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Thu, February 5, 2004

Harper No.1 in poll Name recognition factor in Conservative race

By BILL RODGERS, OTTAWA BUREAU CHIEF

OTTAWA -- Stephen Harper is the first choice of Canadians if they could vote in the Conservative leadership race, according to a SES/Sun Media poll. When asked to rank the "profiles" of three candidates, based only on their political or private sector experience and ability to speak both official languages, 41% preferred Harper's resume. Former Ontario cabinet minister Tony Clement ranked second at 26%. Both Clement and Harper, the former Canadian Alliance leader, speak English and French. The unilingual, former auto parts executive Belinda Stronach placed third with 20%.

Of the 1,000 Canadians surveyed last week, 12% were undecided.

The poll also asked Canadians who they would prefer "to be the next leader of the Conservative Party of Canada" based on name recognition. The results pushed Stronach, who has received saturated media coverage, into second place with 20%. Harper's lead fell to 27% while Clement dropped to 13%. The number of undecided voters jumped to 36%.

The survey shows Clement is a relative unknown in the West and Atlantic provinces. All three candidates are in a dead heat in Ontario with 24% supporting Harper, 21% favouring Clement and 19% backing Stronach.

"Regardless of how you introduce the ballot, Stephen Harper is the frontrunner in this race," SES president Nik Nanos said.

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"Tony Clement does much better based on his profile than based on his name recognition, which means that ... as he increases his profile, his support is likely to increase at the same time."

Nanos said the survey shows Stronach, who didn't enter the public spotlight until last month, "has run a masterful media campaign."

The SES/Sun Media poll contrasts sharply with a controversial survey conducted by Northstar Research, which found Stronach with a 13-point lead over Harper when Canadians were asked who they would vote for if they were members of the Tory party.

The polling firm's senior partner is John Laschinger, Stronach's campaign director.

The SES/Sun Media poll conducted January 26-29 is accurate to within 3.1 percentage points, plus or minus, 19 times out of 20.

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Based on the following anonymous descriptions, respondents ranked the candidates:

1. A male candidate from Western Canada who was leader of the Canadian Alliance and the former President of the national Citizens Coalition who speaks both French and English. 41%
2. A male candidate who was a former Ontario provincial cabinet minister and very active in politics in Ontario who speaks both French and English. 26%
3. A female candidate who was the successful chief executive officer of one of Canada's largest companies, who has never been elected to office, and does not speak French. 20%

Based on just their names, respondents ranked the candidates (see percentages). The circled numbers represents how candidates were previously ranked by description:

1. STEPHEN HARPER: 27%
2. BELINDA STRONACH: 20%
3. TONY CLEMENT: 13%

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