



NEWS RELEASE

Tories Consolidate Lead *Canadians Now Want and Expect Tory Victory*

The Conservatives have consolidated their lead over the Liberals this week, as negative views on Paul Martin and the Liberals continued to harden. Although Tory support has ebbed somewhat from a peak last weekend, the race has solidified into a new pattern, with the Conservatives showing a seven to eight point lead over the Liberals day after day.

"There's ten minutes left in the third period and the Liberals are a couple of goals down," said EKOS President Frank Graves. "Can they still win? It's possible. But the race is now the Tories to lose, and their game looks pretty sound. There will have to be some new factor in play to change the dynamic, unless the new Liberal ads turn out to be more effective with voters than their media reviews would predict."

If an election were held today, the likeliest outcome would be a Conservative minority government. However, it would take only a relatively small improvement in Tory fortunes to lift them into potential majority territory. In fact the Conservatives were in majority territory as recently as last weekend.

Although the voter volatility of the last two weeks as well as the Liberals' successful fight-back from behind in the 2004 election may give them reason for hope, they face a daunting challenge. Paul Martin, once the strongest element in their appeal, is a diminishing asset. He now trails Stephen Harper as the leader with the most positive vision for the future. And among those who have an opinion on this week's leaders' debates, he was the clear loser. The aversion to Martin in Quebec, which is proving to be an even more crucial battleground in this election than anyone expected, is especially profound.

"Canadians are saying that Martin lost the debates," said Graves. "However, that may be a symptom of the Liberals' woes rather than its cause. Stephen Harper and the Tories actually established their lead before the debates, and the pattern that was already set on Monday, before they began, has persisted all week. The electorate seems more and more comfortable with the prospect of Harper as Prime Minister."

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There has been a truly dramatic turnaround in Canadians' expectations from this election. Just ten days ago, they believed by a large margin that the Liberals would be returned to office. Now a sizeable majority say it is the Tories who will probably win. More important, perhaps, when asked whether they would prefer the outcome of the election to be a Conservative majority, Conservative minority, Liberal majority or Liberal minority, most of those with an opinion are opting for a Conservative government of some kind.

We are also seeing the recently-converted Conservative supporters expressing a high level of confidence that their minds are firmly made up. For the first time in the campaign there is a sense of that the electorate is settling in to a new pattern, if not locked down.

"If Paul Martin and the Liberals are not able to disrupt this pattern in the next few days, the only remaining question will be whether it is a Conservative minority or Conservative majority on election night," said Graves.

Methodology

These data are based on telephone interviews conducted January 10 to 12, 2006 with a random sample of 2306 Canadians aged 18 and over. A sample of this size provides a margin of error of +/- 2.0 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The margin of error increases when the results are sub-divided (i.e., error margins for sub-groups such as regions).

All the data were statistically weighted to ensure the sample's regional, gender and age composition reflects that of the actual population of Canada according to Census data.