

Voters cozy up to Harper as PM

Tories solidify their lead over Liberals Martin behind by 9 percentage points

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Canadians are becoming more comfortable with the idea of Stephen Harper as prime minister, a new *Toronto Star* poll suggests.

The EKOS Research Associates poll shows the Conservatives have solidified their lead over the Liberals with just 10 days to go before the Jan. 23 election.

EKOS president Frank Graves said Canadians believe Prime Minister Paul Martin lost the two leadership debates earlier this week, "but that may be a symptom of the Liberals' woes rather than its cause."

Graves said the lead the Tories established before the debates Monday and Tuesday night "persisted all week. The electorate seems more and more comfortable with the prospect of Harper as prime minister."

Today's poll gives the Conservatives 37.6 per cent of the decided vote, the Liberals 28.3 per cent, the NDP 18.1 per cent, the Bloc Québécois 11.6 per cent and the Green party 3.7 per cent.

EKOS interviewed 2,045 Canadians 18 and older for the *Star* and *La Presse* on Tuesday, Wednesday and yesterday. Results from a sample of that size are considered accurate to within 2.2 percentage points 19 times out of 20. About 8.5 per cent of voters remain undecided, the poll showed.

Graves said: "There will have to be some new factor in play to change the dynamic, unless the new Liberal ads turn out to be more effective with voters than their media reviews predict.

"Can they (the Liberals) still win? It's possible. But the race is now the Tories' to lose and their game looks pretty sound."

Some Liberals are clinging to the belief the party can come back the way it did in the 2004 election, when the Tories pulled ahead mid-campaign. Many soft NDP supporters fled to the Liberals because of a fear of a Harper right-wing agenda.

After a *Toronto Star*/EKOS poll showed the Conservatives slightly ahead, Harper declared on June 17, 2004 — 11 days before the election — that he could win a majority government.

Two days later, the Tories were only two points ahead of the Liberals, and the *Star* headline read: "Neck and Neck."

The Tory slide continued and by June 26, two days before the election, an EKOS poll showed the Liberals back on top, 32.6 per cent compared to the Tories' 31.8 per cent.

The Liberals won with 36.7 per cent of the vote, compared to the Tories' 29.6 per cent. The final

numbers in 2004 resulted in a minority government, with the Liberals winning 135 of the 308 seats in the House of Commons. The Tories won 99, the Bloc Québécois 54 and the NDP 19. There was one independent MP, Chuck Cadman.

But this year, many Liberals are conceding that it may be impossible to come back. Harper has run a nearly mistake-free campaign with a popular cut in the GST as the centrepiece of his platform, and some Liberal party insiders believe that the mood for change is just too strong to overcome.

Graves backed that up in his poll. "Although the voter volatility of the last two weeks, as well as the Liberals' successful fight-back from behind in the 2004 election may give them some reason for hope, they face a daunting challenge.

"Paul Martin, once the strongest element in their appeal, is a diminishing asset," Graves said. "He now trails Stephen Harper as the leader with the most positive vision for the future. The aversion to Martin in Quebec ... is especially profound." Just 10 days ago, Graves said, Canadians believed by a wide margin that the Liberals would be re-elected.

"Now a sizeable majority say it is the Tories who will probably win," he said.

Graves added that "recently converted" Tory supporters express a high level of confidence that their minds are made up.

"If Paul Martin and the Liberals are not able to disrupt this pattern in the next few days, the only remaining question will be whether it is a Conservative minority or Conservative majority on election night."

Graves said "we now see Ontario falling into the Conservative column for the first time. The Tories, based on tonight's tracking numbers, seem set for major gains of seats in the province."

In the 2004 election, the Liberals won 75 seats in Ontario, the Tories 24 and the NDP 7.

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