

EKOS/GLOBE & MAIL SURVEY

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Liberals Rejoin Battle Under Gloomy Skies

In an increasingly pessimistic mood about the economy and the Harper government's handle on it, many Canadians are turning to the Liberal Party, which is now closing in on the ruling Conservatives.

If forced to choose between a Conservative government or a coalition government led by Liberal leader, Michael Ignatieff, Canadians choose the coalition option by a margin of 50% to 43%.

Still, if the Tories are defeated on their budget, Canadians narrowly prefer another election to the Governor-General asking Ignatieff to form a government.

"There are a lot of factors now helping the Liberals," said EKOS President Frank Graves. "The contrast between Barack Obama and Stephen Harper is one. Not only is there a 'charisma gap', there is a perception that Obama has a better grip on what to do about the recession."

"The replacement of Stéphane Dion as Liberal leader is another," said Graves. "Many Canadians don't know Michael Ignatieff very well; but they know he isn't Stéphane Dion and they know he isn't Stephen Harper."

At the moment the Conservatives enjoy a lead over the Liberals of just over three percentage points.

"This is a huge change from the period right after the coalition agreement was struck in Stéphane Dion's last days as Liberal leader, when the Tories took an apparently unassailable 20-point lead," said Graves. "Clearly much of the recoil against the idea of a coalition really had to do with alarm at the idea of Stéphane Dion becoming prime minister so quickly after have been rejected so decisively at the polls."

Outside of Quebec and Alberta, the Liberals are strong enough to have recreated a two-horse race. Conservative support is retreating into its traditional demographic bases of seniors, men, Albertans, and middle and lower income voters.

More affluent and educated voters are moving into the Liberal camp.

"Stephen Harper's very high negatives are now clearly a problem for the Conservatives," said Graves. "Harper has a 55% disapproval rating, which is exceedingly high – a serious challenge for the Tories going forward."

Just 35% of Canadians approve of the way Harper is doing his job.

Michael Ignatieff, in contrast, gets a 44% approval rating, with just 21% disapproval, though it is clear that many Canadians still don't feel they know the man: more than a third declined to state an opinion on the Liberal leader.

Interestingly, the exhilaration around Barack Obama's election in the United States may be creating positive waves for the Liberals here in Canada. Although a near-majority of Canadians say that Democratic dominance in the United States will have no effect on Canadian politics, 37% say it will make a Liberal victory at the next election more likely.

Indeed, asked to choose who would make the best prime minister to forge a positive working relationship with Obama, Ignatieff is a clear favourite.

Just 40% of Canadians believe Canada is moving in the right direction right now, down from 60% a year ago. This is clearly being driven by economic pessimism. More than two-thirds of Canadians say the economy is moving in the wrong direction. One in five Canadians is worried about losing their job, and more than a third think they'd have a hard time find a new one if they lost the one they have.

"It is important to note that when we asked whether Canadians were worried most about their economic well-being in the next year or in the next ten years, the division was almost exactly equal," Graves pointed out. "It is a mistake to say that Canadians are relentlessly focused on the economic short-term. They are just as concerned that Canada have a long-term plan for prosperity."

Although it is not the top-of-mind issue that the economy is, Canada's military role in Afghanistan continues to lose support. Half of Canadians now say they oppose the mission, compared with 37% who support it.

"While the Conservatives retain a narrow lead over the Liberals, the political landscape is shifting to the advantage of Ignatieff and the Liberals," said Graves. "This is being driven by four factors: sinking approval for Harper, the contrast with Obama, the Conservatives' underwhelming performance on the economic file, and the change in Liberal leadership."

Methodology:

This survey was conducted January 15-17, 2009 using EKOS' unique hybrid internet-telephone research panel, Probit. This panel is randomly recruited from the general population, meaning that, the only way to be included in Probit is through random selection. Unlike opt-in internet-only research panels, Probit supports confidence intervals and error testing.

In total, a random sample of 1,000 Canadians aged 18 and over responded to the survey. A sample of this size provides a margin of error of +/- 3.1 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 samples composition reflects that of the actual population of Canada according to Census data.