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Election call a Martin mistake

Vote timing could doom his team

[JAMES TRAVERS](#)

Ottawa - Paul Martin considered and then rejected an option to delay for a year an election that now threatens the ruling party's grip on power.

In what may well prove a fatal political error, the Prime Minister chose instead to ask the country for a mandate strong enough to implement a sweeping agenda topped by health care.

But just nine days into the campaign, Liberal hopes for a fourth consecutive majority are fading fast towards a minority - or even worse - as voters question both the ruling party's commitment to reform and this Prime Minister's ability to govern.

Those issues and the danger they pose to Liberals jump out of an EKOS Research poll published Friday and Saturday in the Star.

Despite Martin's frenetic efforts to distance himself and his team from a scandal inherited from Jean Chrétien, voters still see Liberals as the patient, not the doctor, when they look at accountability and ethics.

Worse still, perilously close to a majority think Martin has not yet shown he deserves to be prime minister.

Even more think that 11 years of Liberal rule is enough and would like nothing better on June 28 than a minority government.

Addressing those concerns would have been Martin's first political priority had Liberals opted to postpone the election until next spring.

In fact, it was the opportunity to demonstrate squeaky-clean ethics and administrative competence that made that option most attractive.

Along with giving voter anger time to fade, a year-long delay would have provided answers to the most pressing questions about the sponsorship scandal. Martin promised Canadians would have some of those answers before going to the polls but relatively little is now known about the scheme's purpose or whom it ultimately benefited.

Martin would have also used the delay to bring his national vision into sharper focus with specific policies. Now Liberals are struggling uphill along the campaign trail where they are being attacked for making costly promises that weren't included in Finance Minister Ralph Goodale's carefully innocuous March budget. Health care is at the centre of both that skepticism and Martin's decision to call an early election.

While health care stands alone as the country's primary concern, voters are keenly aware the Liberals have campaigned on the issue before only to continue to bicker with the provinces once safely back in power.

Worried that Canadians might not suspend their disbelief one more time, Martin thought hard about trying to reach

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a medicare agreement before an election. Eventually his experience with difficult federal-provincial negotiations convinced him that a prime minister without a mandate had little chance of success.

Insiders say that was the tipping point in Martin's election decision. But there were other considerations. In the months leading up to the election, Liberals reached a number of conclusions. The most disturbing of those was that despite a comfortable majority, they were poorly positioned to rule. An internal transition made slow and awkward by warring Liberal factions, a House of Commons consumed by partisan politics and the decision by dozens of caucus members not to run again all made prolonging the government's life problematic.

Even so, the risks of facing angry voters in an election without a defining issue were high enough for Martin and his advisers to consider radical solutions. They eyed shaking up an obviously weak five-month-old administration, injecting fresh legislation into a moribund Parliament and toyed with challenging tradition by including new-blood candidates into caucus meetings, a preserve elected members guard jealously.

After the usual freewheeling debate that characterizes Martin's decision-making process, the conclusion was reached to go to the people rather than try to impose discipline and purpose on this Parliament. Financial commitments for health care and other priorities were pulled out of the budget to keep them for the campaign and parish-pump promises trumped policy as Martin toured the country preparing the ground for the coming campaign.

Voters will ultimately determine the wisdom of that strategy. But with the election just over a week old, it's painfully obvious that the seeds Liberals planted in the pre-election period are now struggling to survive.

Health care is the dominant issue but not an issue that is the Liberals' alone. Stephen Harper isn't nearly as scary to voters as the prospect of another scandal-prone majority government. And in the heat and cynicism of an election campaign, Liberals have yet to find any effective means of addressing doubts about Martin's competence.

Like so many other governments that opted for early elections, the ruling party, its record and its leadership are now the issue. Unless voters find more to like about Liberals and this Prime Minister, Martin's moment at the apogee of federal politics promises to be cruelly short. There's no guarantee postponing this election would alter that outcome. But in politics time is precious and between last winter and next spring Martin could have used it to his advantage. He could have imposed impeccable ethical standards while waiting for the covers to be pulled back on scandal and he could have governed.

Instead, he and the Liberals are now off the high board and plunging towards an electoral pool that daily looks increasingly like a damp sponge. Having made the decision to dive, he can now only hope his entry won't be a painful belly flop.

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