

Ontario voters turning to Tories, poll suggests

Liberal support has also collapsed in Quebec

But party is surging in British Columbia

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The Liberals' Ontario electoral fortress is falling to the Conservatives, a *Toronto Star* poll suggests.

Despite a lock on the province since 1993, the Liberals trail the Conservatives in the race for Ontario's 106 seats. In Quebec, the government party's vote has collapsed, with the Tories now the leading federalist champion.

The EKOS Research Associates survey conducted for the *Star* and *La Presse* found that 40 per cent of Ontarians favoured Stephen Harper's Tories compared with 34 per cent for Paul Martin's Liberals, 21 per cent for the New Democrats of Jack Layton and 5 per cent for the Green party led by Jim Harris. In Ontario, 914 people were polled, meaning the data is accurate to within 3.2 percentage points 19 times out of 20.

"Fortress Ontario has definitely been breached and is in danger of crumbling," EKOS president Frank Graves said yesterday, noting signs increasingly point to a Tory majority.

In the 2004 election, the Liberals won 75 seats in Ontario, the Tories 24 and the NDP seven.

Nationwide, EKOS interviewed 2,306 Canadians aged 18 and older from Tuesday to Thursday and found 37.6 per cent support the Conservatives, 28.3 per cent back the Liberals, with the NDP at 18.1 per cent, the Bloc Québécois at 11.6 per cent and the Greens at 3.7 per cent. The national survey is considered accurate to within 2 percentage points 19 times out of 20.

"Certainly the Liberals remain strong in Toronto and up north, but there's very little evidence that there's much strength elsewhere," said Graves, noting the Tories are doing well in the 905 belt around the city and most of the rest of Ontario.

"The Liberals are doing almost shockingly poorly in Eastern Ontario," he added. "When you think about it, that's dominated by Ottawa, rich in public servants, who, historically, would have viewed Stephen Harper as a scary anathema. Now, apparently, they're ready to take the broom to Martin and the Liberals.

"That's quite shocking and I think instructive of just how much Paul Martin's reputation seems to have eroded in not that long a time."

EKOS surveyed 548 people in Quebec, where they found Gilles Duceppe's separatist Bloc has 49 per cent support, the Tories 21 per cent, the Liberals 15 per cent, the NDP 10 per cent and the Greens 3 per cent. The Quebec numbers are accurate to within 4.2 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

Graves said personal support for Martin, who was once popular with Quebecers, "has just cratered" in his home province thanks largely to the Liberal sponsorship scandal.

"It does appear by corollary that Stephen Harper is now seen in increasingly positive terms by Quebecers, where he's still something of a new phenom. That's good for him and it's good for his party," the pollster said.

"The ceiling for the Conservatives in Quebec is actually pretty high. You could see almost all the federal vote congregating there if these trends continue," he said.

"There doesn't appear to be any floor to the Liberal plummet in Quebec. It looks like Quebec could end up as scorched earth for the Liberals."

In 2004, the Liberals won 21 seats in Quebec and the Bloc 54 seats. The Tories and NDP were shut out.

The only good news for Martin in the poll was that the Liberals are surging in British Columbia, which is home to many tight three-way races. The Liberals are at 40 per cent, the Tories 34 per cent, the NDP 22 per cent and the Greens 4 per cent. EKOS polled 303 British Columbians and the survey is considered accurate to within 5.6 percentage points 19 times out of 20.

In the last election, the Tories won 22 seats in B.C., the Liberals 8 seats and the NDP 5 seats and there was one independent.

When the election was called in November, the 308-member Commons consisted of 133 Liberal MPs, 98 Tories, 53 Bloc Québécois, 18 New Democrats and four independents. There were two vacancies.

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