

## Politics apparently was on the menu at holiday dinners

### CAMPAIGN DECODER

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OTTAWA—The election campaign didn't disappear over the holidays; it just changed location — from the hustings to living rooms across the nation.

The evidence of that is turning up in new polls, most notably in yesterday's *Toronto Star/La Presse/EKOS* survey, showing the Conservatives with a sudden six-percentage-point lead nationally over the Liberals.

Nothing really momentous has happened in the few days since the parties kicked off the second half of the extra-long campaign for the Jan. 23 vote.

Prime Minister Paul Martin has laid out his "values" statement, Conservative Leader Stephen Harper has issued his five priorities and NDP Leader Jack Layton has reinforced his bid to widen the race beyond a Liberal-Tory contest.

Beyond these developments, there have been a few tussles to occupy the same policy terrain on health care and immigration.

So if there's sudden movement in the polls, if votes are getting "unparked," it may well be a result of serious reflection among the electorate over the Christmas and New Year's break.

Nik Nanos, head of SES Research, has also been tracking interesting changes in polling numbers over the past couple of weeks, while the campaign was supposed to be dormant.

Nanos started to see the numbers lurch to life immediately after the Dec. 28 announcement of an RCMP investigation into alleged Liberal leaks to the financial markets. The leaks being investigated are purported to have come from Finance Minister Ralph Goodale's office in the hours before he made an announcement regarding taxation of dividends and income trusts.

According to Nanos, the holiday break actually amplified the bad-news development for the Liberals. Though some strategists would assume that people would be too busy with the holidays to pay attention to news, Nanos thinks that family and social gatherings in fact served as a powerful Petri dish for campaign developments.

Why? Because word of mouth is a powerful tool in the marketing arsenal. Rather than getting their opinions solely through the media, busy people had a chance to take a longer look at the news and talk it over with friends and family.

"Having a holiday in the middle of a campaign provides the unique chance for family and friends to gather and talk about what is happening politically," Nanos says. "Corporate research shows that word-of-mouth opinions have a great impact on consumer behaviour. I don't think one can

underestimate the impact of friends, parents, siblings and neighbours on voting behaviour."

So much, then, for the notion that politics took a holiday. Canadians sat around and talked to each other, and now they're talking to the pollsters.

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