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Harper hasn't captured enough hearts and minds

Voting public still prefers Martin

Many question Harper's chances

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OTTAWA—As he celebrates his 46th birthday today, Conservative Leader Stephen Harper finds himself boxed in — not by presents and adulation — but by polls and public uncertainty about who he is.

A new EKOS poll for the *Star* and *La Presse* shows that no matter how fed up Canadians are with the Liberals, the Conservatives' lead is slipping and fully half of those polled do not see the country led by Harper as prime minister.

Less than a third — 29 per cent — say they can picture Harper being elected to run the country.

A big chunk — 18 per cent — neither agreed nor disagreed with a statement on the prospect of Harper becoming prime minister.

The national ambivalence toward Harper is mirrored in the key electoral battleground of Ontario, where 51 per cent said they just couldn't see him being elected as the country's leader.

Just a quarter of Ontario respondents see him as electable. Another 21 per cent said they neither agreed nor disagreed, while 3 per cent said they didn't know or had no response.

"It seems," says pollster Frank Graves of EKOS, "Canadians have taken a second look at Stephen Harper as a potential prime minister and are having second thoughts."

The survey revealed some lingering suspicions about Harper and lingering goodwill toward Prime Minister Paul Martin.

In fact, Martin is the first choice of more people in Ontario as the leader who "would be best for the interests" of their province — 36 per cent — ahead of both Harper at 25 per cent and NDP Leader Jack Layton at 23 per cent.

Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe was chosen by 2 per cent of Ontario voters — the same number as chose "none of the above." Another 11 per cent said they didn't know or did not respond.

Graves says 41 per cent of Ontarians see Martin as a better leader for the country as a whole, while Harper was picked by just 26 per cent and Layton by 14 per cent.

Nationally on that same question, Martin was favoured by 36 per cent, Harper 28 per cent and Layton

15 per cent.

(It should be noted, however, that the national and provincial sample sizes for the best leader question were slightly smaller than for the rest of the poll's questions, which increases the margin of error.)

But there is one potentially encouraging element in this survey for Harper.

While Harper is not now seen as plausible as prime minister, neither was Jean Chrétien back in 1993, but to a slightly lesser extent.

When EKOS asked Canadians a similar question in the post-Mulroney days of Kim Campbell's Progressive Conservative government, 45 per cent said they did not foresee the election of Chrétien as prime minister as a plausible outcome. And only 31 per cent could picture him in the job.

Chrétien went on to win the fall election that year, and the Tories were virtually wiped out, reduced to just two seats in the Commons.

**Lingering suspicions about Harper and
lingering goodwill toward Martin**

In all, the national EKOS poll asked 1,212 people a series of questions to test the depth of their anger toward the Liberals and, given that, whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: "As much as Canadians may be fed up with the Liberals, I just can't see them electing Stephen Harper as Prime Minister."

Doubts about Harper as prime minister run even higher in the Atlantic provinces (62 per cent) and British Columbia, where 54 per cent say they don't see him in the job. B.C. promises to be a tight, three-way race between Conservatives, New Democrats and Liberals.

Even in strongholds of Conservative support in the West, the prospect of Harper being elected as prime minister is viewed as unlikely by many. In Alberta, 42 per cent don't see him in the job, and in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, the number is higher — 49 per cent.

In Quebec, where Harper desperately wants to win seats to be able to claim he could form a truly national government, 45 per cent do not picture him at 24 Sussex Drive.

Women more than men seem uncertain about Harper in the job as prime minister.

Fully 54 per cent of females surveyed said they didn't view him as electable to the position, while 46 per cent of males took that view.

There's also worrisome news in that more than a third — 35 per cent — of people who identify themselves as undecided voters say they don't see him as prime minister. Nearly a third — 27 per cent — neither agreed nor disagreed.

Just 23 per cent of undecided thought they could see him being elected as prime minister. And 15 per cent of undecided voters said they didn't know or didn't respond.

The survey was conducted over three key days — Tuesday through Thursday — this week. Tuesday was the day the Liberals and New Democrats announced they'd struck a deal to support the budget with an extra \$4.6 billion in social and environmental spending. Wednesday was the day Harper responded, warning he would try to put the minority government "out of its misery" as soon as possible.

Graves says the results of the poll show people are viewing with suspicion Harper's plan to work with the Bloc to bring down the government.

He notes that the Tories have slipped, losing almost all the ground they had gained after some of the most damning testimony emerged from the Gomery inquiry into the sponsorship scandal.

"Despite an apparently favourable political environment, support for the Conservatives seems trapped in the low 30s," Graves says.

It's not clear if any of the public opinion polls are giving Harper reason to re-consider his decision to instruct caucus colleagues to try to topple the government.

Yesterday, Harper shrugged them off, as did Deputy Conservative Leader Peter MacKay.

MacKay said an election "is almost like a trip to the dentist — it may not be something you enjoy, but it may be something that's necessary."

The EKOS survey was based on telephone interviews conducted with a random sample of 1,212 Canadians aged 18 and over.

A sample of this size provides a margin of error of plus or minus 2.8 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

The margin of error is higher when the results are sub-divided.

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