

Ignatieff camp dismisses poll numbers

Mistake-free convention will deliver votes, front-runner's supporters say

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Front-runner Michael Ignatieff's advisers insist they aren't worried about bad-news polls going into this week's Liberal leadership vote.

Two national surveys, including EKOS for the *Toronto Star*, have shown the Etobicoke-Lakeshore MP is stalled, with little second-ballot growth potential and a high "anybody but" factor.

But his team says it has a plan to build on a substantial lead. Ignatieff is expected to have more than 30 per cent of the first-ballot votes Friday night.

"It's like one delegate said to me today, 'We'll vote for him if he doesn't give us another reason not to,'" an Ignatieff strategist told the *Star* yesterday.

"That's our message and our goal for the convention."

No more mistakes. It's hardly an inspiring message for the star candidate who has been front-runner since entering the race officially last spring.

Still, if Ignatieff can remain gaffe-free at the Palais des Congrès in Montreal, his team feels the results should play out according to the numbers.

"We've got our hands and feet out with everybody," said the source, of the "buddy system" in place to deliver delegates. "We don't have to do that much more to win. Every two of our delegates has to bring in only one more."

The strategist's theory looks good on paper.

National "Super Weekend" voting gave Ignatieff 1,377 delegates and his team claims another 240 ex officio delegates. If every two pulls in a delegate from one of the other seven camps, he's got the potential of about 2,400 votes, which should be enough to win a convention with an expected 4,000-plus delegates.

But polling by EKOS for the *Star*, and the Strategic Counsel for the *Globe and Mail*/CTV News has shown negligible second-choice support for Ignatieff — only 8 per cent and 6 per cent respectively.

"We're not worried about that," said David Peterson, former Ontario premier and Ignatieff adviser. He points out that both polls have high "undecided" numbers for second-ballot choice, with 38 per cent for EKOS and 44 per cent for the Strategic Counsel. Peterson says that's significant.

"Everybody feels very good right now. They're very happy," he added. "Michael's got a big lead and

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there's real optimism in the ranks."

Peterson thinks Ignatieff will impress in Friday night's candidates' speeches. "He performs well, he speaks well, he has integrity. When he speaks, everybody listens," he said.

Peterson added advice that contradicts the "be careful" message: "He can't be fearful of taking positions or be worried people will disagree with him. He can't become wishy-washy or milquetoast."

Competing strategists see danger for Ignatieff in the polls.

"When only 6 per cent of the delegates say they will vote for you on second ballot, you've got problems," said one campaign adviser. "It's time to polish your resumé."

However, he admits Ignatieff "still has the potential to make a blockbuster speech and wow people. ... Every convention has a life and momentum of its own, and we won't begin to see what that is until Friday afternoon" — just before eight speeches, with Ignatieff speaking last.

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