

Obama's popularity higher than ever in Canada: poll

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U.S. President Barack Obama is more popular among Canadians now than when he was first elected, according to a new poll that suggests this country's opposition parties may have lost one of their campaign weapons against the governing Conservatives.

A new poll provided exclusively to Canwest News Service suggests Canadians are no longer as worried about seeing Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government cozy up to the U.S. administration, said Greg Lyle of the Innovative Research Group.

It's a stark contrast to the days of George W. Bush, when the Opposition Liberals and NDP would slam Mr. Harper's closeness to the unpopular U.S. administration.

Mr. Lyle said that whenever the next Canadian election rolls around, those attacks simply won't be a factor. "The election of Obama has taken the issue off the table," said Mr. Lyle, the managing director of the national polling firm.

"It was there before because it was a club the Liberals could hit the Tories with -- that was its use. It was a big negative and something to scare people about that Stephen Harper would cuddle up to George Bush. "In election campaigns, there's a lot more time spent looking for clubs than for carrots, so I think the Liberals will look for other weaknesses."

The poll -- co-commissioned by the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute -- suggests that more than half of Canadians, 52%, see Mr. Obama's presence in the White House as a positive thing for his country -- a number that's higher now than when he first won the presidency last November.

The poll explored border security and co-operation between Canada and the U.S. and found that Canadians have felt a noticeable difference since Mr. Bush left office.

In October 2008, when Mr. Bush's presidency was winding down, 39% of Canadians polled felt Mr. Harper was too close to the U.S., but that number has now dropped to 13%.

In fact, 19% of respondents in the new poll said they feel Canada is now too distant from its powerful southern neighbour -- an increase from just eight% last October, when Bush was still in power. The poll was conducted Friday and Saturday.

Within Canada, Quebec had the most faith in the new president, with 62% of respondents saying it was a "good thing" to have Obama in the Oval Office.

The widespread dislike of Mr. Bush among many Canadians only boosted Mr. Obama's image even before he took the oath of office, Lyle said.

"What you have is the president we've disliked most in recent history and the president we've liked most," he said.

Mr. Lyle said, however, the fact Mr. Obama's popularity in Canada has outlasted the hype leading up to his election and taking over the presidency in January is remarkable, despite the fact that his numbers have slipped in the U.S.

"It's very unusual for someone to do better in reality than people thought he would do in theory," he said. "Given the response he had when he came to Canada and the ongoing media attention, it's not a huge surprise, but it is a remarkable achievement."

"At the moment, he's fighting for the things Canadians believe in. He's fighting for public health care, a cleaner environment and he's trying to bring in stability to foreign affairs."

Although Mr. Obama remains largely popular in Canada, the poll suggests Canadians are not warm to establishing more co-operation with the U.S. on a number of topics, including defence strategies and international affairs.

Since Mr. Obama has taken office, more Canadians feel stricter border restrictions have made it more difficult for Canadian exporters, with 26% of respondents saying it was a lot more difficult, compared to 19% last October.

But Colin Robertson, a senior research fellow at the CDFAI, said tighter border regulations aren't aimed at just one country, and go well beyond the realm of exporting.

"We're not doing [stricter border security] because of the United States, we're doing it for our own protection," Mr. Robertson said. "There have been reports on the B.C. coast of drugs and people trafficking . . . and this is why we have coastal security. The more we can do in co-operation with your neighbour, it makes a lot of sense."

Overall, however, 51% of respondents said they felt closer border co-operation between the two countries "just makes sense."

The survey received 1,027 responses, with a 3.06 percentage points margin of error, 19 times out of 20.