



## *NEWS RELEASE*

# **Liberals Retain Narrow Lead** *Quebec is Wasteland for National Parties*

<b>National Federal Voting Intentions</b> (n=1,105)	
Liberal Party of Canada	33.0
Conservative Party of Canada	27.9
New Democratic Party	20.9
Bloc Québécois	13.1
Green Party	4.9

### **The Top Line**

The Liberals under Paul Martin are hanging onto a narrow national lead over the Conservatives, despite Justice Gomery's report on the sponsorship scandal last week, according to a new EKOS/Toronto Star/La Presse poll. This suggests that if the opposition parties do force an election soon, as they are threatening to do, the Liberals might still eke out a minority government. However, the failure of the Liberals to resuscitate themselves in Quebec, and of the other national parties to make any significant inroads there, makes it difficult to foresee any party forming a majority government.

"The overwhelming dominance of Bloc Québécois support in Quebec forms a wall that none of the national parties seemed poised to penetrate," said EKOS President Frank Graves. "The Liberals are no longer competitive in the province outside of a few pockets in the West Island of Montreal and West Quebec, and the NDP and Conservatives barely register."

### **The Liberals**

The Liberals have held onto their national lead through their continued (if somewhat shaky) edge in Ontario, where they have a ten point lead over the Conservatives, as well as, to a lesser extent, through their strength in British Columbia and the Atlantic provinces. However, their efforts to throw off the weight of the sponsorship scandal in Quebec have gone unrewarded. The Liberals now have less than half

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the support they enjoyed in Quebec when Paul Martin became Prime Minister, and have made no headway since the election of June 2004.

Strikingly, although Martin seems to have succeeded in his strategy of convincing Quebeckers that Jean Chrétien was responsible for the sponsorship scandal and that he wasn't, it has had no effect in reversing his party's fortunes in Quebec. He has, however, had some modest success in convincing more Canadians that he has been working to clean up the sponsorship mess.

The Liberals' room to grow from their current level of support across the country is hampered by the fact that nearly half of Canadians now say that they are so disturbed by the problems of ethics and accountability in Ottawa that they won't vote Liberal.

"The ceiling on the Liberals' potential support is getting lower and lower, largely because of the ethics issue," said Graves. "Ironically, this is true despite the fact that most Canadians say they don't want ethics to be the main issue in the coming election."

Nationally, the Liberals have lost the lock they once enjoyed on social issues such as health and education, though they retain a lead over the other parties in terms of their capacity to manage the economy. They trail the NDP on social issues and the Conservatives on ethics and fiscal issues. Although the Liberals still enjoy an overall advantage over the Conservatives on the issues, they are dangling by a thread: in an economic downturn that advantage might well disappear and do so very quickly. One bright spot for the Liberals is that they retain an advantage on the issues among undecided voters.

## The Conservatives

The Conservatives continue having trouble breaking through in Ontario. They retain their domination in Alberta and their lead in the rest of the prairies, but they are vulnerable to the Liberals in British Columbia.

"If the Conservatives hope to form a government after the next election – even a minority – they need to break out of the box they are in on the issues," said Graves. "At the moment, they are seen as far stronger than the Liberals on ethics and accountability, but that isn't what the public wants the election to be about. The public still sees social and economic issues as more important."

Stephen Harper continues to suffer from strong negatives, and has yet to convince many voters that he is a viable alternative to Martin as Prime Minister.

## The Bloc Québécois

The Bloc Québécois continues to consolidate its commanding lead in Quebec. Even in Montreal, the BQ leads by a margin of almost two-to-one over the Liberals.

There is no sign that the BQ is vulnerable to the Liberals wooing back any substantial number of their traditional supporters. In fact, BQ voters are more likely to see the Conservatives or NDP as their second choice than they are the Liberals.

Interestingly, although the BQ's strength is obviously related in part to the sponsorship scandal, the party's supporters actually rank ethics behind social, economic and fiscal issues as the most important for debate in the next election.

## The NDP

The NDP is running stronger than it did in the last election nationally. It is competitive in Ontario, even though it does trail the Liberals and the Conservatives. The NDP has also surpassed the Liberals as the party judged the best equipped to deal with social issues such as health and education – the issue most widely seen as the most important for the next election.

The NDP remains, by a comfortable margin, the second-choice party for more Canadians than any other. If the NDP could capitalize on that good will among those intending to vote for the other parties, it could become a contender for power. But there is no sign that that will happen. NDP voters are slightly warier of an early election than other Canadians, perhaps because they fear that it might produce a Conservative, rather than a Liberal, government.

“Expect the Liberals to use the fear of a Tory government to squeeze the NDP vote in an election campaign as they have successfully done in the past,” said Graves.

### *METHODOLOGY:*

These data are based on telephone interviews conducted Nov 7 to Nov 9, 2005 with a random sample of 1275 Canadians aged 18 and over. A sample of this size provides a margin of error of +/- 2.7 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.