



**Breaking
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International

Canada's Conservative Party Gains Strength

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AP Photo CONTH102

By BETH DUFF-BROWN

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TORONTO (AP) - Canada's Conservative Party, which would be more in line with Bush administration policies, appeared to gain strength in its quest to end 13 years of Liberal Party rule as campaigning for national elections entered its final week.

Opinion polls released Monday show that Stephen Harper's opposition Conservatives were holding an advantage of 8 to 13 percentage points over Prime Minister Paul Martin's Liberal Party - a gap that analysts say will be very difficult for the ruling party to overcome by Jan. 23, when voters will cast ballots for the 308-seat House of Commons.

In November, Martin's minority government was forced to call elections after it lost a no-confidence vote. Opponents have accused the Liberals of corruption and broken promises, themes that have resonated with voters.

"I think the Liberals are doing everything they can to do turn it around, but the reality is that we're at the point right now where only Stephen Harper can lose this election," said Nik Nanos, president of SES Research, a polling and management consulting group in Toronto, whose latest poll put Conservatives ahead by 8 points. "Only some major mistake by Harper or someone close to him can derail the Conservative juggernaut."

A Strategic Council poll for The Globe and Mail and CTV said Monday that if elections were held today, the Conservatives would come out with 40 percent of the vote, compared with 27 percent for the Liberals. The New Democratic Party, meanwhile, won the support of 16 percent of those polled while Bloc Quebecois secured 11 percent and the Green

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From the Associated Press

Party, 6 percent.

The poll of 1,500 voters had a margin of error of 2.5 percentage points, while the SES Research poll of 1,200 voters had a margin of error of 3.1.

The Liberals have focused their campaign on negative attack ads against Harper, portraying him as a closet right-winger who would recast traditionally liberal Canada in the mold of its southern neighbor, currently steered by conservative Republicans.

“We have a schizophrenic Harper and if he has a majority, it'll be the Calgary persona I presume, and if it's a minority, it will be the Ontario persona,” said Stephen Clarkson, a professor of political science at the University of Toronto, arguing that if Harper wins, he will return to his conservative roots. But, if he loses, he will maintain the moderate image more palatable to voters in the traditionally liberal province of Ontario.

Harper, who is from Calgary, is against gay marriage, the Kyoto Protocol to reduce greenhouses gases and once referred to Canada as a “northern European welfare state” weighed down by too many social programs. He also said he would reassess Canada's decision to opt out of the U.S. ballistic missile program.

Harper's platform is viewed as more in tandem with that of the Bush administration, which has found little support among ordinary Canadians or Martin's administration. Canadians have largely praised the embattled Martin for standing up to the White House on such issues as missile defense, Iraq and lumber tariffs.

“The White House, they'll be delighted,” Clarkson predicted, should Harper win.

The negative ads this time around have backfired as Harper keeps hammering on several Liberal Party corruption scandals and calling for change, a mantra that many Canadians have taken up. He's kept his ultraconservative views to himself and his handlers have successfully portrayed him as a moderate who will work for the middle class of Ontario, the country's most populous province and a Liberal Party stronghold.

Martin - widely praised for cutting the deficit during his years as finance minister under former premier Jean Chretien - has played on the strong economy under the Liberal Party.

Martin has had frosty relations with the White House, standing by the Liberal Party decision not to support the U.S. invasion of Iraq. He also declined to join in Washington's continental ballistic missile shield and has been called weak on terrorism.

On the Net:

Liberal Party: www.liberals.ca

Conservative Party: www.conservatives.ca

New Democratic Party: www.ndp.ca

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