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What voters look for in TV clash

Debates will help 64 per cent decide
Questions of trust, promises top list

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OTTAWA—Almost two-thirds of voters will be using the party leaders' TV debates tonight and tomorrow night to help decide how they will cast their ballots on June 28, says a Toronto Star poll.

And the voters' top debate questions revolve around trust, follow-through and whether Canada is able to afford the kind of government the leaders are promising, says the poll, conducted last week for the Star and La Presse by EKOS Research Associates.

A full 40 per cent described the TV debates as very important in making the voting decision on June 28 and another 24 per cent said the debates — in French tonight and English tomorrow night — would be moderately important to their democratic choice.

EKOS also did some random testing of sample debate questions with the 2,117 Canadians over the age of 18 who were polled by telephone between Monday and Wednesday last week. The following are the top five favourite questions — from among the options offered — that voters would like to see posed to the four party leaders in the TV debates:

- ★ How will you ensure that money you need to fulfill your election promises will be available?
- ★ What do you consider to be the biggest threat to our economy over the next three years and how would you address it?
- ★ Can I trust you to keep your promises?
- ★ How will Canada be different in 10 years from now if you are elected?
- ★ Do you want to continue Canada's broad direction and values or do you think that we need to shift direction?

The poll is considered accurate within 2.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

The televised debates start each night at 8 and for two hours will follow the same format: brief opening and closing statements from each of the leaders and then four separate, topical segments that start with a question and follow-up to one leader, followed by six, one-on-one debates between each of the leaders on stage.

The multitude of one-on-one sessions, more than have been seen in past election debates, will present all kinds of



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Former prime minister Jean Chretien, above left, Tory leader Jean Charest and the Bloc's Gilles Duceppe face off in the 1997 debates.

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possibilities for dramatic confrontation; the mythic "knockout punch" that is always sought in these events, but only rarely delivered. The search for that defining moment is more media driven at any rate, since the major influence of debates generally comes after the event, when pundits and journalists deliver their verdict on the performances to a public that may have missed the broadcasts or watched only a small portion of the show.

Indeed, this pivotal campaign event is largely a media creation, hosted by a consortium of broadcasters who install their own reporters to ask the questions. Tonight, the journalists' panel will include Emmanuelle Latraverse of TVA and Patrice Roy of Radio-Canada. CBC-TV's Keith Boag, CTV's Craig Oliver and Global-CanWest's David Vienneau are on the English-language debate panel.

EKOS President Frank Graves sees a strong economic slant in the preferred questions of the poll respondents — a sign, he said, that people are looking for a more substantial debate on economic issues.

"Canadians still want to know about things like skill shortages, inflation, productivity, regional disparities, North American economic integration, aging and demographics, yet they've heard little on these issues to date," Graves said.

But trust and integrity matters form an equally strong current running through these questions — voters are demanding some type of predictability and accountability for promises made.

Cynicism is a major force in this election, pollsters and pundits agree; part of the legacy of the recent Ontario budget, in which Premier Dalton McGuinty introduced health-care premiums despite his signed election pledge to avoid tax hikes.

Prime Minister [Paul Martin](#) appears to be the chief victim of this cynicism, sharing the Liberal brand with McGuinty and running a campaign that has so far failed to convince Canadians that he or his party deserve a chance at re-election. Tonight and tomorrow night are seen as Martin's main chance to turn that impression around, which raises the stakes for him to perform well.

Martin spent much of the weekend in intense debate preparation in a rented, cable TV studio, taking time out to meet about a dozen Ottawa-area Liberal candidates yesterday at a diner in Gatineau, Que.

Martin said he will bring a positive message to Canadians in the broadcast debates.

"I basically want to tell them I'm incredibly optimistic about the future of this country — as long as we make the right decisions," he said.

Martin and New Democratic Party Leader [Jack Layton](#) have both mentioned using the debates to talk beyond each other and directly to Canadians.

Yesterday, at an Ottawa barbecue, Layton said: "In the last election, we had a million-plus votes and by all accounts, we're up by another million so far. ... This is a chance to speak with the millions more and invite them to be a part of one of the most positive campaigns, positive agendas that the country has been presented with in a long time."

Conservative Leader [Stephen Harper](#) stayed out of the limelight all weekend, spending his time in debate preparation and relaxing with his family.

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