



FEDERAL ELECTION 2004: THE DAY AFTER

June 29, 2004

In the wake of the results of the June 28th national election, a number of commentators have suggested that public opinion polls were “the big losers” of the campaign, having gotten the results “wrong”. Indeed, the popular support for the Liberal Party of Canada, at 36.7% was notably higher than reported in polls published as recently as two days prior to the election. EKOS President Frank Graves offers his views on this putative letdown of the polls.

“This is not a question of an outlier rogue result, but rather a case of most survey organizations offering very similar national support numbers late last week. While it is possible that some systemic bias caused all of these surveys to be wrong – and there are almost certainly some lessons to be learned here – the degree of consistency of these disparate surveys suggests that they did accurately predict voting intentions *last week*, but something changed since then.” In other words, the polls were notably right *at the time*, but they were an unreliable guide to election results because of turbulence and shifting in the electorate. **The nature and direction of this turbulence was fairly devious and that is why we predicted a Liberal minority despite final poll results that suggested a Conservative minority. Our adjustments were based on empirical evidence pointing to some last minute shifts to the Liberals.**

Graves pointed to a number of factors as likely shifting on voting intentions: “In periods of uncertainty, such as this close race, there is a natural tendency to retreat back to a position seen as safer, in this case, the Liberals. We also saw a generally negative tone towards the Conservative Party in the media, sparked by reports of MP Randy Whyte’s comments. The frankly irrational reaction to the Ontario provincial budget, which had bled away a good deal of support from the federal Liberals, also continued to temper.”

Qualitatively, EKOS was the only major national firm to accurately forecast a Liberal minority. On June 25, 2004, Frank Graves said, “*We see the Liberals ending up with somewhere in the area of 117 seats, 109 for the Conservative Party of Canada, 55 for the Bloc and 27 for the NDP. It seems like the Green Party, despite some serious examination by voters, will need to wait until next time to gain their first seat in Parliament.*”

Graves also noted that EKOS’ forecast was not a simple mathematical extrapolation of the firm’s most recent data but that adjustments were made to reflect last minute trends and differences in potential voter turnout for the various parties. As Graves explains, “The trends we highlighted did indeed prove to be accurate, with the Liberals faring well in Quebec and Ontario and the NDP vote being soft and to some extent turning Liberal.

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Ultimately this conversion was stronger than we had anticipated in Ontario which resulted in a larger minority than expected.”

On June 25th Graves said: “The most notable region remains Ontario where the Liberals have regrouped, the Conservative vote has solidified but seems to have approached a ceiling and may be contracting, and a number of late trends point in favour of the Liberals. The key potential shifts will be across the Liberal Party and a re-invigorated NDP.” — Press release, June 25, 2004

And:

“Furthermore, an important factor left to play out is the potential movement across Liberal Party-NDP support. The Conservative vote, on the other hand, appears quite stable and its growth opportunities limited. A swing portion of Liberal, NDP (and Green Party) supporters are still weighing their options and pondering where to most effectively spend their vote.” — Press release, June 25, 2004

Bottom line: Overall, we do indeed see a Liberal minority government with a strong Bloc presence (within one seat of the predicted 55). The Liberals fared somewhat better than we expected in the Atlantic and Ontario and somewhat worse in British Columbia. Overall, however, the forecast (which was explicitly different from the final poll) was correct.

EKOS seat projection from June 25, 2004 vs. actual number seats won by region on June 28, 2004

	North		BC		Alberta		Prairies		Ontario		Quebec		Atlantic		Total	
	EKOS	Actual	EKOS	Actual	EKOS	Actual	EKOS	Actual	EKOS	Actual	EKOS	Actual	EKOS	Actual	EKOS	Actual
LPC	3	3	11	8	1	2	6	4	58	75	20	21	18	22	117	135
CPC	0	0	17	22	27	26	16	20	41	24	0	0	8	7	109	99
NDP	0	0	8	5	0	0	6	4	7	7	0	0	6	3	27	19
BQ	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	55	54	0	0	55	54
Other	-	0	-	1	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	0	1
Total	3	3	36	36	28	28	28	28	106	106	75	75	32	32	308	308

Media coverage of the issue:

"We think seat projections are a mug's game," Mr. Graves said, even though his firm was closer to the mark than were the others. He would like pollsters not to publish such projections. "Plugging polling data into a seat projection model assumes the future will resemble the past, which it may, but often doesn't, and in this case spectacularly didn't," Mr. Graves said yesterday. — JEFF SALLOT, Globe and Mail, June 30, 2004

"Only EKOS Research Ltd. put the Liberals ahead in seats, giving them 117 to 109 for the Conservatives Saturday in the Star." — PETER CALAMAI, The Toronto Star, June 30, 2004

"EKOS, which conducted the largest and last major public opinion survey of more than 5,000 Canadians had correctly projected a slim Liberal minority, based on a trend toward the governing party that the firm detected as the campaign wound down." — JANNICE TIBBETS, National Post, June 30, 2004

EKOS' analysis throughout the campaign highlighted these trends:

May 28, 2004

"There are, however, some signs that Paul Martin can still turn things around. As Graves points out, "He continues to enjoy a broad advantage as best leader for the country and Canadians decisively say they want a choice which works best for the country as a whole." – Frank Graves

"The current inventory of attitudes and expectations, particularly when placed in the dynamic context of trends and momentum, suggests serious perhaps insurmountable obstacles to a majority Liberal government." – Frank Graves

May 29, 2004

"Canadians want to elect the party that will serve the interests of the entire country," Graves continued, "and they also want social issues like health and education to be the top priority. The Liberals have the advantage here and should capitalize on it." – Frank Graves

June 11, 2004

"Little has gelled; there is still substantial superficiality to current attachments, which are quite capable of profound movement." – Frank Graves

"The renaissance appears to be continuing, with the NDP well over double their support from 2000 and now appearing poised to exert considerable influence in a minority parliament." – Frank Graves

"NDP supporters are going to be carefully weighing the likely electoral outcomes before voting." – Frank Graves

June 12, 2004

"Canadians are somewhat aware that, in the rush to punish the Liberals for real and imagined sins, they may in fact be setting the country on a course inconsistent with dominant values." – Frank Graves

"Despite their dissatisfaction with the Liberals," notes Graves, "Canadians still say that, come election day, what matters to them is making a choice that will be best for the country." – Frank Graves