

May 29, 2004. 01:00 AM

Voters doubting Martin's leadership

49% say he hasn't shown he deserves top job, poll says But PM seen as more likely to

fulfill promises

SUSAN DELACOURT
OTTAWA BUREAU CHIEF

OTTAWA—Canadian voters have more doubts about Prime Minister Paul Martin's leadership than they do about the agendas of either of his main rivals, says a new Toronto Star poll.

A full 49 per cent of respondents to the poll by EKOS Research Associates for the Star and La Presse said Martin had not shown he deserves to be prime minister.

Far fewer had serious doubts about Conservative Leader Stephen Harper's agenda and even fewer believed that NDP Leader Jack Layton would wreak economic disaster on the nation, as his critics often warn.

The results poke gaping holes in the governing Liberals' campaign strategy, which is built around capitalizing on Martin's perceived superiority in this area, while trying to scare voters away from either the Conservative or New Democratic Party leaders.

The poll, carried out this week in 1,306 telephone interviews with Canadians 18 years of age or older, is considered accurate within 2.7 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Doubts about Martin's leadership skills are rampant, even though he has been seen as prime-minister-in-waiting for many years and has been Prime Minister in fact since Dec. 12.

When respondents were read this sentence: "I don't think Paul Martin has shown that he deserves to be prime minister of Canada," almost half — 49 per cent — said they agreed. Only 29 per cent disagreed, and 19 per cent said they neither agreed nor disagreed.

That result came even though Martin ranked higher in the poll in terms of offering a positive vision for the future and being likely to fulfill promises.

In defiance of dire Liberal warnings about Harper's plans for Canada, only 36 per cent of respondents said they would agree with this statement: "I have serious doubts about Stephen Harper's real agenda."

And even fewer, 30 per cent, said they agreed that Layton would "spend the country into bankruptcy" if he was elected prime minister.

"There's no general fear or anxiety about either of these leaders," says Frank Graves, president of EKOS Research Associates.



RICK MADONIK/TORONTO STAR
Paul Martin joins Jarome Iginla, left, and other Flames in their Calgary dressing room yesterday. Martin, Stephen Harper and Jack Layton back Calgary in the Stanley Cup finals but Bloc Leader Gilles Duceppe is going for Tampa Bay - on the account of their Quebecois talent.

STAR COLUMNISTS

- > [Miro Cernetig](#)
- > [Graham Fraser](#)
- > [Richard Gwyn](#)
- > [Stephen Handelman](#)
- > [Chantal Hebert](#)
- > [James Travers](#)
- > [Ian Urquhart](#)
- > [Thomas Walkom](#)

As well, Graves says, the results show that Canadians are skeptical of Martin's claims to be putting a new face on a Liberal government that has been in power for the past 11 years.

"I don't think he's seen as change anymore," Graves says.

Canadians seem down on the idea of leadership altogether, in fact, telling EKOS that "none of the above" is the most honest leader in the country right now. Martin scored just 23 per cent when respondents were asked who they most trusted to do what they had promised with Harper at 17 per cent and Layton with 13 per cent. More people — 26 per cent of the interviewees — simply said none of those leaders could be trusted.

This is in part a legacy of the recent Ontario budget, Graves says, which he has been calling the most unpopular budget in contemporary political history.

Overall, the poll shows Liberals have 38 per cent support among decided voters, with the Conservatives at 30.4, the NDP at 18 and the Bloc Québécois at 10.7.

'I don't think he's seen as change anymore.'

Franks Graves, Ekkos

The desire for change is massive, with 59 per cent of respondents agreeing "the country needs a new ruling party in Ottawa." Liberals, naturally, were least likely to agree with this sentiment, with only 28 per cent hungering for change.

The fervour is naturally coming from voters who support other parties — 87 per cent of Conservatives and 72 per cent of New Democrats want a new party in government. More than half of the people still undecided — 53 per cent — want a new ruling party too.

Voters seem "somewhat cynical" about the potential result of the June 28 vote, Graves notes, but almost half of the respondents, 48 per cent, said they thought it would make a difference who gets elected.

And 42 per cent said they agreed this election "will be one of the most important in Canada's history." Martin, 65, has been saying this for some time now, only to be greeted with scepticism, especially among pundits and Liberal critics.

Ironically though, as Graves points out, "the people who agree with Martin that this will be one of the most important elections are not the people who intend to vote for him."

Indeed, 48 per cent of Conservative voters, 51 per cent of New Democrats and 41 per cent of undecided voters regard this election as historically crucial while only 39 per cent of Liberals see it that way.

All of these results together paint a bleak picture for Martin and his Liberals even before one week has passed in an election campaign they chose to call. Their hopes of pitting Martin as the champion of change and renewal don't seem to be working and their bid to paint Harper, 44, and Layton, 53, in a bad light are falling on mostly deaf ears. Moreover, the ruling party seems to be on the wrong side of the mood for change.

But Graves says there are some glimpses of hope for Martin in a mostly gloomy poll.

"The current hurdles or roadblocks for the Liberals are substantial."

But, he says, Martin is "still seen as articulating the most positive vision for Canada and ranks as the leader most trusted to follow through with election promises."

More than half those polled — 51 per cent — identified health care as the most important issue facing Canada. Overall, the Liberals had a slight edge when voters were asked which party they trusted most to handle social issues, like health care.

Canadians, apart from being highly interested in this campaign, are also keen to elect a government that puts the country's best interests ahead of pandering to voters' values or self-interest. More than half of respondents — 52 per cent — said they would be most likely to vote for a party that will be best for the country, while 23 per cent said they would be looking for one closest to their personal values and only 18 per cent said they were looking for a party that was tailoring its actions to "act most in your interest."

Graves sees this as an appetite for bigger thinking and vision. Liberal and Conservative supporters seem especially keen on this approach, while New Democrats put more weight on politics of personal values.

Sixty-one per cent of Liberals and 52 per cent of Conservative supporters said they wanted a party that would be best for the country, while 35 per cent of New Democrats and 34 per cent of Bloc supporters were looking for personal values.

"This result might discipline Martin and his guys into coming up with a positive agenda, with some vision and energy," Graves said.

The Liberals held 168 seats in the Commons when Martin called the election. The Conservatives held 72, the Bloc 33, and the NDP 14.

There were 10 independents and four vacancies.

> [**Pay less than \\$3 per week for 7 day home delivery.**](#)

[FAQs](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [My Subscription](#)

[Home](#) | [GTA](#) | [Business](#) | [Waymoresports](#) | [A&E](#) | [Life](#)

Legal Notice: Copyright Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. All rights reserved. Distribution, transmission or republication of any material from www.thestar.com is strictly prohibited without the prior written permission of Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. For information please contact us using our [webmaster form](#). www.thestar.com online since 1996.