

Weighing voter motivation

Voters balance the party, leader and candidate at the ballot box

BY ROGER VARLEY
Staff Writer

What directs a voter to mark an "X" beside the name of a candidate in the federal election?

Is the elector motivated by choice of party, leader or candidate? Or is there some other determining factor, such as name recognition or ethnicity?

According to Robert MacDermid, professor of political science at York University, studies have shown it's the party that counts.

About 50 to 60 per cent vote for the party, 30 to 40 per cent vote for the leader, while only about 10 per cent base their vote on the candidate, MacDermid said.

"Candidates are generally not important," he said. "When you think how many people can actually name their member of Parliament, it's only about 30 per cent."

However, that pattern can change if a particular candidate has a high profile, MacDermid said.

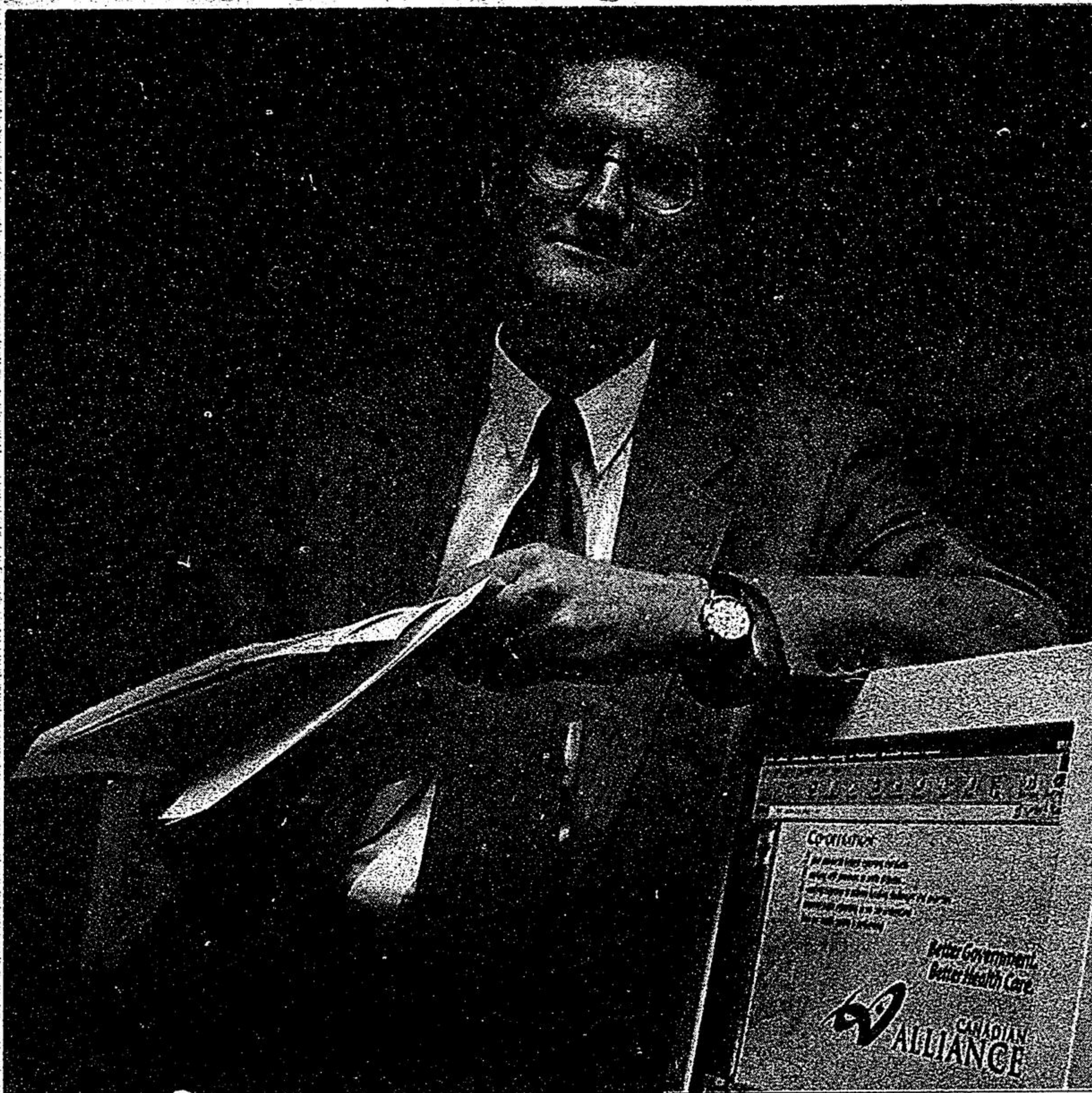
"Why do you think (Globe and Mail columnist) Michael Valpy is running as a candidate for the NDP?" he asked rhetorically. "People know him. It's the same with (Liberal) John McCallum in Markham. He is known by the people who read the business pages." McCallum is the chief economist with Royal Bank Financial Group.

University of Toronto political science professor Paul Fox was of the same opinion.

"That's going to be a really interesting riding," he said of the match-up between McCallum and Canadian Alliance candidate Jim Jones. Jones received wide publicity earlier this year when, as the incumbent Progressive Conservative member for Markham, he switched his allegiance to CA. But Fox added a cautionary note.

"(The riding has) had an unfortunate history with Liberals," he said, referring to former MP Jag Bhaduria, who was ousted by the Liberals for falsifying his resume.

Nelson Wiseman, also a University of Toronto professor, was less certain voter motivation could be determined accurately.



PHOTO/CELIA BRONKHORST

The party's platform and its leader are of equal importance to Hugh Dodd of Stouffville. Dodd will be voting for Oak Ridges Alliance candidate Bob Callow on Monday, although he didn't place the local candidate's performance high on his list of reasons for voting CA.

"Some vote for a combination of factors," he said. "Some vote for an inherited party affiliation. You know from birth how they will vote."

He acknowledged the party draw is probably more significant than that of a leader, "although in recent decades more focus has been placed on the leaders."

"But," he added, "you might ask is gender a factor, is age a factor?"

And what about ethnicity? "Ethnicity and religion might play a part," said Wiseman. "Although religion is not as important as it was."

He said if ethnicity — whether the candidate's or the voter's — did come into play, it likely would be in combination with some other factor.

But to explain and understand voting behaviour is a complex busi-

ness, Wiseman said. "People are complex and there are problems categorizing them."

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or for or against the Alliance.'

Sarah Dover, campaign manager for York North Liberal candidate Karen Kraft Sloan, agreed it isn't easy to define voters' priorities, especially based on door-to-door canvassing.

"It's difficult to make that assessment in a quantifiable way," she said. "I'm not sure people think of these things separately."

Dover thought it likely that a portion of the undecided electorate will "become involved in the national campaign. Voters who aren't yet decided might be looking at the parties rather than the candidates."

Sarah Tomlinson, a voter in Thornhill riding, said she usually votes for the leader "because I think the leader usually gets their way. Elected members vote (on legislation) the way the leader wants."

"I'm not really impressed with the choices we have," Tomlinson said. "Basically, you either vote for or against the Liberals or for or against the Alliance. The other three don't seem to make any waves."

For Hugh Dodd of Stouffville, who will vote in the Oak Ridges riding, party platform and leadership are of equal importance.

"I will support the Canadian Alliance and Stockwell Day," he said. "I looked at the party platform over the summer and (Day's) persona is a contributing factor."

He said he rated the local candidate's qualifications much lower than party or leader in this particular election.

For some voters, however, it boils down to a last-minute decision, probably based on gut instinct.

"I haven't decided yet," said one woman voter, who preferred to remain anonymous. "I'll think about it when I get in the booth."

Polls close at 9:30 p.m.

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In a repeat of the way in which the 1997 federal election results were reported, interested voters in York Region will begin watching Monday night's election returns at about the same time as all other Canadians.

Polls in Ontario will close at 9:30 p.m. EST on Monday, after being open for 12 hours. Shortly afterwards, results will begin rolling in from polling stations across the country.

Michael Kennedy, returning officer for the riding of Oak Ridges, said staggered voting hours across the country came into effect for the 1997 election. While polling stations open at 9:30 a.m. EST in Ontario, he said, voting in B.C. runs from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. PDT.

"In effect," he said, "polls close at the same time, give or take about half an hour."

The move was made in an attempt to eliminate a situation in which voters in western Canada could learn of results in the east — via American radio and television stations, or the Internet — before their own votes were cast.

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