



NEWS RELEASE

Harpermania? Well, What Else to Call It? *Conservatives Nearing Majority Territory on Strength of Harper's National Vision* Liberals in Crisis with Volatile Electorate in Ontario and Quebec

Stephen Harper's Conservatives have sailed into majority government territory after a stunning week of rising popularity, principally at the expense of the Liberal Party nationwide, and of the Bloc Québécois in Quebec.

"This is the breakthrough Harper has been waiting for," said EKOS President Frank Graves. "The Conservatives' gains are nationwide, but their most significant growth is in Ontario, where they have surpassed the Liberals in their traditional heartland, and in Quebec, where they are now vying with the Liberals as the leading federalist alternative to the Bloc Québécois."

The electorate is volatile, moving rapidly from the pattern established early in the campaign, but not yet settled securely into a new one.

The Conservatives' gains appear to reflect, at least in part, Harper's success in renovating his personal image over the early part of the campaign. Since he became Conservative leader, he has trailed Paul Martin in most measures of public esteem. Last week, an EKOS poll found, for the first time, that he had outstripped Martin in the area of "positive vision" for the future. Harper's reputation in this area continues to grow – likely a response to the Conservatives' steady stream of policy positions. Meanwhile, Martin's rating has continued to slip.

The Tory growth in Quebec is especially astonishing. It potentially heralds the return of the Conservatives as a truly national party. However, Tory gains in the province, which started last week at the expense of the BQ, and are now eating into Liberal support, are inherently fragile. Harper is likely to be subjected to an intensity of media interest in the province that he has never experienced before. That could push him and his party even higher in the province, or it might lead some current Tory supporters to have second thoughts.

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The wild card in the campaign now is how Canadians will react when they realize that a Harper government is increasingly likely, and that a Harper majority government is also a serious prospect. Canadians are still digesting the news of the recent Tory gains, and many continue to believe that the Liberal Party is chugging towards a fifth consecutive mandate.

“What happens when Canadians fully realize the Conservatives’ current potential?” asked Graves. “Will there be a bandwagon effect, as there was for Brian Mulroney in the 1984 campaign after he surged into the lead? Or will Harper succumb to a whiplash as he did in 2004, with many voters recoiling from the prospect of a Tory victory after a furious Liberal onslaught in the last two weeks of the campaign?”

Methodology

These data are based on telephone interviews conducted January 7 to 9, 2006 with a random sample of 1415 Canadians aged 18 and over. A sample of this size provides a margin of error of +/- 2.6 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The margin of error increases when the results are sub-divided (i.e., error margins for sub-groups such as regions).

All the data were statistically weighted to ensure the sample’s regional, gender and age composition reflects that of the actual population of Canada according to Census data.