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Conservatives betting Canada wants change

By Rebecca Cook Dube, Special for USA TODAY

TORONTO — After 12 years of Liberal Party rule in Canada, Conservatives are making a contest of national elections Jan. 23.



Canada's Conservative Leader Stephen Harper delivers a speech during a rally in Brantford, Ontario.

Paul Chiasson, CP

Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin squares off Monday night in a nationally televised debate with Conservative Party leader Stephen Harper.

Pollsters say Harper's underdog Conservatives have seized the momentum in the campaign. Canada last had a Conservative-led government under Brian Mulroney in 1993.

"If Mr. Harper does well in the debate, he could seal this right then and there," says Christian Bourque, vice president of polling firm Leger Marketing in Montreal.

Although all the results are within the margins of error, five recent national polls show Conservatives leading by 2-5 percentage points. The latest poll, released Sunday by SES Research, shows Conservatives would get 34% of the vote and Liberals 32% if elections were held now. The far-left New Democratic Party (NDP), the separatist Bloc Quebecois and the Green Party split the remainder.

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A large number of Canadians — 17% — are undecided and could determine the outcome of the elections, according to the SES poll done for CPAC, a public affairs cable TV channel similar to C-SPAN.

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An EKOS Research poll, published Thursday in *The Toronto Star* and Montreal's *La Presse*, showed the Conservatives with 36% and Liberals with 31%, the widest margin.

The prime minister has been exonerated in a probe of a Liberal kickback scheme that took place under Prime Minister Jean Chrétien in the 1990s. However, Quebec Justice John Gomery's investigation linked some party organizers with ties to Chrétien to the mispending of millions in public money.

Martin also has been hurt by new allegations by the Conservatives and NDP that Liberal officials tipped off investors before the government announced tax changes on some investments.

"No matter what's true or false, it sends that message again of the Liberals being the corrupt party," Bourque says.

No party is likely to win an outright majority in Parliament. The winner will probably have to form a coalition with other parties.

Harper has campaigned as an anti-crime, pro-tax-relief moderate. He has downplayed his opposition to gay marriage, which is legal in Canada. Conservatives this year have avoided being drawn into debate about dismantling Canada's costly and extensive system of government-run social services and health care.

Martin is touting the strong economy. Unemployment is 6.5%, near a 30-year low, and the federal government has had seven years of budget surpluses. He says his support for gay marriage and federally funded child care reflects most Canadians' values.

Martin says he's not panicking.

"Are there setbacks? Yes, there are for all campaigns," Martin told reporters last week. "But I have to tell you that I'm very happy with the way it's operating. We are in the same situation we were in during the last election."

The Liberals overcame a deficit in the polls two weeks before the last elections, in June 2004. But pollsters say voters now know and trust Harper more. "This time around, it's going to be much more difficult for the Liberals to demonize Stephen Harper," says Nik Nanos, president of SES Research, based in Toronto.

After tonight's English-language debate, the candidates will debate again Tuesday in French.

Conservatives have run a more disciplined campaign built on the theme that "change is not threatening," says Tim Woolstencroft of The Strategic Counsel, a polling firm in Toronto.

Patrick Basham, director of the conservative-leaning Democracy Institute think tank in Washington, says a Harper government in Canada would give the Bush administration an ally close to home. Martin has clashed with Bush over trade, security and environmental issues.

Alan Tupper, political scientist at the University of British Columbia, says it's too early to count out the Liberals.

"The Liberal Party has by far the largest pool of committed voters. It has the most savvy, the most connections, the most roots, and it comes at this with the power of incumbency," he says.

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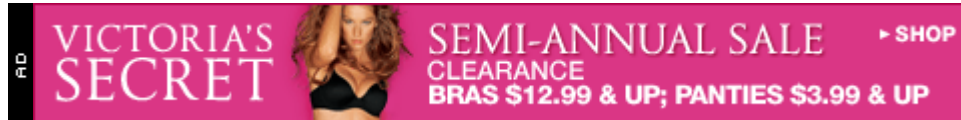
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