

## Tories head for majority

### Poll shows 'breakthrough' for party 'Significant growth' in Ontario, Quebec

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Conservatives are charting a course toward a majority on Jan. 23, according to a new national poll completed yesterday.

The survey, conducted by EKOS Research Associates for the *Toronto Star* and *La Presse*, shows Stephen Harper's Conservatives have sailed into majority government territory after a stunning week of rising popularity, largely at the expense of the Liberal party.

The EKOS survey of 1,240 Canadians through the weekend and yesterday found 39.1 per cent support for the Conservatives. The Liberals had 26.8 per cent support; the NDP 16.2 per cent; the Bloc Québécois 12.6 per cent; and Green party 4.6 per cent.

"This is the breakthrough Harper has been waiting for," EKOS president Frank Graves said.

In Ontario, the Conservatives have widened the gap to a 10-percentage-point lead over the Liberals. Of the 518 Ontarians surveyed, 43.8 per cent supported the Tories, 33.5 per cent the Liberals, 16.2 per cent the NDP, and 5.4 per cent the Greens.

Even in Quebec, the Conservatives are ahead of the Liberals. A total of 330 people were surveyed in that province and 19.1 per cent threw their support behind the Tories, compared with 17.4 per cent for the Liberals.

The Bloc, however, remains miles ahead with 52.4 per cent.

"The Conservatives' gains are nationwide, but their most significant growth is in Ontario, where they have surpassed the Liberals in their traditional heartland, and in Quebec, where they are now the leading federalist alternative to the Bloc Québécois," Graves said.

The national poll numbers are considered accurate within 2.8 percentage points 19 times out of 20. The margin of error in Ontario was 4.3 percentage points.

EKOS's Paul Adams said Harper's popularity is driving the surge. When those surveyed were asked who had the most positive vision for the future, the Conservative leader received 32 per cent support. Prime Minister Paul Martin had 20 per cent, the NDP's Jack Layton 16 per cent, and Bloc Leader Gilles Duceppe 10 per cent. "None of the above" registered 10 per cent and 12 per cent said they didn't know.

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But premature talk of winning a majority of Parliament's 308 seats spooks the Conservatives. A party would have to win 155 seats to win a majority.

At dissolution, there were 133 Liberals in the House of Commons. The Tories held 98 seats, the Bloc Québécois 53 and the NDP 18. There were four Independents and two vacancies.

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**'This is the breakthrough Harper has been waiting for.'**

***EKOS President Frank Graves***

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The Tories are well aware that after Harper predicted a majority win in June 2004, their political fortunes started a downward spiral in the last election.

"I'm certainly not going to be drawn into any questions that can be used to have me making predictions," Harper said during last night's English-language leaders' debate.

"My role here is not to be a political analyst. My role here is to explain to Canadians why we need a new government."

Following stories Sunday in the *Star* and the *Toronto Sun* about Harper hinting at a majority, right-wing blogs were abuzz with dark — and unsubstantiated — suggestions of a mainstream media conspiracy to stall the Tories' momentum.

Ironically, hours after refusing to rule out a Tory majority win, Harper criticized EKOS by name while chatting with reporters aboard his campaign plane in Hamilton on Saturday.

"They are, in my view, the least believable," he said. "Our people feel the momentum, but it is a statistical dead heat. ... There is over two weeks to go and a lot of things can happen. ... There is no certainty."

Graves said the "wild card" in the campaign now is how Canadians react to the potential of a Harper government — minority or majority.

"What happens when Canadians fully realize the Conservatives' current potential?" Graves asked.

"Will there be a bandwagon effect, as there was for Brian Mulroney in the 1984 campaign after he surged into the lead? Or will Harper succumb to a whiplash as he did in 2004 with many voters recoiling from the prospect of a Tory victory after a serious Liberal onslaught in the last weeks of the campaign."

On June 16, 2004 in Niagara Falls, Harper boasted there were "no safe Liberal seats for the Liberals any more," and said the Tories could win a majority. Less than two weeks later, the Liberals won a minority government.

The Liberals received 36.7 per cent of the popular vote in the June 28, 2004 election. The Conservatives garnered 29.6 per cent of the vote, the NDP 15.7 per cent, the Bloc 12.4 per cent and the Greens 4.3 per cent.

Graves said the apparent Conservative breakthrough in Quebec is "especially astonishing," heralding the possible return of the Tories as a truly national party.

But he warned that because the Harper Conservatives are poised to win some seats in Quebec, the media spotlight will be on the aloof Harper more than ever before. Graves stressed that the party's growth in Quebec is inherently fragile.

With files from Robert Benzie

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