontario.

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The Munk Debates poll, meanwhile, also found that nearly half of respondents said they are likely to tune in to the debate. This would mean viewership of 11 million to 12 million, or half of all Canadians aged 18 and over. All four TV debates in the 2005-06 campaign garnered only about four million viewers in total.

Few of those polled - one in five - said they plan to watch the U.S. vice-presidential candidates' debate that is taking place at the same time.

When asked to rank attributes they value in the Canadian debate, respondents rated empathy, or understanding "people like me," as No. 1. This was followed by the ability to speak well, thinking quickly on their feet, looking knowledgeable, appearing trustworthy, not looking "like a deer in the headlights," and a good sense of humour.

Mr. Harper outcores his Liberal, NDP, Bloc and Green rivals on five of seven counts, but trails Mr. Layton on the most important trait - empathy - as well as the least important one: sense of humour.

Mr. Dion, however, fared poorly on all measures, which would suggest he's got the most to gain tonight, said Rudyard Griffiths, co-organizer of the Munk Debates. These are semi-annual events supported by the Aurea Foundation.

"[Mr. Dion is] starting from a deficit here compared to Harper or Layton, but there's great potential," Mr. Griffiths said.

The latest Strategic Counsel seat projections suggest a majority is further out of reach for the Tories. The Conservatives need to win all or most of the 45 battleground ridings tracked by the survey to have sufficient seats for a majority. But the latest estimates are that they will secure only 30 of them, down from 32 last week. The NDP's seat count would be unchanged at four while the Liberals would lose all but one of 17 battleground seats and the Bloc would gain two to hold 10.

The Munk Debates survey of 1,000 Canadians was conducted September 23 to 29 and has a 3.1 per cent margin of error 19 times out of 20.