

Bet on Tory minority

Stephen Harper's Conservatives look poised to topple Paul Martin's Liberals

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ROBERT BENZIE
STAFF REPORTER

Conservative Leader Stephen Harper is in the driver's seat headed for 24 Sussex Dr., a new *Toronto Star* poll suggests.

But the EKOS Research Associates survey conducted for the *Star* and *La Presse* shows that though the Conservatives look poised to topple the Liberals, voters may only give Harper the test drive of a minority government in Monday's election.

Nationally, the Tories enjoy the support of 37.1 per cent of decided voters compared with 26.9 per cent for Paul Martin's Liberals, 19.5 per cent for the New Democrats of Jack Layton, 11.5 for the Bloc Québécois led by Gilles Duceppe and 4.6 for the Green Party led by Jim Harris. The undecided vote stood at 16 per cent.

The Conservatives have achieved success by increasing their support among older voters, men and more affluent Canadians, EKOS president Frank Graves said yesterday.

"The real story here is largely one of demographics and the intersection of values and interests with some of Canada's key groups of voters," Graves said.

Campaign pledges on issues like crime and government ethics, as well as economic pledges like eliminating the capital gains tax on proceeds that are reinvested within six months have appealed to these voters, he said.

As well, he added, the Conservatives have presented a more moderate stance and this has made many voters more comfortable with choosing them.

"The electorate have collectively decided that ... we gave Paul Martin the keys to the car with some limitations in 2004. We weren't satisfied with the performance. Now we're going to try the same thing



CHARLA JONES/TORONTO STAR
Stephen Harper made his last pitch in Windsor this morning.

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with Stephen Harper," Graves said.

Harper, 46, will be assuming power at a time when Canadians acknowledge a profound sense of progress and economic security, but have been increasingly gloomy about whether these achievements will continue, much less be enjoyed by the next generation, Graves added.

When the election was called in November, the 308-member Commons consisted of 133 Liberal MPs, 98 Tories, 53 Bloc Québécois, 18 New Democrats and four independents. There were two vacancies.

"I think you're going to find Canadians giving Stephen Harper a very similar sized mandate and a test drive to see if he can do better. And then they'll decide if they want to go with someone on a more carte blanche basis," Graves said.

"The possibility of a Conservative majority government — which is fine with some groups (because about 30 per cent of Canadians say it's the best outcome — came into sharper focus and some Canadians blanched. They went, 'a minority maybe, but I wasn't thinking we'd give these guys the keys to the car with no controls whatsoever,'" he said.

"They want to see a little period where they demonstrate with some controls what they can do."

For the national results, EKOS surveyed 2,313 Canadians 18 and over from Wednesday until last night and the results are considered accurate to within 2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

'We gave Paul Martin the keys to the car with some limitations in 2004. Now we're going to try the same thing with Stephen Harper'

Frank Graves, EKOS president

In Ontario, home to 106 seats and the Liberals' electoral stronghold since 1993, the Tories are in a statistical dead heat with the governing party.

EKOS interviewed 967 people in Ontario and found 35.8 per cent support for the Tories, 33.4 for the Liberals, 24.3 for the NDP, and 6.3 per cent for the Greens.

The percentage of undecided was 14.3. The results are considered accurate to within 3.2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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

"Certainly there's a scenario where the Conservatives still pull out a majority and there's actually a scenario where the Liberals can end up maybe losing the popular vote slightly and pulling out a plurality of seats. It's in play," noted Graves.

"It's not a good bet, but it's a possibility. Frankly, if Ontario moved the same way it did last time from here on in, Liberals end up with a tie or more seats. It's not outside the realm of possibility — it happened last time," he said.

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"Clearly, there's an expectation and preference for some form of Conservative government right now."

In Quebec, EKOS surveyed 618 people, where they found the separatist Bloc has 50.2 per cent support, the Tories 24.5 per cent, the Liberals 12.7 per cent, the NDP 7.9 per cent and the Greens 3.4 per cent. The percentage of undecided was 21.3.

The Quebec numbers are accurate to within 3.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Eighteen months ago, the Liberals won 21 seats in Quebec and the Bloc 54 seats. The Tories and New Democrats were shut out.

Graves credited "a masterful campaign" by the Tories for their showing. Harper's key promises of immediately cutting the GST from 7 per cent to 6 per cent — and eventually to 5 per cent within five years — and \$1,200 per child annual baby bonus cheques for parents of children 6 and under have proved popular vote grabbers.

"We went into a situation where both the expectation and the preference was for a Liberal government. This is one of those campaigns that really did make a difference," said the pollster.

It could be late Monday night before Harper knows for sure whether he will be residing at the prime minister's official residence.

British Columbia continues to be the most hotly contested province in the country with the Liberals, Tories and NDP running a three-way race for the province's 36 seats.

In the last election, the Tories won 22 seats in B.C., the Liberals eight seats and the NDP five seats. There was one independent.

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