



NEWS RELEASE

BELINDA BOUNCE? WIDENING LIBERAL LEAD AS TORIES STALL (GAP WIDENS IN ONTARIO)

May 19, 2005

National Federal Voting Intentions (overall n=1704)	
Liberal Party of Canada	34.7
Conservative Party of Canada	28.3
New Democratic Party	18.4
Bloc Quebecois	12.6
Green Party	5.6
Other	0.5

Interviews conducted May 13 to 17, 2005

The Top Line

The federal Liberals have consolidated and widened their lead over the Conservatives in the run-up to a possible federal election. The Conservatives have conspicuously failed to further capitalize on the political ammunition emanating from the Gomery Inquiry. Moreover, the recent defection of Belinda Stronach appears to have reinforced this trend and deepened the Conservatives difficulties in the crucial Ontario arena.

"Despite an auspicious political climate, the Conservatives have not only failed to advance but have retreated to their core constituency in recent weeks," said Frank Graves, President of EKOS Research Associates. "All this paints a considerably darker picture of Conservative prospects than appeared a month ago." Notably, the political landscape looks remarkably similar today to last year's election. Virtually all of the parties are within the statistical margin of error of the results they achieved in last year's election. "All this storm and fury and its déjà vu over again," said Graves, "No wonder voters are flummoxed."

If these current numbers were to continue, the Liberals would likely form another minority government, Graves said. But, he warned that, given the turbulence in the polls, and the contradictory forces confronting voters, a prediction of an as yet hypothetical election is highly speculative. Even the night-to-night movement within the polling period paints a picture of an unsettled and turbulent electorate reluctantly confronting an unwanted election with no clear preferences.

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The poll also demonstrated once again that Canadians strenuously oppose an early election, though the number of those who do support going to the polls immediately has risen somewhat in recent weeks.

“The Conservative leader, Stephen Harper could still arrive at the same conclusion that the public have – an immediate election is neither wanted nor likely to produce anything demonstrably different or better than the current Parliament,” Graves said. Conservative enthusiasm for an election may be dampened by the fact that they are actually trailing their election performance of last year (and pre-election final polls).

There is no compelling evidence that either the Liberals or the Conservatives are clearly positioned to improve on the results of 2004. This may well underlie continued public resistance to another costly election, which may well reproduce the same basic Parliament we have now. This may also explain rising public enthusiasm for majority stability.

The Belinda Stronach Effect?

The news that MP Belinda Stronach had left the federal Conservative party to join the Liberal government of Paul Martin hit Canadians with a wallop. Polling conducted the evening of Ms. Stronach's dramatic announcement showed that more than two-thirds of Canadians were aware of the event (most “clearly” aware). This dramatic move has produced mixed public reviews, but the early evidence suggests this may reinforce favourable trends for the Liberals and have a deleterious impact on the Conservatives already flagging prospects in Ontario.

Slightly more Canadians said they supported Ms. Stronach's move than opposed it. However, the split was clearly along party lines. Those intending to vote Liberal overwhelmingly supported her decision and NDP-leaning voters also tended to back her by a significant margin. Conservative supporters overwhelmingly disapproved of her decision and Bloc Quebecois supporters also said they disapproved.

Most Canadians say that Ms. Stronach's move will not affect their likelihood to support the Liberals in the next election. However, her change of parties seems to have shifted the public's expectations in one important respect: respondents were much more likely to say they expect a Liberal victory in the next election after Ms. Stronach's move than they had been in the days leading up to it. Moreover, many other key indicators, including vote intention and trust improved for the Liberals and weakened for the Conservatives, particularly in Ontario where the Liberals now enjoy a 15-point lead.

Trust: Duceppe and Layton the easy winners over Martin and Harper

In terms of trust, the two likeliest candidates to be Prime Minister after an election, Paul Martin and Stephen Harper, trail the leaders of the smaller parties. The NDP's Jack Layton is the most trusted leader in English Canada and Gilles Duceppe is the most trusted leader in Quebec by a runaway margin. For both Mr. Layton and Mr. Duceppe, these are remarkable improvements.

Belinda Stronach's defection to the Liberal Party has done little to her trust ratings, which remain unremarkable at this time. However, it is noteworthy that Stephen Harper's trust levels were somewhat lower after Belinda Stronach's dramatic move.

Nationally, Paul Martin and Stephen Harper receive, at best, tepid trust ratings from the Canadian public. For Mr. Martin, this is a dramatic descent from his status as Canada's most trusted politician by far when he took office as Prime Minister a year and a half ago. Although Mr. Harper is not producing high levels of trust, his numbers are much better than they were when he first became leader of the Conservatives (and even compared to the lead up to last year's election).

There are significant regional variations in the levels of trust accorded the leaders. While Paul Martin does better in British Columbia, Ontario and Atlantic Canada, Stephen Harper is more trusted in Alberta, the Prairies, and Quebec. Overall, however, close to half of Canadians are saying they have a low level of trust in each man. That compares with less than a third who say they have higher levels of trust in either leader.

The most dramatic shifts have occurred in Quebec, where Paul Martin has precipitously declined, while Gilles Duceppe, Jack Layton, and Stephen Harper have all enjoyed profound improvements.

Expecting Minority but Thirsting for Stability

"Most Canadians expect a minority government to emerge from the next election," said Graves, "and by and large they don't like the prospect." Like 2004, the overwhelming majority of Canadians expect a minority government, but unlike 2004, whatever their expectations, by a decisive margin they would prefer to see a majority. Moreover, by more than two-to-one Canadians say that if there were a minority government again, they would like to see a formal alliance among some of the parties to ensure stability in Ottawa. "This is especially interesting because in our last poll, less than a month ago, we found that Canadians have a huge preference for a Liberal/NDP alliance over a Conservative/Bloc Québécois grouping," said Graves.

The thirst for stability can also be seen in the strong majority that back a change to fixed elections every four years. This new desire for stability, coupled with the relative attraction/repulsion of various party alliances, may well be a crucial political force for the foreseeable future.

Elevated Ceiling for the NDP?

In addition to the positive trust numbers enjoyed by Jack Layton outside Quebec, the NDP has something else to cheer about. Although the party is only marginally stronger in this poll than it was in the election last year, the NDP is far and away the most popular party as a second choice.

"The NDP now has the highest theoretical ceiling, combining the first and second preference," Graves said. "Apart from the Bloc Québécois, the NDP is the only party that seems like a clear winner in the present situation."

Liberals Strengthen Lead on the Issues

Canadians continue to put social issues such as health and education far ahead as their priorities in the next election. Among Canadians who rank these issues first, the Liberals are considered to have the best solutions to offer, whereas the Conservatives are last among the national parties. The cleavages by political preferences are huge. For Conservatives, “ethics” is picked as the most important election issue whereas for Liberal, NDP and Bloc supporters, social issues outstrip ethics by at least a six to one margin.

The Liberals also lead the Conservatives, though by a less dramatic margin, on the second most frequently cited group of issues, jobs and the economy. This advantage is particularly pronounced in vote rich Ontario.

This is a substantial improvement for the Liberals, who saw their support on the whole range of issues suffer badly in April in the aftermath of some of the most shocking testimony to emerge from the Gomery Inquiry. It is, however, still the case that “Liberal ethics” has become a political “oxymoron” for the public with only five per cent feeling that the Liberals are best poised to deal with ethical issues.

The Conservatives, on the other hand, lead the Liberals modestly on fiscal issues such as deficits and taxes, and dramatically on ethics and accountability. However, fewer than one in five considers either of these to be the priority issue for the campaign.

The NDP do very well on key social issues, which may be contributing to their improved lustre with voters.

Regional Differences

The Liberals have increased their lead over the Conservatives in the crucial Ontario battleground and it appears that Belinda Stronach’s move has reinforced that trend. They are also showing resilience in British Columbia and the Atlantic provinces.

The Conservatives continue to dominate in Alberta and hold an edge in the Prairies. However, they are now lagging so far back in Ontario that it puts their hopes for government in doubt.

The Bloc Québécois has a commanding lead in Quebec. The Liberals are flirting with collapse in the province. Bloc support is fuelled by outrage over Gomery and a steep erosion of confidence in the direction of the federal government and the country writ large.

METHODOLOGY:

These data are based on telephone interviews conducted May 13 to May 17, 2005 with a random sample of 1704 Canadians aged 18 and over. A sample of this size provides a margin of error of +/- 2.4 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. A somewhat restricted interview of 501 cases was conducted on May 17, 2005 after Belinda Stronach announced her move to the Liberal Party of Canada. It should be noted that 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.