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## ***BEYOND THE HORSERACE***

*THE LONGER TERM VIEW FROM THE PUBLIC*

### **INTRODUCTION**

[Ottawa – January 12, 2012] Is there anything sadder than a pollster without a horserace? The fever pitch of real and imagined perturbations in an electorate vibrating to the vagaries of minority governments has been displaced by the serenity of a clear majority government. Not only are the Conservatives ascendant in the House of Commons, they have a clear majority in the Senate and are refashioning public institutions such as public service, the courts, and the media to support their goal of a new era with Conservatives as the new “natural governing party”. Stephen Harper’s Conservatives are on the verge of achieving the fruition of their patiently executed strategy to allow Canada to discover its inner Conservative child. The only mild uncertainty is another opportunity to drub the newly anaemic Liberals and the upstart NDP opposition, now leaderless and reeling with a neophyte caucus stripped of its top talent seeking leadership in some distant federal election. There appears to be no obstacle in the path of the Conservative machine’s continued dominance and the pollster has been reduced to tortured interpretations of what essentially meaningless vote intention data might mean for an indifferent public.

The current majority reflects a broad national fatigue with horse races and the fractious and unstable dynamics of the past decade. This sentiment, coupled with a high degree of risk aversion in an economically anxious and aging Canada were the key drivers of the last majority. This result was not only the product of these active factors; there were other more passive yet crucial factors which shaped the final outcome. Increasingly, there is a profound generational gap emerging in Canada. Whereas older Canada opted for prudence and stability, younger Canada largely stayed home. A blend of indifference and disapproval of politics has produced burgeoning levels of disengagement in younger Canada. Not only is Canada older than it has ever been, the relative political advantage of older Canada has been amplified by a steep fallout in younger voter participation and a newfound senior consensus around conservatism. This may reflect the still lingering echo of September 11<sup>th</sup> and a more astute and political playbook in conservative politics but there is little question that this political landscape is very different and unexpected from what we saw at the outset of this century, when liberal and progressive governments seemed to have an unshakable stranglehold over the political world that experts are now bestowing on conservatives. Yet the received wisdom of a decade ago was wrong and perhaps we should pause and reflect on something other than a nonexistent horserace.

In this coming series of columns and reports we want to shift away from the obsessive media focus on the horserace and offer an alternative approach to polling. While retaining a commitment to the increasingly elusive goal of scientific representativeness, we want to look at the deeper issues facing the country. We want to move from the hurly burly of the race to a more in depth consideration of where the public are and where they wish to go. We want to have

citizens themselves select the top issues they want to discuss with their leaders and we want to engage them using reflection and information. We want to hear the voices of all Canadians but we are not satisfied with the notion that if one didn't vote, too bad lost your turn and we will see you in four years (maybe). This is particularly unacceptable when we now have most of under 40 Canada staying home and when this may well be a product of conscious political strategies designed to suppress their participation. The missing voices of under 40 Canada are crucial to the economic, cultural, and political well-being of this country. If our politics is teetering into the realms of oligarchy and gerontocracy then perhaps the tools of representative sampling coupled with the capacity for citizen engagement through the power of new electronic technologies, can redress some of this lacuna. If politics is becoming less and less democratic, maybe a rethought polling strategy become more so.

We will be releasing this poll in six parts, including this first release which will look at Canadians' outlook on the country. The series will conclude with the winning choices for national conversations.

## PART 1: NEW MORNING OR JUST MOURNING?

In this initial release of a six-part series we examine the public's outlook on the country. This release is intended to be an introduction to the more important series which will examine how citizens see the future and what national conversations they select as most important from their perspective.

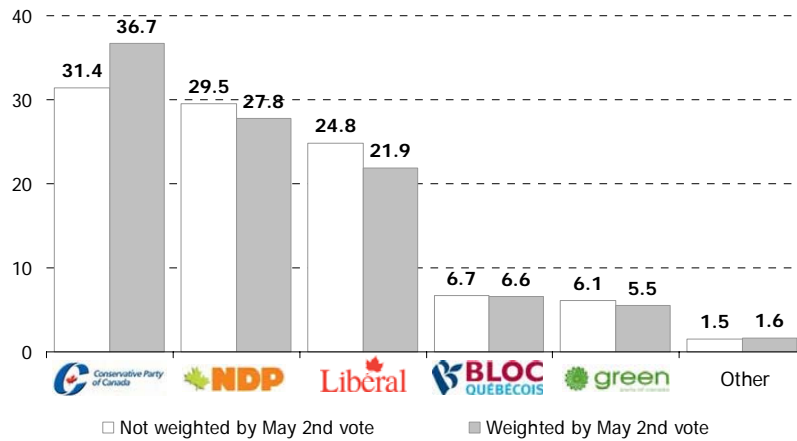
Many of the year end reviews of the political landscape have suggested that the country is experiencing a growing level of comfort with a new Conservative majority. The consensus seems to be that the government's remarkable political success last May was a prelude to a new era of Conservative dominance tantamount (at least) to the historical successes of the erstwhile "natural governing party", the now hapless Liberal Party of Canada. Moreover, the view is that this incipient dynasty is producing broad confidence and satisfaction with the public.

Whereas the government's political success is indeed impressive, it would appear from a review of key barometers of approval that the depiction of a new national spring might be somewhat premature and, more pointedly, the country is divided into those who are very pleased with national direction and those who are underwhelmed. In fact, the review of some of the longer term tracking indicators suggest that enthusiasm for the new government is tightly pocketed within those who voted for the government and that the overall national outlook is more sour than sweet. The media and intelligentsia may be bestowing a consensual nod to the continued dominance of the Harper political machine, but there are some troubling signals emerging from the citizenry themselves. This puzzling gap between what the public are telling us and what the punditocracy is telling us may reflect a widening rift between voting and nonvoting Canada which reflects newer fault lines across generations, social classes and regions. These fault lines are by no means the familiar ones we have seen in Canada and they deserve careful attention.

**Federal vote intention**



*Q. If a federal election were held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?*



*Note: The data on federal vote intention are based on decided and leaning voters only.*

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**BASE:** Decided voters; December 14-21, 2011 (n=1,908)






There is nothing more numbingly irrelevant than an update on a nonexistent horse race. While urging the media to wean itself off the collective ADHD which seems to have gripped it in recent years, we will provide the obligatory update of the party standings. Basically, the Conservatives continue to perform at about the same levels as they did last May (and they continue to do so with the same constituency of older, Anglophone males who propelled them to a majority). When we try and isolate the roughly 60% of Canadians who now vote, the Conservatives are basically in the same position as they were last May 2nd. When we broaden our focus to include all eligible voters, however, we find that they are supported by only about one in three voters.



### Federal vote intention – demographics



Q. If a federal election were held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?

	Overall	Region	Gender	Age Group	Education
	31.4	<b>AB (54.4%)</b> <b>SK/MB (42.0%)</b> <b>ON (34.6%)</b>	<b>Male (36.1%)</b> Female (26.4%)	Under 25 (15.3%) 25-44 (27.6%) <b>45-64 (35.3%)</b> <b>65+ (39.4%)</b>	<b>High Sch (37.6%)</b> <b>College (42.3%)</b> University (23.1%)
	29.5	<b>BC (35.9%)</b> <b>SK/MB (38.7%)</b> <b>QC (34.4%)</b>	Male (24.5%) <b>Female (35.0%)</b>	<b>Under 25 (38.3%)</b> <b>25-44 (33.4%)</b> 45-64 (27.3%) 65+ (23.2%)	High Sch (28.3%) College (24.5%) <b>University (32.7%)</b>
	24.8	<b>ON (31.9%)</b> <b>Atlantic (33.3%)</b>	Male (26.6%) Female (23.4%)	Under 25 (26.4%) 25-44 (22.4%) 45-64 (23.9%) <b>65+ (29.3%)</b>	High Sch (16.0%) College (20.2%) <b>University (30.0%)</b>
	6.7	<b>QC (27.4%)</b>	Male (5.7%) Female (7.0%)	Under 25 (8.3%) 25-44 (6.9%) 45-64 (6.9%) 65+ (4.9%)	<b>High Sch (10.3%)</b> College (5.1%) University (6.7%)
	6.1	<b>BC (13.5%)</b>	Male (5.4%) Female (6.9%)	<b>Under 25 (10.5%)</b> 25-44 (7.5%) 45-64 (5.2%) 65+ (2.3%)	High Sch (6.6%) College (5.4%) University (6.5%)






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BASE: Decided voters; December 14-21, 2011 (n=1,908)

### Federal vote intention – demographics (cont.)



Q. If a federal election were held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?

	Overall	Religious service (past 3 months)	Marital status	Visible minority	Place of birth*	First language
	31.4	0 (27.1%) 1 (31.1%) <b>2+ (43.8%)</b>	<b>Married (36.1%)</b> Single (23.3%)	Yes (26.2%) <b>No (32.4%)</b>	Can (31.3%) Other (31.8%)	<b>Eng (37.5%)</b> Fr (13.2%)
	29.5	<b>0 (32.3%)</b> 1 (28.3%) 2+ (21.2%)	Married (26.4%) <b>Single (33.6%)</b>	<b>Yes (36.1%)</b> No (28.1%)	Can (29.7%) Other (28.9%)	Eng (28.6%) <b>Fr (34.2%)</b>
	24.8	0 (24.6%) 1 (25.9%) 2+ (25.4%)	Married (24.6%) Single (25.8%)	Yes (27.5%) No (24.4%)	Can (23.6%) <b>Other (31.6%)</b>	<b>Eng (25.9%)</b> Fr (19.1%)
	6.7	<b>0 (7.7%)</b> 1 (8.9%) 2+ (3.7%)	Married (5.7%) <b>Single (8.6%)</b>	Yes (2.8%) <b>No (7.4%)</b>	<b>Can (7.7%)</b> Other (0.5%)	Eng (0.0%) <b>Fr (27.6%)</b>
	6.1	0 (7.0%) 1 (3.8%) 2+ (5.5%)	Married (5.4%) Single (7.5%)	Yes (6.6%) No (6.1%)	Can (6.1%) Other (6.4%)	<b>Eng (6.9%)</b> Fr (3.3%)

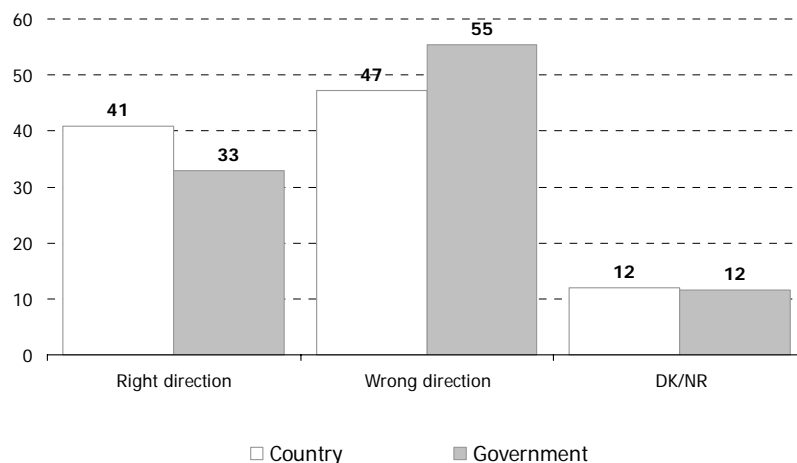
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BASE: Decided voters; December 14-21, 2011 (n=1,908)

The apparent gap between all eligible voters and the election result is largely a product of better get-out-the-vote by the Conservatives<sup>1</sup>. In fact, the Conservatives are doing much better with the groups that matter most politically – the actual voting public. Just as Canada has become older than it ever has been (hence increasing the clout of older voters) two other linked phenomena have occurred. One, the newly muscular senior vote has become remarkably unified in support of the Conservative Party and two; the numerically disadvantaged younger vote has opted out of voting in numbers which are a fraction of how younger voters have participated in the past. Much of the apparent “blueing” of the Canadian public is restricted to the diminished fraction of our society that is participating in elections. As a whole, and even more pointedly in non-voting Canada, the shift to the right is much harder to see.

### Direction of country/government

*Q. All things considered, would you say the country/Government of Canada is moving in the right direction or the wrong direction?*



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BASE: Canadians (half-sample each); December 14-21, 2011 (n=997/1,008)

Beyond the tediously irrelevant horserace numbers, what else do we see out there? First of all, the broad directional numbers for the country and the federal government are not the crisis like numbers evident in places like the USA but they fall short of a new “morning in Canada”. In fact, outside of the one in three core supporters for the government, the more apt description may well be “mourning in Canada”. Only 41 percent believe that the country is headed in the right direction and that number plummets to just one in three (mirroring Conservative support on vote

<sup>1</sup> For evidence of this point, see our retrospective analysis of the May 2<sup>nd</sup> election titled “Accurate Polling, Flawed Forecast”, accessible online at: [http://www.ekospolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/accurate\\_polling\\_flawed\\_forecast.pdf](http://www.ekospolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/accurate_polling_flawed_forecast.pdf)


intention) when asked about the direction of the federal government<sup>2</sup>. When we look at certain key groups, such as Quebeckers, the university educated, and the younger citizens of Canada, the outlook on the country and particularly the government is nothing short of bleak. By corollary, the sense of a new spring or morning is very strong amongst the current Conservative constituency which includes Albertans, older Canada, those who are living with families, and those who attend church. These positive sentiments are also somewhat higher among males and the college educated. We see these patterns of approval and disapproval permeating our research. It is also worth noting that there is a sizable group of Canadians who fall into the ambivalent or uninterested category.

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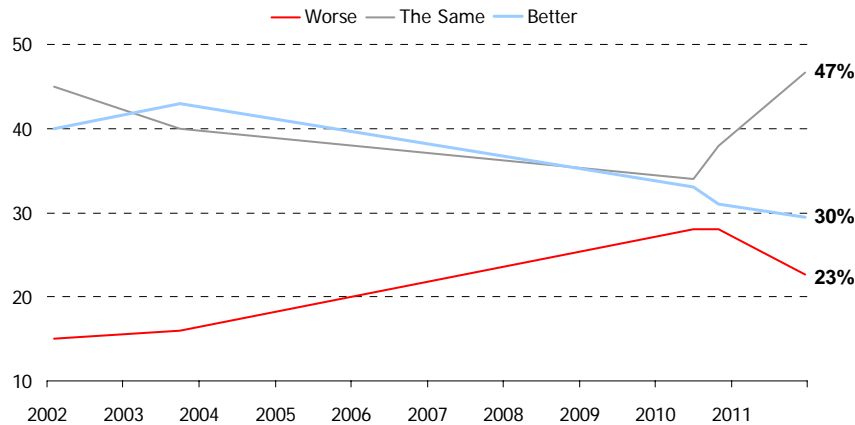
<sup>2</sup> The shift to an online, self-administered survey will produce somewhat lower satisfaction numbers due to the absence of social desirability effects. For further reading, please see:

Don A. Dillman, Glenn Phelps, Robert Tortora, Karen Swift, Julie Kohrell, Jodi Berck, Benjamin L. Messer. **Response Rate and Measurement Differences in Mixed-Mode Surveys Using Mail, Telephone, Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and the Internet** (Revised 2008). Accessible online at: <http://www.irss.unc.edu/odum/content/pdf/Dillman%20Mixed%20Mode%20Soc%20Sci%20Research%202009.pdf>

**THE ECONOMY: SHORT TERM RISE IN SENSE OF STAGNATION AND CONTINUED SLIDE INTO INCREASED PESSIMISM OVER THE LONGER TERM.**

**Outlook on short-term personal financial situation** 

*Q. Thinking ahead over the next year or so, do you think your personal financial situation will be better or worse than it is today?*



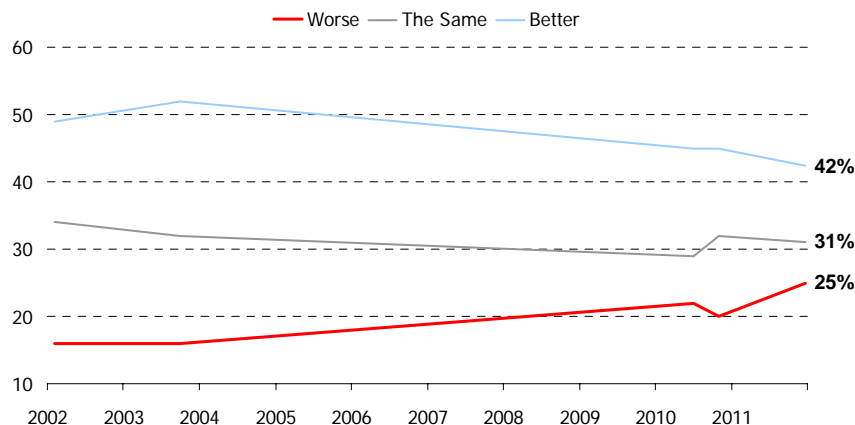
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BASE: Canadians (half-sample); most recent data point December 14-21, 2011 (n=1,027)

**Outlook on long-term financial situation**



*Q. Thinking ahead over the next five years or so, do you think your personal financial situation will be better or worse than it is today?*



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BASE: Canadians (half-sample); most recent data point December 14-21, 2011 (n=978)

Public outlook on the economy is not pretty. Canadians' sense of the shorter term economic outlook is much less positive than it was several years ago and the pattern is to an increasingly gloomy outlook. In terms of the next year or so the most notable movement is a sharp spike up in the sense of things will be the same, but a gentle yet steady long term slide in short term optimism. This growing sense of stagnation and decline can be quite grinding and may wear on the popularity of incumbent governments as time goes on.

There was little doubt that shorter term insecurity worked in favour of incumbent governments in Ottawa and Queen's Park in the past year. It is a much more open question whether longer term persistence of stagnation will weigh heavier on governments in the longer term. Further to this question, we have data on trends in how Canadians see the longer term economy evolving for them as well as their longer term views on the future political landscape. To the degree that the public as prognosticators might be correct, both measures may be a source of concern to the current government.

In terms of the five year outlook on whether things will be better or worse, there is less clarity than in the case of the one year outlook but the overall trends are to mildly rising pessimism and eroding optimism. Negative views are stronger among older Canadians and the economically vulnerable (lower socioeconomic status). Somewhat surprisingly, the East-West patterns where the West enjoys greater confidence in the current economic outlook flips when Canadians are looking at the longer term. In this case, citizens from Ontario to the Atlantic are relatively more optimistic in their long term outlook than those in the West.

In conclusion, it appears that the question of whether Canada is experiencing a new morning or simply mourning depends on who we ask. Conservative Canada is very happy with the current directions and this includes many groups who have been historically alienated from federal politics. The rest of Canada is more glum or indifferent with the 'mourning' characterisation really limited mostly to younger Canada, Quebec and, more secular and highly educated Canada. Even though dissatisfaction is more prevalent than approval, there is little to suggest that any of this is politically threatening to the government's success in the shorter term. The real questions lie in the longer term effects which we will examine in more detail in the coming portions of this release.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using EKOS' unique, hybrid online/telephone research panel, *Prob/t*. Our panel offers exhaustive coverage of the Canadian population (i.e., Internet, phone, cell phone), random recruitment (in other words, participants are recruited randomly, they do not opt themselves into our panel), and equal probability sampling. All respondents to our panel are recruited by telephone using random digit dialling and are confirmed by live interviewers. Unlike opt-in online panels, *Prob/t* supports margin of error estimates. We believe this to be the only probability-based online panel in Canada.

This particular study involved an ***online only*** survey of 2,005 Canadians. While panellists are randomly recruited, the survey itself excludes the roughly 1 in 5 Canadians without internet access. The results should therefore be considered generalizeable to Canada's online population. The field dates for this survey are December 14-21, 2011. The margin of error associated with the total sample is +/-2.2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Please note that the margin of error increases when the results are sub-divided (i.e., error margins for sub-groups such as region, sex, age, education). All the data have been statistically weighted to ensure the samples composition reflects that of the actual population of Canada according to Census data.