



# CANADA VOTES

ELECTION DAY

June 28, 2004

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## The Campaign

### To the End Game

**By Keith Boag**  
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**Keith Boag**

**Last week the Liberals and the Conservatives** found themselves repeating the same message. Usually that's a sign one of them has made a mistake.

The Liberals had been struggling to convince voters that if they voted for the Conservatives they might actually get a Conservative

government. It sounds odd, but polls had showed a majority of Canadians felt that no matter how they voted, the Liberals were still going to end up in government. In other words, they thought their vote had no real consequence.

But then Stephen Harper came out of the TV debates a little bit pumped and he started telling voters they'd be getting a Conservative government and it could very well be a majority government to boot. Liberals scratched their heads and thought "Hey, that's supposed to be our point!" But they weren't complaining.

**People do seem to want change** and they are ticked off at the Liberals. But suppose they just want to exercise some discipline and reduce the Liberals to a minority government? If that's the kind of change they want then Harper's got a problem. His "majority" talk may have given voters a reason to think twice before voting for him, the very thing the Liberals were hoping for.

By the end of last week Conservative strategists were privately conceding that Harper would have been better off to just continue to hammer the Liberals on the sponsorship scandal and forget the stuff about forming government. Better for voters to go to the polls still

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thinking "time for a change" than to switch to wondering whether Stephen Harper should be the next Prime Minister.

**And then there was that business** of accusing Paul Martin of supporting child pornography only to withdraw the accusation an hour or so later. It was the kind of move that probably plays well with the Conservatives' base but it's not a move you'd expect from a party trying to appeal to voters who are seriously checking them out for the first time.

It makes you wonder whether the Conservatives knew there was always something very tentative about their modest momentum in this campaign, whether they've worried about something in the polls that has been obvious for a while.

**Only once has a media poll** put the Conservatives as high as 37 per cent support nationally and that was more than a week and a half ago. It lasted two days. The magic of 37 per cent is that it equals what the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservatives parties got in the 2000 election if you add their votes together. Adding their votes together was pretty much the whole point of merging the two parties, so 37 per cent is a reasonable estimate of the base from which the Conservative Party should be building. They should be able to pull 37 per cent in their sleep.

But the Conservatives have yet to sustain that number. They have moved incrementally from the low 20s into a statistical dead heat with the Liberals in the low 30s, but they have not reached what should be their base.

**Which brings us to the polling company SES Research**, the only pollsters who've put the Conservatives, albeit briefly, at 37 per cent. We're quite fond of SES here at the CBC election desk. Together with its media partner, CPAC, SES is carving out a niche among political addicts with their daily tracking poll. It's a small sample size with a relatively big margin of error, but it's regular, predictable daily fix and it's free. Plus, it's been remarkably quick to pick up changes in the campaign. It caught the Conservatives' momentum, the Liberals' decline and then the big stall when both the main parties went day after day in a statistical dead heat.

What SES showed in its most recent tracking poll, Friday, was a reversal in both of the main trends of the campaign: the Liberals beginning to recover ground and the Conservatives falling back. Such a turn in fortunes so late in the campaign would be one of the most dramatic shifts in recent Canadian elections. That's if it's really happening.

**It all augurs well for spectators** in the final week of the race. The Liberals are still running hard against "change" and "change" is a formidable opponent. The Conservatives may have peaked too soon in this

campaign so they will have to pour it on in the homestretch to recover their shot at forming a government. It may indeed be "one for the ages."

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