



PRESS RELEASE

LIBERALS REBOUND: CANADIANS FAVOUR LPC-NDP ALLIANCE OVER BQ-CPC

National Federal Voting Intentions (n=1,212)	
Liberal Party of Canada	32.5
Conservative Party of Canada	30.5
New Democratic Party	19.0
Bloc Quebecois	12.0
Green Party	5.5

Interviews conducted April 26 to 28, 2005

Ottawa, ONTARIO. A Toronto Star/La Presse/EKOS poll finds the federal Liberals are rebounding while the Conservative balloon has started to deflate. That has produced a tight race as Canadians ponder an imminent election they say they do not want. The crucial Ontario battleground is looking considerably more favourable for the Liberals than it was just two weeks ago, and their fortunes have also improved somewhat in Quebec. Strikingly, the parties are roughly at the same place in public standing as they were last year just one week before the election. "It is déjà vu all over again," said EKOS President Frank Graves, "even though what Canadians really seem to want is more stability in Ottawa."

The most important recent political dynamic is public response to current and potential party alliances in Ottawa. This week, the Liberals and NDP decided to cooperate, and they have accused the Tories of siding with separatists to force an election. Given the choice, Canadians show a clear preference for a Liberal-NDP alliance; it is the possibility of a Conservative-BQ collaboration that voters find disturbing.

Fury over the sponsorship scandal has ebbed ever-so-slightly in the last two weeks. More significant, it seems, Canadians have taken a second look at Stephen Harper as a potential Prime Minister and are having second thoughts.

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With the race between the Liberals and Conservatives now so tight, the only unequivocal winner if an election were called soon would be the Bloc Quebecois, which is cruising to significant gains in Quebec at the expense of the Liberals. "The Bloc is poised to win more seats in Quebec at a time when Quebecers are deeply dissatisfied with the overall direction of the country," said Graves. "This is a dramatic reversal from just two years ago when Quebecers said they were very satisfied with the direction of the country."

Ironically, the NDP, whose alliance with the Liberals now seems the only obstacle to triggering an election, are also well-situated for a vote: they are riding several points higher than they did in the last election, and they are well positioned to grow since they lead all the parties as a second-choice option.

OVERVIEW:

Who is Scariest? Public Optic on Emerging Alliances

The alliance between the LPC and the NDP is far more palatable to Canadians than a CPC-BQ alliance. "While Stephen Harper may see an NDP-LPC alliance as unholy, his reliance on the BQ to dislodge the Liberals may well constitute the Conservatives most glaring exposed flank," Graves said. "Paul Martin and Jack Layton are regarded as a far less frightening political couple; rather, it is Stephen Harper and Gilles Duceppe who are seen as disturbing and beyond odd bedfellows."

Liberals Rebounding

The electorate is becoming polarized as it seeks out the least objectionable choice in an unappealing political landscape. The Liberals have regained about half the ground they lost in the days after the release of the Brault testimony at the Gomery Inquiry. They now have a slight lead over the Conservatives nationally. More crucially, they have recovered their advantage in the key battleground of Ontario, where 38.6 per cent now say they would vote Liberal compared to 33.3 per cent Conservative.

Conservatives in a Stall

Despite an apparently favourable political environment, support for the Conservatives seems trapped in the low 30s. The Conservatives have given up almost all the gains they made in the aftermath of the release of the Brault testimony. The polls and headlines advertising a possible Tory victory in recent weeks seem to have led Canadians to take a closer look at Stephen Harper and his party, and they are re-discovering old doubts. There is still significant aversion to him as a potential Prime Minister. Moreover, the CPC scores poorly on the social issues cited as most important by voters. "Harper may also be misjudging just who voters will deem as participating in an unholy alliance," said Graves.

Pining for Stability, But No Ready Option Evident

There is no evidence that any party is in a position to produce a majority government, but the public recognizes the instability of a minority Parliament. "While a combination of strong fatigue with the Liberals and continuing wariness of the Conservatives precludes an obvious majority Parliament," said Graves, "this might shift as election-weary voters are increasingly attracted to the stability of majority rule." In fact, despite a strong lean (69 per cent) to expecting a minority outcome, voters are now more favourably disposed to a majority outcome than in the past. Overall, the search for stability may provide a slight, but significant vote premium to whichever party seems poised to win, and right now, the public are evenly divided on the chances of an LPC or a CPC victory.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE KEY CONTENDERS:

The Liberals:

The LPC should take comfort at erasing a recent disadvantage, but many of the underlying fundamentals augur poorly for the Liberals. "Declining confidence in the direction of the country, weakened overall competitive position on key electoral issues, high generalized fatigue with Liberal rule and focused desire to punish the party, all coalesce to pose a formidable (but not insurmountable) challenge for Paul Martin and the LPC," Graves commented. Moreover, the Liberals trail the NDP and the CPC as a second choice among voting Canadians, and may lose ambivalent voters seeking majority stability if the Conservatives emerge as a more likely winner.

Despite these challenges, the Liberals still display a number of strengths. First and foremost they have rebounded and have staunched the bleeding noted in earlier polls. Further, Martin is still considered the best leader for the country (once again possessing a greater advantage in the crucial Ontario arena). Save the dismal scores on ethics, the LPC does well on all other issues, particularly the economy, which is an area of rising importance. Lastly, it appears that, in the eyes of Canadians, the newly formed alliance with the NDP is preferable to any potential CPC-BQ alliance.

The Conservatives:

The Conservatives remain in a fairly solid position overall despite their inability to consolidate the burst of support they received after the Brault testimony emerged. They are benefiting from acute anger over the sponsorship scandal and are seen as the party best able to address ethics and accountability. They also score well on fiscal issues and passably on the economy. "They are seen as the only real governing alternative to the Liberals, and therefore the obvious successors in Ottawa. If they are able to open up a lead on the Liberals, they may also capitalize on the underlying desire for stability, and hence aspire to form a majority government," Graves noted.

The NDP:

Since the last election, the NDP have strengthened their position considerably and now enjoy a wide lead as preferred second choice. They are also highly competitive on overall issues, and lead on the top priority of social issues. However, the NDP are still not in a position to form a government, and they continue to show weakness in the usual areas (e.g., fiscal policies and the economy). That said, as Graves noted, they are Canada's new power brokers: "Not since the salad days of the 1980s have the NDP been poised to exert such influence on the Canadian political scene".

The Bloc Québécois:

Capitalizing on weakening confidence in Canada and fuelled by intense anger over sponsorship, the BQ are poised to eclipse their impressive performance from last year. To this point, our evidence suggests that it is a combination of the sponsorship with general dissatisfaction with the policy direction of the government that is the crucial engine of their success, and not the sovereignty issue. The BQ are benefiting from simply not being Liberals.

REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE:

Quebec:

Quebeckers are currently the least happy with the direction of the country (currently 66 per cent say "wrong direction"). This is particularly startling given that it was only a few years ago that Quebeckers were most pleased with national direction. They are highly split on the importance of sponsorship, with most opting for the BQ and censure of the Liberals. There is, however, some evidence of a modest LPC rebound, potentially attributable to consolidating federalist vote.

Ontario:

Ontarians appear to be more forgiving of Martin and the Liberals than they were just two weeks ago. They are among the provinces most likely to say that Martin deserves credit for calling inquiry. They are also more likely to cite Martin as the best leader for their province (36 per cent followed by Harper at 25 per cent) and for the country (41 per cent compared to 26 per cent for Harper). Ontarians also possess the strongest aversion to a CPC-BQ alliance (67 per cent uncomfortable with this alliance compared to 59 per cent across the country).

British Columbia:

Residents of B.C. (along with those in Atlantic Canada) express the highest approval of the direction of the country (55 per cent say "right direction"), which may explain why LPC support is highest in this province (42.8 per cent). However, it should be noted that, historically these Liberal numbers collapse at the ballot box, and, as a result, B.C. results tend to be notoriously difficult to predict.

METHODOLOGY:

These data are based on telephone interviews conducted April 26 to April 28, 2005 with a random sample of 1,212 Canadians aged 18 and over. A sample of this size provides a margin of error of +/- 2.8 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.