

US pollster tips Fianna Fail to return to power

By Fionnan Sheahan

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THE key question to be decided in the general election is who will join Fianna Fail in the next government, a renowned US pollster suggested yesterday.

Dr Frank Luntz also poured cold water on the impact of Fine Gael leader Enda Kenny's contract with the voters.

The concept was borrowed from the Republican Party in the US but Dr Luntz said there was a huge difference between American voters and Irish voters.

"Enda Kenny may get a surprise when he hears how Irish voters respond to his 'Contract for a Better Ireland'," he said.

Back in the country for his final show for RTE's 'The Week In Politics', Dr Luntz appeared to tip Mr Ahern to return to office.

"It's pretty clear Bertie Ahern will get most votes, but it is not clear what form of coalition he will form," he said.

Yet Dr Luntz also seemed to endorse the Fine Gael tactic of letting the voters know more about Mr Kenny.

He said it was important for leaders to allow the public to see a little of themselves and to let their hair down, "even if you're McDowell and don't have much".

Policies are important but the attributes of the leaders are even more important, he said. Although he wouldn't identify the culprits, he said two leaders in this country are "ineffective" and said the pair are turning people off their parties.

Voters in rural areas were far more concerned about local and community issues than voters in Dublin, who tended to focus more on national issues, Dr Luntz said.

"I do believe the parties and leaders would do very well to get to know the local issues," he said. Health is by far the most important issue in the general election.

"The issue of health has got everyone concerned. Everyone can tell you a story of a failure with the health system," he said.

Crime was a different type of issue from the voters perspective, Dr Luntz said.

"Crime is more of a perception than a personal experience. Health is more of a personal experience than a perception," he said.

- *Fionnan Sheahan*