



## *NEWS RELEASE*

# **Tories Move into Clear Lead *But Election Far From Over*** Swing Voters and Swing Regions Now in Play

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### **National Federal Voting Intentions (n=1968; decided voters n=1744)**

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Conservative Party of Canada	36.0
Liberal Party of Canada	30.8
New Democratic Party	17.5
Bloc Québécois	10.6
Green Party	4.7

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## Overview

The Conservatives opened blue water between themselves and the incumbent Liberals this week, as the election campaign moved into its most intense phase. But hang on: this one isn't over yet. In fact, you might even say this election campaign has only really just begun. Remaining Liberal and BQ voters are more committed than the rest of the electorate, while many of the current supporters of the Conservatives and NDP are still considering their options.

These results come from a major survey of Canadians, collected over three nights this week, January 3 to 5, by EKOS Research Associates with the *Toronto Star* and *La Presse*. The sample size allows us to break down regional support. EKOS has also created a "commitment index" of variables that helps us analyze the depth and firmness of party support.

A night-by-night breakdown of the poll suggests that the Conservatives may have peaked midweek, though too much should not be made of such short-term fluctuations.

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“We have seen a pattern in the past where the Liberals lose support to the Tories in the wake of news about scandals, but manage to recover fairly quickly,” said Frank Graves, President of EKOS Research. “The question now is whether the strong Tory campaign to date has made them less vulnerable to that boom-and-bust cycle in public opinion.”

A big part of the Conservatives’ current lead comes from their surprising growth in Quebec. This has occurred mainly at the expense of the BQ, and so could have the paradoxical effect of electing more Liberals. Besides, those new Tory supporters may only be tire-kicking: they are only loosely attached to the Conservatives at the moment. Still, the real pay-off for the Tories for their growth in Quebec may come elsewhere in the country, where they can now represent themselves as a national party rather than one confined to English Canada.

Meanwhile, the apparently close race in Ontario is really the aggregate of several different regional races, with the Liberals running away with the election in Metro Toronto, but fading in the “905” region and struggling in Eastern Ontario. The fight is fierce in Western Ontario, but the Liberals are hanging on to a lead in the North.

The electorate is cross-pressured and disgruntled. It isn’t sure it likes its options.

“What is really striking is that Canadians are distressed by the concentration on issues related to scandal,” said Graves. “It’s like watching a train wreck, unable to avert your gaze. But Canadians are sick of it all, and don’t think it is doing anything to help the country.”

## Quebec

The Conservatives are on the march in Quebec. They are in a statistical tie with the Liberals in the province, though both remain more than twenty percentage points behind the BQ. The Conservative surge in the province may resurrect visions of the formidable Conservative alliance Brian Mulroney once built between Quebec and the rest of the country. But for the moment, at least, the Tory boom may amount to less than it seems. That’s because of the regional distribution of current Tory support.

At the moment, the Conservatives are weakest on the Island of Montreal (15%) and strongest in the East and Northeast of the province (29%) where the BQ nonetheless seems to retain a lead. For that reason, the Tories could match the Liberals in popular support in the province, but still fail to make a breakthrough in terms of seats: their votes might be “wasted” in other words. Paradoxically, because the Conservatives are carving their support mainly out of the BQ’s hide, the result of their improved performance could be to give the Liberals a chance to translate their own support into seats in ridings where the BQ was beginning to get away from them.

In addition, Tory supporters in Quebec, many of whom are very recent converts, are less likely to be firmly committed to the party than Liberal and BQ supporters are to theirs. While the Conservatives may be seeing the beginning of a trend in the province, they might equally well be witnessing nothing more than a blip.

## Ontario

In Ontario, the Liberals retain a narrow lead over the Conservatives, with the NDP continuing to trail. While the Liberal edge is a narrow one, the party has some reason to take comfort. The party seems to be down to a core of voters, whose commitment is quite strong, and whose suspicion of Stephen Harper and the Conservatives is, if anything, stronger.

Meanwhile, Conservative support is less committed, and the NDP support seems almost ripe for the Liberals' picking. Many NDP supporters express great worries about a Conservative government led by Stephen Harper, and they are actively considering a jump to the Liberals if they think that could stop them. What is important here is that most people across Canada still think a Liberal government is the most likely outcome of this election. It will be interesting to see how they react – especially the NDP supporters – when the reality that the Conservatives are now poised to form a government sinks in.

At the moment, the apparently close race in Ontario between the Liberals and Conservatives actually breaks down into an array of regional races, whose shape and dynamics are quite different. The Liberals are running away with this election in Metro Toronto (416) and to a lesser degree in the North. However, the Conservatives have established an edge in the prized 905 belt around the city.

In the Southwest of the province, the Liberals are in a statistical tie with the Conservatives, and the NDP are not too far behind. This may prove a crucial battleground between the Liberals and NDP, because roughly half the voters there say they fear that in the desire to punish Paul Martin and the Liberals, Canada could end up with a Conservative government that will lead the country in the wrong direction.

In Eastern Ontario, the Conservatives have established a lead, and Stephen Harper's personal numbers are very high: 41% saying he is the leader who has done the best job of articulating a vision for the future, compared with just 25% who say the same of Paul Martin.

## British Columbia

British Columbia could reasonably be said to have the hottest electoral race in the country. People in B.C. are more engaged than other Canadians, and they have been slip-sliding around, giving each of the national parties an apparent lead at some point in recent weeks or months.

But now, the Tories have established a commanding lead in the province. They have 42% support, with the Liberals and NDP both well behind in the 25% range. That doesn't mean they are set to walk off with all the seats, though. They will likely face close races with each of the other parties in different parts of the province.

For the NDP, B.C. may be the most discouraging region in the country. It is the province in which they had their highest hopes (and at times their highest poll numbers), but they seem to have fallen victim to the fact that so many of their supporters are only loosely attached and are also attracted to the populism of the Conservative Party.

### *Methodology for this survey*

These data are based on telephone interviews conducted January 3 to 5, 2006 with a random sample of 1968 Canadians aged 18 and over. A sample of this size provides a margin of error of +/- 2.2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The margin of error increases when the results are sub-divided (i.e., error margins for sub-groups such as regions).

All the data were statistically weighted to ensure the sample's regional, gender and age composition reflects that of the actual population of Canada according to Census data.

### *Methodology Going Forward*

Beginning Monday, EKOS and its media partners, *The Toronto Star* and *La Presse* will publish the results of a 500 interview national sample every day. It is important to recognize that while these results will give insights into the state of the campaign, not too much should be made of day-to-day fluctuations because of the margin or error involved. Periodically, we will release detailed analysis of results based on large national and region sample accumulated over several days.