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Majority back a blend in health care: 61% favour private, public mixture, survey suggests

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Nearly two-thirds of Canadians would back a political party that campaigned for a blend of private and public health care, suggests a new national poll.

If given a choice between two hypothetical parties -- one that banned "non-governmental" health care and one that allowed a mixture -- 61% of Canadians would back the party that permitted a blend, the survey found.

Only 28% of respondents said they would support a party that prohibited "non-governmental care."

The findings come in the final days of a federal election campaign that has seen every major party leader pledge his allegiance to the public health care system.

Paul Martin, the Liberal Prime Minister, and Stephen Harper, the Conservative leader, have both promised a wait-times guarantee under the public system, albeit with different methods. Jack Layton, the leader of the NDP, is campaigning as a champion of medicare.

"Here, what we're trying to get at is, suppose this were the only issue? How would you vote?" said Conrad Winn, president of COMPAS Inc.

Given that kind of stark choice, Canadians would pick a party that supported "two-tier care or medical choice," Mr. Winn said. "And this is the one question [on the survey] that produced the most support for the single-payer monopoly system and support for that was outnumbered two to one by support for two-tier or medical choice."

The survey was commissioned by the Canadian Independent Medical Clinics Association, a one-year-old private health care lobby. The 100-member group is led by Brian Day, a British Columbia orthopedic surgeon who runs the for-profit Cambie Surgical Centre in Vancouver. He has vowed to open a similar clinic in Ontario by 2007.

Dr. Day is also campaigning to become the next president of the Canadian Medical Association with private health care at the centre of his policies.

"My decision to stand for president-elect of the Canadian Medical Association is based on the need for change," he says on his Web site. "The introduction of market forces, competition, consumer empowerment and responsibility will lead to improved accountability and performance."

The survey posed three other questions about the private-vs.-public-care debate.

The first found 71% agreed the Supreme Court's landmark June, 2005, decision opening the door to private medical insurance in Quebec was reasonable or very reasonable.

The second concluded 75% believe politicians should follow or at least carefully consider the experiences of countries with parallel private and public health care systems. But almost half, 49%, backed cautiously considering blended alternatives instead of outright following other countries.

The third question found 76% of Canadians would encourage friends facing long waits for medical care to seek treatment outside the public system.

"In a modern democratic era, people don't want to be told they don't have options," said Mr. Winn, adding the results were roughly uniform across the country.

The survey, titled Public Opinion on Health Care: Widespread Support for Medical Choice/2-Tier in the Wake of Supreme Court Decision, did not use the words private care, medical choice or two-tier in its questions.

Instead, COMPAS asked respondents how they felt about "non-governmental" care, a phrase Mr. Winn defended as emotionally neutral.

"The word private is not an emotionally neutral word," he said. "Forget about business. Private implies something secretive, right? So there's got to be a very good reason to use a term that implies secretiveness and possibly even conspiracy."

The COMPAS survey, which canvassed 1,015 Canadians from Jan. 9 to 15, is considered accurate within 3.2 percentage points, 19 times in 20.