



EKOS/CBC Survey – April 2009

POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

IGNATIEFF AND THE LIBERALS TAKE OFF.

Liberals take Significant Lead

[Ottawa – April 15, 2009] Under their new leader, Michael Ignatieff, the federal Liberal Party has vaulted into first place in the race towards the next election, riding renewed strength across the country with the exception of Alberta. In Quebec and Ontario, the party is rising back towards the levels it enjoyed in the 1990s. Nationally the party has a lead over the Conservatives of almost seven percentage points.

The Conservatives retain a clear lead in popular support only in Alberta. In British Columbia they appear to be in a dead heat with the Liberals. Everywhere else in English Canada the Liberals are ahead. In Ontario, they have opened up a gap of almost ten percentage points. In Quebec, where Conservative hopes for a majority once lay, they now trail badly, behind not only the Bloc Québécois, but also the Liberals and even the NDP.

Significantly, for the first time since Stephen Harper became prime minister, more Canadians think the government is headed in the wrong direction than think it is going in the right direction. In fact, also for the first time, confidence in the direction of the country is going up, while confidence in the direction of the government is going down.

As for the other parties, the NDP has slumped somewhat since the last election, though not dramatically and the BQ is faring relatively well in historic terms. However, there is a real downside risk for the NDP now, who might see voters drifting to the Liberals in the hope that they can defeat the Conservatives. The Greens remain below the level at which they might hope to win seats in parliament.

“This is a startling turnaround for the Liberals in terms of its speed, considering that Canadians went to the polls just six months ago,” said EKOS President Frank Graves. “At this level of support the Liberals would gain scores of seats in an election, would likely form a minority government, and would likely be able, if they chose to do so, to form a majority coalition with the NDP without the support of the BQ.”



"The pressures from the Liberal benches for an early election are bound to mount now, with only the fact that Canadians don't really want another election soon, and perhaps dreams of a majority, as restraints on that impulse," said Graves

Interestingly, although the Liberals are gaining in most significant demographic groups, they are doing particularly well among better-off and well-educated Canadians. While this runs the danger of ceding the "populist" appeal to the other parties, the flipside is that these groups tend to be more influential, and their opinions often trickle down to other socio-economic groups.

Although economic management during the recession (about which, more below) is certainly a factor, leadership is also playing a major role in this change. Michael Ignatieff is enjoying a sizeable "post-coronation" bounce. In part, this may be simply that he has replaced the hapless Stéphane Dion. But he is beginning to take definition in the public's mind, and in general, they like him. About a fifth of Canadians still don't express an opinion about him, but among those who do, opinions of his job performance are good: 50% positive compared with 28% negative.

In contrast, Stephen Harper's job-approval rating is dismal. Fifty-four per cent of Canadians disapprove of the job he's doing, compared with 38% who approve.

Two Universes

The poll reveals a striking polarization in Canadian politics, between Conservative supporters and adherents of the other parties. It is as if there were two political universes operating in the same political space.

"Although there's been media attention lately to Stephen Harper's supposed weakening grip on his caucus, there is no hint of this among the Tory grassroots," said Graves.

Nearly three-quarters of Conservative supporters say the country is moving in the right direction at the moment, and four-fifths say the government is moving in the right direction. Most want a government that adopts a careful approach rather than one embracing a big vision for the future, and they are getting what they want. More than nine-tenths of Conservative supporters approve of the job Stephen Harper is doing.

"This perception of the state of the country, the government, and of Harper's performance, could hardly be more different than the viewpoint of other Canadians," said Graves. "Among non-Conservatives, less than 40% think the country is moving in the right direction, and barely a fifth think the government is doing so. They want a government with a clear vision for the future and aren't getting it. And among non-Conservatives, Harper's job-approval rating is terrible."



This suggests that it is getting ever-more-difficult for the Conservatives to break out of their traditional base. Dreams of a majority are fading quickly, and hopes for a third minority also seem seriously compromised. The "Conservative universe" is not only no longer growing, it is shrinking everywhere outside Alberta – and almost to oblivion in Quebec

The Conservatives can find some solace here, however. They outperformed the expectations of many people on election day 2008, partly because they got better turnout. This was due to greater ardour among their supporters, and superior organization among their activists. Despite the suggestion that the government's embrace of neo-Keynesian fiscal policy might weaken its base, there's no sign of that here.

Indeed, if there are two universes in Canadian politics now, Stephen Harper is clearly in much better command of his universe than Michael Ignatieff is of his -- albeit larger -- universe.

The Economy

Canadians are surprisingly upbeat about their personal prospects in this recession. Expectations of losing a job are actually falling – the continuation of a trend that began in the mid-1990s.

"In part, this reflects the reality that unemployment has not yet risen the way it did in the 1990s," said Graves. "On the other hand, it may be that the bitter realities of this recession have yet to sink in outside of those communities already hard hit by unemployment, in the auto and resource sectors, for example."

Just over a quarter of Canadians say they are adjusting their retirement plans. Not surprisingly, the group most likely to say this are those who would normally expect to retire in the next decade or so. Half of baby-boomers now say they expect to delay retirement. Half of seniors, meanwhile, say they are cutting back drastically on spending. In these groups there is fury at the perceived culprits behind the financial and economic meltdown.

There is plenty of blame to be spread around in this recession, but Canadians are clear where they think it deserves to be placed. Nearly half say that greed and incompetence in the world of business contributed most to our economic crisis. Just over a quarter blame consumers for buying things they could not afford, while just under a quarter blame poor financial oversight by governments.

Interestingly, Conservative supporters are somewhat more likely to put the responsibility on individuals and less likely to blame business.



And what about those fat executive paycheques we've been hearing about? Just 7% of Canadians say that executive pay should continue to be set by corporate boards as it is now. More than half want executive pay submitted to shareholders for their approval. And more than a third say that any executive income over a million dollars should be taxed at 90%.

However, when you turn to government policy, again, the picture for the Harper government is not encouraging. Just 31% of Canadians say that its approach to combating the recession is "sound", compared with 44% who say it is unsound. Compare that with Canadians' views of Barack Obama's approach: 54% of Canadians say his plan is sound, compare with just 18 % who say it is unsound.

Methodology

Today's poll was conducted using EKOS' unique hybrid internet-telephone research panel, PROBIT[®]. This panel is **randomly** recruited from the general population, meaning that, the only way to be included in PROBIT[®] is through random selection. Unlike opt-in internet-only research panels, PROBIT[®] supports confidence intervals and error testing.

The field dates for this survey are April 8 to April 13, 2009. In total, a random sample of 1,587 Canadians aged 18 and over responded to the survey. A sample of this size provides a margin of error of +/- 2.5 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.