

Tories thrilled with surge in Quebec

But support might not mean seats, analysts say

Bloc officials see gains due to split of federalist vote

Jan. 7, 2006. 09:17 AM

[GRAHAM FRASER](#)

NATIONAL AFFAIRS WRITER

Montreal—A Conservative surge in the polls in Quebec has left Tories pinching themselves and Bloc Québécois activists delighted.

An EKOS Research Associates poll conducted for the *Star* and *La Presse* reveals the Conservatives with support of 20 per cent of respondents and the Liberals with 21 per cent. The Bloc Québécois was far ahead with 45 per cent support — but below its showing in other campaign polls, which have consistently put the party over 50 per cent.

However, the public opinion analysts warn that the Tory support may not translate into a breakthrough in terms of seats.

"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 Bloc was beginning to get away from them," the EKOS analysts write.

However, the fact that the Conservatives are very weak on the island of Montreal, as the EKOS poll confirms, makes this less likely.

In the 2004 election, the Bloc won 48.9 per cent of the Quebec vote, the Liberals 33.9 per cent and the Conservatives 8.8 per cent. The New Democratic Party had 4.6 per cent.

Michael Fortier, co-chairman of the Conservative campaign, was very cautious about the poll results, but said that the party is doing much better than it has done for a long time.

"We've clearly caught people's attention," he said, arguing that in 2004, Quebec voters did not know Tory Leader Stephen Harper.

"If you were for one second to believe this (poll result), Stephen Harper is not doing so badly with Quebecers," he said. "Is it 20 per cent? Is it 15 per cent? I don't know — but it's not true that one out of two Quebec voters want a Bloc MP in Ottawa."

The EKOS poll was based on a sample size of 519 in Quebec, which produces a margin of error of plus or minus 4.3 per cent. The poll was conducted Jan. 3 to Jan. 5.

Political scientist Antonia Maioni of McGill's Institute for the Study of Canada agreed that the party has had an impact in this campaign.

Star Columnists

[Graham Fraser](#)

[Richard Gwyn](#)

[Stephen Handelman](#)

[Chantal Hebert](#)

[James Travers](#)

[Ian Urquhart](#)

[Thomas Walkom](#)

Related Stories

[Election Special](#)

[Poll results \(.pdf\)](#)

[Liberal plan gets cautious welcome \(Jan. 7\)](#)

[Liberals still have support in region \(Jan. 7\)](#)

[Behind the affair on income trusts \(Jan. 7\)](#)

[Fierce fight for Ontario \(Jan. 7\)](#)

[Tories thrilled with surge in Quebec \(Jan. 7\)](#)

[Harper, 46, stresses generation gap \(Jan. 7\)](#)

[Layton defends crime plan \(Jan. 7\)](#)

[Editorial: Layton's pitch for a Liberal vote](#)

"Something about the Conservative message is catching on in Quebec," she said.

"I'm not sure that it will translate into seats, but there is some kind of connection."

She pointed to Harper's speech in Quebec at the beginning of the campaign, when he talked about Quebec playing a role in international forums like UNESCO, and the commitment to address what Quebecers call "the fiscal imbalance."

But the effect of this increase in Conservative support is not clear.

'Something about the Conservative message is catching on in Quebec.'

Antonia Maioni, political scientist

Université de Sherbrooke political scientist Jean-Herman Guay said the Conservatives do not have an organization in Quebec to deliver that vote. Université de Montréal political scientist Pierre Martin said the Tory surge could hurt the Bloc.

"Between 15 and 20 per cent (for the Conservatives) is possible," he said, pointing to a group that he called "angry federalists" who have swung to the Bloc.

"It is a protest vote," he said. "These people may say that they can vote Conservative and express that protest."

Similarly, Guay points out that the increase in Conservative support, even if only a few percentage points, may prevent the Bloc from breaking through the 50 per cent barrier that Gilles Duceppe has set as his goal.

However, Bloc campaigners read the figures differently, and calculate that this will split the federalist vote and that a vote for the Conservatives is a vote the Liberals don't get.

"It helps," said Farouk Karim, who was a Parti Québécois candidate in the Outremont by-election in December and is now campaigning for Bloc candidate Jacques Léonard.

He argues that any increased support for the Conservatives in some key Montreal ridings — and in ridings off the island of Montreal — will be at the expense of the Liberals.

Harper has been visiting Quebec regularly in this campaign.

There are two strategic reasons for the Conservatives to emphasize their campaign in Quebec.

The first is to look beyond this election to the next one.

If the Conservatives form a minority government with little or no support from Quebec, they will have drawn attention to strong candidates who will be in a better position to win seats in a subsequent election.

This was the pattern in 1957, when Progressive Conservative Leader John Diefenbaker won a minority government with little support in Quebec — and then won 50 seats in Quebec when he formed a majority government in 1958.

"They're clearly preparing the terrain," Maioni said. "They're laying the groundwork for next time."

Fortier acknowledges that it will take more than one election to have a significant breakthrough.

"Win, lose or draw, we now have a solid base on which to build — and I think it will be win — and next time win bigger," he said.

"Having zero MPs means there's only one way to go. But absolutely, in my mind, it's a two-step approach."

The other, more subtle strategic goal is to show Ontario voters that Harper is comfortable in Quebec.

[Additional articles by Graham Fraser](#)

[Get great home delivery subscription deals here!](#)

[FAQs](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [My Subscription](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [Webmaking Blog](#)

[Home](#) | [GTA](#) | [Business](#) | [Waymoresports](#) | [A&E](#) | [Life](#)

Legal Notice: Copyright Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. All rights reserved. Distribution, transmission or republication of any material from www.thestar.com is strictly prohibited without the prior written permission of Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. For information please contact us using our [webmaster form](#). www.thestar.com online since 1996.

