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## After the deluge: How Alberta's floods will be a litmus test for Redford at the polls

By GARY MASON

*With a provincial election three years away, Conservatives paying close attention to polling data*

The impact of the flooding that severely damaged towns and cities throughout Alberta in June will linger for years. So will the impressions people in the province form of the way in which Premier Alison Redford's government responded to the crisis.

While three years away, the next provincial election could well be a referendum on the Premier's handling of the disaster. Which is why she is no doubt paying close attention to what government-commissioned polling is indicating – most of which is good news, some of which is not.

The government had Innovative Research Group gauge the public's mood to the flood response in two rounds of polling – first in July and then again in August. The Globe and Mail obtained results of both surveys.

The initial online poll of 900 adults found that 85 per cent of Albertans believed the government did a somewhat or very good job in dealing with the emergency. A month later, however, that enthusiasm had waned, with support dropping to 69 per cent.

Meantime, those who felt Ms. Redford's team did a somewhat or very poor job rose to 16 per cent in August, from five per cent in July.

The polling did indicate solid endorsement of many of the government's key flood initiatives, such as providing \$1-billion in preliminary funding, offering financial assistance for uninsurable damage and providing money to rebuild and replace municipal infrastructure. But again, in the month between the first round of polling and the second, public backing for those programs fell off.

On the key question of whether they supported the idea of the government's controversial plan to assist families and communities with uninsurable damage, for instance, almost 89 per cent somewhat or strongly supported the idea in July. A month later, as details of the program became better known, that number fell to 82 per cent.

It should be noted that those numbers would appear to be at odds with more recent polling done by Léger and published this week. That survey showed that nearly three-quarters of Albertans don't want the government to pay the full cost of buying out property owners in flood-way zones. (The government insists it is not.)

The Léger poll found that 74 per cent of those surveyed rated the government's early response to the floods as good or excellent. However, support dropped to 57 per cent when participants were asked how the government had handled the recovery phase, including compensation arrangements.

Other key findings in the government poll: There remains broad support for plans to rebuild in flood-damaged areas; in July, 80 per cent said it was the right direction, in August, 70 per cent. Meantime, 63 per cent said in August they supported the government's move to prevent, by law, any new construction in flood ways.

The one area where the government has dramatically lost support is in the way in which it has communicated its flood policies. In July, 52 per cent felt the government was doing a very effective job of communicating its actions. A month later, that number fell to 25 per cent. Overall, those who felt the government was doing either a very, or somewhat effective job in communicating its strategies stood at 65 per cent in August, down from 89 per cent in July.

It's not surprising that support for the government's efforts has slipped. (The polling showed that public backing of flood-response efforts by municipal governments in Alberta, as well as by Ottawa, also shrank by equal measures). People tend to rally around their leaders and governments in a time of crisis. But as life returns to normal, the hard public-policy decisions that the disaster left behind must be dealt with. The repercussions of those moves begin to take hold in the public's mind.

It will be years before some communities return to an existence that bears any resemblance to the one that existed before June 20. Meantime, Ms. Redford's government will continue to be judged on its handling of the situation.

The floods represent a seminal moment in the history of Alberta. They reflect a potentially pivotal time in the life of Alison Redford's government, too.

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