



PRESS RELEASE

MARTIN'S LIBERALS SHOWING MODEST REBOUND IN A LISTLESS AND FRAGMENTED POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Ottawa, ONTARIO. On most of the key national issues of the day, there is increasing fragmentation of the Canadian public along political party lines. The Liberal Party of Canada (LPC), however is faring moderately better and, for the first time since the election, in majority territory. The Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), on the other hand, seems to be losing touch with centre/core (vis-à-vis the last election). The political landscape is, however, is still best characterized as stable, perhaps listless. There are a number of fractious issues; none of which appear capable of propelling any party to clear victory at this time.

OVERVIEW:

It appears that the country is significantly more fractured along party lines on the key issues (e.g., same sex, BMD, budget priorities, ethics), than it has been for some time. Worrisome for the Conservatives is that their support appears not only considerably less connected to the centre/mainstream, but smaller than it was in the last election. This is not the preferred trajectory for the party that is the obvious contender to depose Martin's Liberals. The NDP, on the other hand, show signs of continued growth; perhaps reflecting public emphasis on social versus fiscal priorities and a continued lean to a progressive rather than conservative stance (contrary to the direction of the U.S. electorate).

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THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Martin's Liberals have tentatively elevated themselves into majority territory for the first time since the election. However, their prospects are still being shackled by the continuing corrosive influence of the sponsorship scandal. Otherwise, the LPC is far more in line with the Canadian centre on key issues than their principal rivals.

The Conservatives, on the other hand, have further distanced themselves from the mainstream/centre since the election, which does not augur well for prospects of deposing the Liberals. Indeed, there is some sense that the CPC are in decline, with little evidence that their current positions on same-sex provide any opportunity to break out of their existing constituency.

Moreover, although the CPC "owns" the ethics franchise, outside of Alberta, this is largely a spent force. In fact, an ethics focus in any looming election will probably kill that party's prospects in Quebec, where voters have no interest in further talk about sponsorship.

THE GOMERY INQUIRY

The Gomery Inquiry, and the sponsorship issue, continues to receive very high levels of attention; but there is little evidence that it is exerting any new influence on the political landscape. In fact, the recent rise in Liberal fortunes (and decline in CPC prospects), suggest that sponsorship/ethics is a declining/spent force. That said, the ongoing inquiry might explain why the LPC is still being held down somewhat, despite having a much squarer connection with centre of Canadian public opinion on most issues.

There is a huge regional split on the importance of the ethics issue – five per cent of Quebeckers want it as most important election issue versus 28 per cent of Albertans. Despite unusually high attention levels, there is evidence of high fatigue with the issue in Quebec. In fact, almost no one in this province sees this as a worthy master issue for any future election. The political arithmetic should be obvious and does not favour the CPC's prospects of expanding into Quebec.

Moreover, despite the large resources devoted to the investigation of this issue, Canadians exhibit only modestly higher levels of comfort that they can judge this issue today, than a year ago. The issue has had a major impact on Canadian politics, but there is little evidence that it has further force to alter the political landscape in the future.

THE SAME-SEX MARRIAGE DEBATE

The issue of same-sex is clearly very divisive, but a number of indicators and trends suggest that it needs not be particularly worrisome for the governing LPC. For instance:

- i. The Liberal's overall position has risen while this debate has evolved
- ii. At the level of *rights* (as opposed to lifestyle-value preferences), their position enjoys clear, and growing majority support
- iii. The issue is *not* seen as important enough to call an election over
- iv. The issue is increasingly polarized along party lines, suggesting little upside/growth opportunity for the Conservatives, particularly in Quebec.

In addition to the key role of age/generation in dividing views on same-sex benefits, the issue is increasingly fractured on party ideological lines and now shows a large divide across faith-based/non-faith-based Canadians.

THE BUDGET

Tracking of preferred allocation of surplus shows a continued strong and strengthening lean to social investments over fiscal priorities. Indeed, a clear majority of Canadians pick social investments over debt retirement and further tax relief. The well-worn 50/50 rule from the late nineties appears to have evolved to a 60/40 rule.

- There is a striking gender gap with women favouring social investment 70/30 over fiscal priorities versus a 50/50 split for men.
- There are also huge political party fractures, with Conservatives favouring *fiscal* priorities 55 to 43 over social, whereas the NDP and the BQ favour social over fiscal by about 75 to 25.

BALLISTIC MISSILE DEFENCE

Public support for BMD has been progressively weakening over the past year. More ominously for the main contenders for power, the issue now is emerging as a potential major election issue (much more important than the same sex or ethics issue it seems). Overall, opposition is the new majority position and it is rising (more rapidly amongst those most strenuously opposed).

Our broader research has shown that the BMD issue has been dragged down in the wake of a steep decline in confidence in the prudence-competence of the U.S./Bush administration (lead by a shift from ambiguity to consensus over the incorrectness of the war in Iraq).

Like others, this issue is highly fragmented on political party lines with Conservative supporters notably off side the Canadian centre (and its trajectory). Fifty-seven per cent of CPC voters support BMD participation, versus only 19 per cent of NDP supporters, 27 per cent of BQ supporters and 44 per cent Liberal supporters.

METHODOLOGY:

These data are based on telephone interviews conducted February 7 and February 9, 2005 with a random sample of 1,046 Canadians aged 18 and over. A sample of this size provides a margin of error of +/- 3 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The margin of error increases when the results are subdivided (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.