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Liberals enjoying 'bounce,' poll shows

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LES WHITTINGTON

OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—The federal Liberal "revival" has been given a big boost by last week's convention that chose Stéphane Dion as leader, according to a *Toronto Star* poll released today.

An EKOS Research Associates poll shows the Liberals would be close to winning a majority government if an election were held today. It gives the Liberals 40.1 per cent of decided voters, compared to 33.5 per cent for the Conservatives.

EKOS president Frank Graves said "what we are seeing here is Dion's Liberals enjoying a post-convention bounce, which builds on a trend of Liberal revival and Tory slump that began in the summer.

"What is troubling for the Conservatives is an underlying trend over many months of rising dissatisfaction with the direction of government, combined with utter disappointment with its efforts on the environment.

"At the same time, the preoccupation with ethics and accountability that drove the Tories' success in January (when Prime Minister Stephen Harper won an election) has largely dissipated," Graves said.

The poll, conducted for the *Star* and *La Presse*, showed the NDP at 10.2 per cent nationally, well below the 17.5 per cent of the vote the party got in the Jan. 23 election.

The Bloc Québécois was at 8.2 per cent, with the Green Party at 7.6 per cent.

The survey of 1,022 adult Canadians was conducted on Dec. 5 and Dec. 6. Results from a sample of that size are considered accurate to within 3.1 percentage points 19 times in 20.

Harper presides over a shaky minority government that could fall as early as spring, likely after Finance Minister Jim Flaherty's budget.

Standings in the 308-seat House of Commons today are: Conservatives, 124; Liberals, 102; Bloc Québécois, 51; NDP, 29. There are also two independent MPs.

The Liberal support is the highest since Jean Chrétien stepped down as leader three years ago. Its support is mainly coming at the expense of the NDP and Bloc Québécois but "they are also coming back in some of the key



ASHLEY FRASER FOR THE TORONTO STAR
New Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion talks to the Toronto Star yesterday in the Opposition leader's Parliament Hill office. Dion said he recognizes the importance of Toronto and Ontario but is cool to Premier Dalton McGuinty's complaints about a "fiscal imbalance" in federal funding to the province.

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demographic groups — high-income earners and baby boomers — who have been important to them in the past," Graves said.

The Liberals are ahead in every region except Alberta and Quebec, where they trail the Bloc, but are ahead of the Conservatives.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Dion, the Liberals' newly crowned leader, is being well received in his home province of Quebec despite his reputation as a staunch federalist, Graves said.

"It's just the opposite of what many predicted. Quebecers are reacting to Dion as a favourite son. It is too early to say whether this sentiment will last. At the same time, he may have potential to win over people in the rest of the country as they get to know him better."

The environment ranks a strong third when Canadians are asked to name the most important election issue, trailing only health-social issues and the economy.

And of those who consider "green" issues of paramount importance, only 4 per cent said the Conservatives are the best party to deal with them. Thirty-five per cent said the Green Party and 31 per cent said the Liberals.

With those type of results, the poll shows how the NDP is being squeezed.

"There is a shock result here for the NDP," Graves said. "Nationally, the Greens are within sight of the NDP."

In Quebec, the Greens now run ahead of the New Democrats and they are tied in Alberta.

"These are the first clear indications we have that the New Democrats could find themselves squeezed into irrelevance in a painful grind between the Liberals and the Greens."

The Tories' high card remains Harper. Even as public voting preferences have shifted toward the Liberals, Harper comes ahead of Dion when respondents are asked which leader would make the best prime minister.

And outside Quebec and Atlantic Canada, Harper is seen by Canadians as the leader with the "best vision for the future of the country."

Respondents were also asked which party leader best understands "the concerns of people like you?"

Harper came out ahead of Dion in Western Canada but the new Liberal leader edged out the Prime Minister in Ontario and Quebec. In Atlantic Canada, Dion was well ahead of Harper on this question.

Among federal voters in Ontario, the Liberals' lead continues to grow and now stands at 46.9 per cent. This is followed by the Conservatives at 37.4 per cent, while the NDP has fallen to 9.1 per cent and the Green Party has 6.6 per cent.

In Quebec, the Liberals, who trailed the Conservatives for most of this year, are now solidly established in second place, with 26.1 per cent support. The Conservatives have 18.3 per cent while the Bloc Québécois hold a strong but diminishing lead, with 34.7 per cent. The Greens have 12.1 per cent and the NDP 8.8 per cent.

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