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Sun, May 23, 2004

**It's Martin's race to lose
Luck is with Harper, pollster says**
By [STEPHANIE RUBEC](#), Ottawa Bureau

OTTAWA -- For the Liberals, it's all about keeping Paul Martin's foot out of his mouth and voters away from the polls. Forget about issues like health care and gas prices. For the first weeks of the election campaign, it's all about leadership.

With support sagging, experts say the Liberals must make sure their leader shines for the full 36-day campaign, or risk a minority government -- even an electoral loss.

Pollster Nick Nanos, president of SES Research, said the outcome of Canada's 38th general election will hinge on who trips up first and how well the other leaders exploit the weakness.

"Luck counts in this game," Nanos said. "Right now, I'd say the luck is with (Conservative Leader) Stephen Harper. Because this last (Ontario) Liberal budget is really top-of-mind for Ontario voters."

The Liberals have conducted air-tight federal election campaigns since Jean Chretien took the party to victory in 1993. The Grits have also been blessed with bungling opposition leaders.

Nanos said voters traditionally reward smoothly run campaigns, pointing to their punishment of former Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day in the 2000 election. Day became famous for his poorly executed publicity stunts and geographical mistakes.

"If you can't run a campaign, what makes you think you can run a country?" Nanos asked.

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Nanos said Canadians will scrutinize Harper and he expects they'll give the new Conservative leader the opportunity to prove he's got the right stuff to be prime minister.

As for NDP Leader Jack Layton, Nanos say he must convince voters he'll keep the federal government in check if he wants to win over voters.

UNITED RIGHT

The big battles are going to happen in Ontario ridings taken by the Liberals in the 2000 election when the former Tory and Canadian Alliance parties split the vote.

The Liberals fear that with a united right, and a stronger NDP, they could lose up to 30 rural Ontario and Toronto-area ridings.

For Team Martin, winning a maximum of Quebec seats is vital to make up for the expected losses in Ontario. But with the separatist Bloc Quebecois leading in the polls, the Liberals are banking on low voter turnout on June 28 to at least save their existing seats.

"Usually a low turnout is favourable to the party in power," Gingras noted.

Gingras said the Grits have no choice but to feature Martin and fade out the party logo since Canadians now associate the federal Liberal Party with scandals, adding for the Grits to win a fourth consecutive mandate, Martin has to show he's running a very different show than former PM Jean Chretien.

But with a united right and a charismatic Layton at the helm of the NDP, Martin is facing punches from both sides.

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