

Gov't role, economy keys to vote

By David McGrane, Saskatoon StarPhoenix, April 15, 2011, A10

Following is the viewpoint of McGrane, an assistant professor of political studies at St. Thomas More College at the University of Saskatchewan.

What became clear in both of the leaders' debates was that there were four leaders on stage, but only two visions of Canada.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper very effectively communicated his vision of Canada, which is based on a strong military, tougher sentences for criminals, lower taxes for corporations and individuals, a reduction of government programs such as the gun registry that unnecessarily interfere in Canadians' lives, and cutting the deficit by a creating a smaller federal government.

Besides the promise to continue to increase health transfers at six per cent a year, social policy wasn't a part of Harper's pitch. He also did not mention democratic reform. His message was crystal clear: Only his vision can ensure that Canada's economy remains strong, and he needs a majority government to prevent the type of political instability that could derail Canada's recovery from the global recession.

A poll taken right after the debate by Ipsos-Reid showed that Harper's message seemed to connect. Prior to the English language debate, 27 per cent of respondents felt that the economy was the most important issue in the campaign, whereas 35 per cent felt that way after the debate.

The poll concerning the French language debate illustrated a similar phenomenon as the respondents who felt that the economy was the most important issue in the campaign rose to 27 per cent from 22 per cent.

On the other side, the three opposition leaders expressed a common vision of Canada, in which corporate taxes would be raised to pay to expand programs in the areas of health care, education, child care, pensions and seniors' care.

Economic growth would flow out of increased government investment in green energy, small business, and skills training.

The opposition parties agreed that the best way to fight crime is rehabilitation and good social programs, instead of tougher sentences. They also agreed on the need to maintain gun control, improve Canada's democracy, and cancel the Conservatives' pledge to buy new F-35 fighter jets.

What has happened in this campaign is that the Liberals have moved to left in their policy positions, while the NDP has moved to the right. The result is that the average Canadian has difficulty seeing the ideological differences between the two major

opposition parties. There are differences, but you have to look pretty closely to find them.

The Bloc Québécois agrees with the Liberals and the NDP that social programs and the government's role in people's lives needs to be expanded. The only difference is that the Bloc wants the social programs and role of the Quebec provincial government to be expanded (with federal money), while the NDP and the Liberal party want the expansion of the federal government.

No matter how many times Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff says he will not enter into a coalition, Canadians will inevitably have a coalition in the back of their minds when enter the voting booth. Given the similarities of the positions of the opposition parties, voters will be thinking that a coalition is a strong possibility if there's another minority government.

When they head off to vote, Canadians also may be thinking about what kind of Canada they want.

Are they comfortable with giving Harper and the Conservatives a majority? Undoubtedly, adding four years of majority Conservative government to five years of minority Conservative government will push Canada further the right.

Harper would be exalted to being one of Canada's major prime ministers who has shaped Canadian politics, instead of being a footnote in history as the guy who never got his majority.

If voters decide to vote for one of the opposition parties, they will be indicating that they want the federal government expanded, and that they welcome the possibility of a coalition in spite of any political instability that it may bring or its potential to send us back to the polls in the near future.

Usually, pollsters talk about the "ballot box question," which is what voters ask themselves as they enter the voting booth and can determine their choice. In this election, there may be a bundle of interrelated ballot box questions.

Voters will be thinking about the expansion or contraction of the federal government. They will be thinking about the best party to ensure that Canada's economy stays strong. They'll be thinking about the prospect of a stable Conservative majority that tilts Canada to the right versus the potential for a coalition of centre-left parties.

How voters in Saskatchewan and elsewhere answer these questions will determine the outcome of this election.