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Canada's Conservatives ready to close the deal

By Rebecca Cook Dube, special for USA TODAY

TORONTO — Canada's Liberal Party appears poised to lose its 13-year grip on power in Monday's elections — an outcome nearly unimaginable here just a few months ago.



Canadian Conservative Party leader Stephen Harper talks to supporters Jan. 10 in Montreal Quebec.

By Tom Hanson, CP via AP

In a campaign marked by anti-American rhetoric and Liberal missteps, Conservative Party leader Stephen Harper has moved his party to the vote-rich middle. Political analysts say a Conservative win could improve recently strained relations between the United States and Canada.

Conservatives hold a 7-percentage-point lead, according to an SES Research Poll completed Monday for CPAC, a public affairs cable TV channel similar to C-SPAN. The poll had an error margin of 3 percentage points. Four other independent polls confirm the Conservatives' momentum.

"It would require Stephen Harper or someone very close to Stephen Harper to make a monumental blunder to turn those numbers around," says pollster Nik Nanos, president of SES Research in Ottawa. "This is Stephen Harper's election to lose."



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Thirty-seven percent of those responding to the SES poll said they would vote for the Conservatives. Support for the Liberals was 30.7%; the far-left New Democratic Party got 16.6%. The Bloc Quebecois, which supports independence for Quebec, got 10.7%; the Green Party, 4.9%.

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In the week before the election, Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin spoke to desultory crowds in formerly safe districts and dodged questions about his dismal poll numbers. The normally stiff Harper looked relaxed and cheerful as he barnstormed in far eastern Canada and Quebec, usually strongholds for the Liberals and the Bloc Quebecois.

"Up is down. Black is white," columnist Christie Blatchford wrote Tuesday in the Toronto newspaper *The Globe and Mail*.

Canadian-style conservatism

In two years as prime minister, Martin has clashed with President Bush over defense, the lumber trade, border security, global warming and Iraq.

Harper says he's open to reconsidering Martin's decision not to participate in a U.S. missile-defense program. The Conservative leader agrees with Bush that the Kyoto treaty on reducing greenhouse gases is flawed. Harper initially supported the war in Iraq, although he now says he's disappointed by intelligence failures and would not send Canadian troops there.

Observers say the biggest change they expect from a Conservative government is simply a friendlier tone toward the United States. "I don't think you'll have the prime minister's communications director calling President Bush a 'moron,' " as happened in 2002 under Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, says Ezra Levant, publisher of *Western Standard*, a conservative magazine in Calgary. "The needless rhetorical irritations will evaporate immediately."

Conservative momentum doesn't mean Canada is moving to the right on social, military or fiscal matters. It's Harper who has moved — to the middle. He has pledged to seek no changes to abortion laws. He has avoided debate on same-sex marriage, which is legal in Canada but which he opposes. He promises to protect social programs, especially universal health care.

"Harper has hugged the center," says Warren Kinsella, a Liberal strategist who is critical of Martin. "What Americans should expect is a centrist Conservative who is quite different from the conservatives they see in Washington, D.C."

Ethics, not ideology, has been the central issue. Martin has been exonerated by an ongoing probe into a 1990s kickback scheme that has implicated other Liberals. But Quebec Justice John Gomery's investigation linked some Liberal organizers to the misspent millions in public money.

At a candidates forum Wednesday in east Toronto, small-business owner Robert Lesser said he's leaning toward voting Conservative, despite his worries about the party's far-right wing. Harper's surge has surprised him. "I thought it would be much closer," he said.

Retired teacher Jill Molema said she would vote Liberal but admitted that voters "are just so angry at Martin and his ineptitude."

The Conservatives' anti-corruption theme got a boost in December, when federal police confirmed they were investigating allegations that Liberal officials tipped off certain investors before an important tax policy announcement.

"Tell us, Mr. Martin, how many criminal investigations are going on in your government?" Harper asked at a debate Jan. 9.

As Harper attacked Martin on the corruption issue, he also presented his party's agenda, including sales tax cuts, child care subsidies paid directly to parents, and mandatory minimum sentences for violent crimes. "The Conservatives got their ideas out early and simply," says Allan Tupper, a political scientist at the University of British Columbia.

Liberal strategist Kinsella says, "The Liberal campaign has just been a series of catastrophes that political science classes in Canada will be talking about for years."

Martin was put on the defensive when Scott Reid, a top aide, said parents would fritter away the Conservatives' proposed child care subsidy on "beer and popcorn." Another top Liberal was forced to resign after he compared a prominent female politician to a dog. The Liberals' final ad campaign was marred by a commercial that falsely suggested Harper would impose martial law in Canadian cities.

The anti-Americanism card

Liberals found some success when Martin portrayed the United States as a bullying neighbor. His popularity rose in mid-December after he criticized the United States for its refusal to participate in the Kyoto agreement and verbally sparred with U.S. Ambassador David Wilkins.

"America is our neighbor, it's not our nation," Martin chided at the Jan. 9 debate.

Martin repeatedly accused Harper of being too close to Republicans in the USA. Liberal ads tried to tie Harper to the American right wing and Bush. However, instead of inspiring anxiety, the ads brought mockery: Parodies circulated on the Internet, and polls showed no dent in Harper's popularity.

"Painting (Harper) as a Canadian version of the extreme American Republicans has just not had any traction," Tupper says. "It's a misstep in the degree of emphasis. You can only go so far with it."

One key election battleground will be Quebec, which elected no Conservatives to Parliament in 2004. Their degree of success in Quebec could determine whether Harper leads a Parliament with a Conservative majority or must forge alliances with other parties to make laws.

Whatever happens, Americans shouldn't expect anything too radical. This is still Canada. "There is a desire for change," Kinsella says. "But it's a typically Canadian change — moderate and quiet."