

Voters in poll fear Tory agenda

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QUEBEC -- The Conservative Party's inability to overtake the Liberals may have more to do with its agenda than with Stephen Harper, according to a new opinion poll.

A Leger Marketing poll, conducted last week, shows the Liberals have gained an 11-point lead over the Conservatives.

And when respondents were asked whether the Conservatives would fare better under deputy leader Peter MacKay or New Brunswick Premier Bernard Lord, two potential leadership contenders, the poll showed little change in the party's support.

"The problem isn't the leader, it is the party and its social policies," pollster Jean-Marc Léger said in an interview yesterday. "The Conservatives have not shown they can be a credible alternative to the Liberals. Despite a full year of minority [Liberal] government, despite the sponsorship scandal, despite the fiery debate over the budget, the Conservatives have not made any inroads across Canada. In fact, they have lost some ground. And the problem isn't Stephen Harper."

The survey showed 38 per cent of decided voters would opt for Mr. Martin's Liberals, 27 per cent for Mr. Harper's Conservatives and 17 per cent for the New Democrats under Jack Layton.

A change in leadership would do little to aid the Conservatives, the poll suggests. Asked whether they would vote for the Tories if Mr. MacKay were leader, 26 per cent of decided voters said yes. Exactly the same number said they would support the party if Mr. Lord were leader.

Regionally, the survey found the Liberals hold a strong lead in Ontario, with 46 per cent support, compared with 29 per cent for the Tories and 19 per cent for the NDP. The Liberals also registered a wide lead in British Columbia, attracting 47 per cent of decided voters to the Tories' 26 per cent and the New Democrats' 22 per cent.

The Bloc Québécois continue to dominate in Quebec, with the backing of 62 per cent of respondents, more than double the Liberals' 24 per cent; the Tories drew 10-per-cent support.

Part of the Conservatives' problem, the survey suggests, may have more to do with the number of Canadians, especially in Quebec and Ontario, who are mistrustful of Mr. Harper's stand on social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage as well as his pro-U.S. positions.

Just as important, half of those surveyed said Prime Minister Paul Martin was better able to preserve national unity; only 26 per cent said Mr. Harper would do a better job.

When respondents were asked whether they were "afraid" of Mr. Harper's positions on "abortion, the death penalty and same-sex marriage," 39 per cent said yes and 43 per cent said no. The remaining 18 per cent said they did not know or declined to answer.

The response was almost evenly split when voters were asked whether they were "afraid" of Mr. Harper's "pro-American positions," with 41 per cent saying yes and 42 per cent saying no. The other 17 per cent were undecided or declined to answer.

However, Mr. Harper can take comfort in the fact that 36 per cent viewed him as "more honest" than the 26 per cent who had that opinion of Mr. Martin. Still, a majority, 46 per cent, said Mr. Martin is better able to manage the country, compared with 29 per cent for Mr. Harper.

The poll was conducted between May 19 and May 22 among 1,509 respondents across Canada. The error for a polling sample of this size is 2.6 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.