

Tories jump into clear lead

Jan. 5, 2006. 05:49 AM

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OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—The election campaign has taken a dramatic turn, with the opposition Conservatives jumping into their first real lead over the governing Liberals, a new poll shows.

The survey, conducted by EKOS Research Associates for the *Star* and *La Presse*, found that 36.2 per cent of decided voters say they will support the Conservatives, while 30.4 per cent favoured the Liberals.

The NDP is supported by 17.9 per cent of voters, while the Bloc is at 10.4 per cent nationally and the Green party is at 4.7 per cent.

If the numbers hold up, it would mean a Tory minority government.

However, the electorate is still volatile, with 40 per cent of respondents saying they could still change their minds.

Until now, polls have shown the Liberals in the lead or, more recently, the two parties in a virtual tie. The EKOS poll came on the same day an SES poll was released showing the Conservatives leading the Liberals 36 to 33 per cent.

The EKOS poll shows that an effective campaign by Conservative Leader Stephen Harper has combined with a renewed focus on Liberal ethics to reverse the position of the two parties.

Results for Ontario and Quebec are eye-catching. In Ontario, where the Liberals have always enjoyed a big lead, a real dogfight has now emerged, with the Liberals at 38.5 per cent support and the Tories at 35.3.

In Quebec, where Harper has spent an unusual amount of time, the two parties are in almost a dead heat with the Liberals at 21.9 per cent and the Conservatives at 20.2. The Bloc Québécois is well ahead at 43.8, but the increased Tory support has come at the Bloc's expense. The shift shows Quebec voters are eyeing a federalist alternative other than the Liberals.

The poll will be a dispiriting blow to the Liberals, who have to rally their troops for the final push to the Jan. 23 vote.

But it will also hold dangers for the Tories, making them a target in a way they've escaped so far.

Many Tories are privately cringing at the prospect of peaking too early, as seemed to be the case in the 2004 campaign.

"It would be better not to be the target this early," said one senior Tory.

That danger was illustrated last night when NDP Leader Jack Layton lashed out at Harper, saying a

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Harper government would wreak havoc on the Canadian federation and team with Quebec separatists in a destabilizing move for the country.

"The Conservatives want to dismantle the Canadian state. So does the Bloc," Layton told reporters on his campaign plane.

The poll suggests that Canadians are looking at Harper in a new light, said Frank Graves, president of EKOS.

The trend is so bad for the Liberals that Harper has overtaken Prime Minister Paul Martin — 28 per cent to 25 per cent — as the leader respondents say is doing the best job of articulating a positive vision for Canada.

"I think we're seeing the lagged effects of a continued set of announcements that say `Here's exactly what I'm going to do. There's no hidden agenda here. Here it is. You may not agree with it, but there's nothing hidden about it,'" Graves said. "And so he's gone from having a major disadvantage with Martin on who has a positive vision for the country to actually having a modest advantage."

The Tory campaign has tried hard to strike a measured tone and shed the image from the 2004 campaign that Harper is a shrill ideologue who isn't ready for the country's highest office.

Graves said part of the explanation for the Tory resurgence lies in the renewed focus on ethics after revelations the RCMP is probing opposition allegations of insider trading resulting from information leaks from government officials.

"I think it's really produced some fertile ground for (the opposition) ... not only do people want a change, now they're willing to consider Harper in terms of what specifically change would mean with him," said Graves, who cautioned there remains "a lot of fluidity" in the electorate and "this thing is still very much up in the air."

The survey includes results from two days of polling, and is considered accurate to plus or minus 2.7 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Ten per cent of respondents said they are still undecided.

The results suggest that Harper's largely positive press in the early going — driven by daily policy announcements and largely reactive Liberal and NDP campaigns — is beginning to sink in with voters.

Support has melted away from the governing Liberals over the last 10 days, and in a way that is likely to demoralize the Liberal campaign.

The RCMP probe also risks tarnishing the reputation of Finance Minister Ralph Goodale, the one cabinet minister who was praised by Justice John Gomery in his initial report into the sponsorship scandal.

The NDP's numbers, meanwhile, have stalled and the idea that many of its voters could migrate to the Liberals if a Tory victory seems apparent is a paramount concern.

While the party is seeing gains in some parts of the country, the NDP vote is fragmenting in British Columbia, and voters are showing a "fragile" attachment to Layton.

The poll showed that the NDP risks being squeezed out by the dogfight between the Liberals and Tories, and getting noticed is exactly the aim of two bold ads the NDP started running on television last night.

"There's lots of noise in election campaigns," said NDP strategist Brad Lavigne. "And to be effective in getting your message to the electorate you've got to punch through."

In one ad, a money-filled bag, marked Liberal, drops from the sky. The ad goes on to highlight the NDP's familiar accusations of Liberal corruption and large corporate "tax giveaways."

The poll's regional breakdowns, which have a higher margin of error, offer a glimpse into a shifting situation in British Columbia and Quebec.

In B.C., the Tories, at 46.5 per cent, are gaining at the expense of both the Liberals and the NDP, who both have around 23 per cent support.

And in Quebec, the poll showed a startling rise in fortunes for Harper, who has been busily announcing a series of Quebec-friendly policies in recent weeks while playing down his opposition to same-sex marriage and to the Kyoto accord on climate change, both of which draw support in the province.

If the numbers hold, they would suggest that Bloc support is soft and that Harper is succeeding in convincing Quebecers his party is a worthwhile federalist alternative.

The poll also revealed that women are increasingly supporting the Tories, and that older voters are leaning Conservative while younger voters simply aren't paying attention.

"The under-45 population, by opting out, may well inherit a government that will have an agenda, values, interests on issues from same-sex (marriage) to pluralism, to the military, to health care versus education and so forth, that may not be particularly resonant with their values and interests," Graves said.

with files from Andrew Mills and Bruce Campion-Smith

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