



PRESS RELEASE

CONTRADICTION SIGNALS FROM AN UNCERTAIN PUBLIC

National Federal Voting Intentions (n=1,326)	
Liberal Party of Canada	41.2%
Conservative Party of Canada	28.5%
New Democratic Party	16.1%
Bloc Quebecois	12.3%
Other	1.9%

Ottawa, ONTARIO. On the surface, Paul Martin's Liberals appear poised to capture a majority government. Ominous signs and precedents suggest, however, that a minority government may be at least as likely. Anything close to the decline in the lead-up to the elections of 1997 and 2000 would steer the Liberal Party of Canada into minority territory. Most Canadians also believe a minority Liberal government is in store, and most prefer Paul Martin to defer an election and govern for a while.

OVERVIEW:

EKOS President Frank Graves offered these views on the findings: "Paul Martin's Liberals are poised precariously to cross a cellophane bridge to a majority government; the destination is in view and achievable; the path, however, is highly risky."

To go or not go?

With confidence in the country and the economy remaining robust, Mr. Graves suggests that, "recent events seem to be reinforcing Paul Martin's interest in an early election." Indeed, Graves notes, "voter support for Paul Martin is stable, the CPC is stalled and Paul Martin still enjoys a large advantage on most leadership issues." Moreover, Mr. Graves underlined, "the public overwhelmingly want to hear about social programs and the economy, rather than ethics and taxes; issues on which Paul Martin's Liberals currently enjoy a major advantage."

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“Despite these auspicious signs for Paul Martin,” warns Mr. Graves, “the turbulent political environment also reveals daunting risks: confidence in the direction of the federal government is at a recent historical low, Paul Martin’s leadership advantage is seriously diminished from a year ago, and he only has a modest advantage on key areas such as empathy for citizens.” Furthermore, Graves continues, “the regional patterns are challenging for Paul Martin’s Liberals, particularly in Quebec, where Liberal fortunes are down drastically, and in Ontario, where the race has suddenly become considerably more competitive. The biggest exposure lies in one of the areas Paul Martin has focused on in recent months - ethics.”

What are the current effects of the sponsorship affair?

“The overall bugbear for the Liberals continues to be the sponsorship spectre,” states Graves. He goes on to say that, “the survey clearly demonstrates the profoundly corrosive effects of this issue on Paul Martin and his party. Indeed, awareness of the issue has been rising, as has the incidence of those dismissing the Liberals in the next election. Somewhat ominously, it is the LPC supporters that are least aware, which suggest the potential for further erosion.”

Mr. Graves explains that, “ironically, raising the volume on ethics appears to have damaged Paul Martin, and the public are increasingly fatigued with the issue – particularly Quebeckers, who are most upset and most aware.” As the survey shows, only a small and declining minority of Canadians want ethics to be the master issue in the next election. Graves cautions that, “Paul Martin would be well advised to focus on positive themes around health, social issues and the economy, instead of ethics where Stephen Harper and the CPC enjoy an overwhelming advantage.”

Where does this leave the other parties?

Despite performing very well on ethics and vaulting himself into plausibility in the role of Prime Minister, Mr. Graves says that, “Stephen Harper and the CPC have stalled somewhat and have fallen well short of an efficient conversion of erstwhile PC and CA votes. Their key exposed flank is the very issues Canadians are most concerned about – social issues like health and education.”

In terms of NDP fortunes, Graves suggests that, “Jack Layton and his party are a rogue factor.” Currently performing better than in the past and lining up well on the array of key electoral concerns, Mr. Graves states that, “the NDP have failed to move forward.” However, as Graves points out, “they are first as ‘second choice’ and could be a formidable force in the next Parliament; doubly so if Canadians are correct and we do see a Liberal minority government.”

As for the BQ, Graves had this to say: “Gilles Duceppe and the BQ have reawakened from a near-death experience and now lead in Quebec. However, Quebec is highly volatile and the LPC actually outperforms the BQ on most electoral issues tested.” Graves continued, “The challenge for the LPC will be to recapture Quebeckers recently eroded confidence in the federal government, confidence which was rooted in positions on Kyoto and Iraq. The evidence suggest that this could be achieved by refocusing on their sizable areas of competitive strength and downplaying the ethics issues – the area in which Quebeckers are least interested in talking about in the coming campaign.”

HIGHLIGHTS:

Outlook on Government and Economy

Satisfaction with direction of federal government is mired in a recent historical low. Once again, Canadians are significantly more confident in the broader direction of the country than in the direction of government. This rupture of national and federal confidence is unusual.

- Quebec has moved from being *most* happy with federal government direction six months ago to *least* confident by a broad margin, making Quebec the most troublesome area of erosion for the new Paul Martin government.
 - This drop in federal support is reflected in parallel decline in LPC fortunes in Quebec. Notably, a terrible rating of the provincial Liberals in Quebec is also reinforcing this problem for Paul Martin.
 - This precipitous decline in Quebec is clearly linked to the sponsorship issue which, 1) registers highest in with residents of this province, 2) is most strenuously damned and 3) is the least preferred topic for the impending election (eight per cent in Quebec vs. 26 per cent in Alberta).
 - All in all, Quebec looks very challenging for the Liberals and the BQ now lead 52 to 35 for the Liberals.

Economic confidence (both in the short- and long-term) is strong and stable. This is linked to support for the incumbent government and should work in Paul Martin's favour.

Sponsorship Continues to Plague Government

Awareness remains exceptionally high (more so amongst key/active voting groups) and notably in Quebec (85 per cent of residents registering awareness). Perceptions of "scandal" continue to be seen as typical of other scandals (47 per cent), but there is a clear drift to a more negative view.

- More airing of scandal = more awareness = more negativity
- BUT, Canadians are also taking comfort in that the facts are coming out.
- While nearly half of voters claim to have precluded a Liberal vote in the next election, 19 per cent of those go on to say they will vote LPC.
- Most disturbingly for Liberals, however, is that approximately a third of voters for the LPC in 2000 now say they won't vote Liberal.

Current Voting Intentions Would Sustain a Majority, but Precedents and Fundamentals Suggest a Less Positive Outcome for the Liberals

Voting intentions look somewhat more promising than the underlying fundamentals. Current numbers appear to provide a Liberal majority, but there is contradictory evidence in poll, suggesting that there is considerable instability and perhaps a superficial attachment to the LPC. Notably, however, there is some evidence that the bleeding has stopped.

Most continue to predict a LPC-Paul Martin government, but increasingly the perception is that it will be a minority (by a margin of 2:1). In both 1997 and 2000, the LPC dropped 10 points from pre-campaign to Election Day – a similar drop in current numbers would produce a bare minority government or opposition status for the Liberals. The public is often right on this and, in this case, the minority status likely reflects a “just outcome” in the public’s mind. In terms of election timing, the public is clearly urging Paul Martin to wait and govern instead of going and getting a new mandate (also by a margin of 2:1).

There is some evidence of “ethics fatigue” with only 14 per cent wanting this to be the central framing issue of the next election. Social issues (health care and education) continue to dominate and the economy (jobs and growth) is rising in issue priority.

- Quebec continues to have lowest appetite for an **ethics** campaign – the CPC is regarded as the party best able to address this issue.
- Liberals enjoy a solid advantage over all parties on **managing the economy** (42:17 for their closest rival, the CPC)
- Liberals lead on **social issues**. Interestingly, “don’t know” answers are high on this master issue, reflecting public skepticism about all parties here.
- Liberals top pick for **fiscal issues** as well.

Bottom line: Liberals lead on socials issues and economy and trail badly on ethics.

Leadership:

As choice for “best Prime Minister”, Paul Martin continues to enjoy a sizable, but dramatically reduced lead over Stephen Harper, his closest competitor (from a more than 10 time advantage in May 2003 to just over a two time advantage in April 2004). Paul Martin also enjoys favourable ratings over the other federal leaders in several areas. He is considered the *most decisive* (by a margin of 2:1 over Stephen Harper), and is believed to have the *best vision* for the country. He is also considered the *most empathetic*, but his advantage on this is less impressive (27 per cent compared to 19 per cent for Stephen Harper and 18 per cent for Jack Layton).

METHODOLOGY:

These data are based on telephone interviews conducted April 26-28, 2004 with a random sample of 1,326 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.