



Tories still have shot at a majority: Survey

39 per cent support to Liberals' 29 No Quebec breakthrough for Harper

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OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Conservatives are maintaining their support among Canadian voters and are within striking distance of a majority government, according to a *Toronto Star* poll released today.

Despite Harper's failure to consolidate popularity in central Canada and growing concerns about the war in Afghanistan, especially among Quebecers, the Conservatives have the backing of 38.7 per cent of decided voters nationally.

The Liberals, in the midst of a leadership race, trail with 28.8 per cent, followed by the New Democrats with 17 per cent, according to the survey by EKOS Research Associates Inc. for the *Toronto Star* and *La Presse*.

The Bloc Québécois has 8.4 per cent support and the Green Party 7 per cent.

"Stephen Harper and his government are doing quite well," said EKOS president Frank Graves. "Harper himself has a solid approval rating and well over half of Canadians say his government has matched or exceeded expectations."

The EKOS poll differs from polls done earlier this summer, which had the Tories and Liberals closer together. But all the polls make it clear Harper has not been able to build upon his showing in the January election, especially in Quebec and Ontario.

And while opposition to the war in Afghanistan intensifies, it appears it has not crystallized into an issue that could really hurt Harper at the polls.

Graves said there could be a couple of reasons why the Tories have not been hurt as badly as people would think. Since the former Liberal government first put soldiers in Afghanistan, "the public is not assigning exclusive responsibility" for the mission, which has about 2,300 soldiers assigned and more going in the coming weeks.

And there are a "few things offsetting" the rising opposition to the war, including the public believing that improving relations with the U.S. through our participation in the war is not really a bad thing.

The EKOS poll is based on Sept. 12-14 interviews with 1,004 adult Canadians. The results are considered accurate to within 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

But the Conservatives have failed to break through in Ontario, where the federal Liberals are on top, with 40.1 per cent of voter support. The Tories have 37.5 per cent, the NDP stands at 15.5 per cent and the Green Party holds 6.9 per cent.

And in Quebec, Conservative support is stuck at 25.9 per cent, compared to 34.9 per cent for the Bloc. And, among Quebecers, Liberals are showing a bit of improvement and now stand at 19.7 per cent, EKOS says.

After a surprising upsurge in support in Quebec in the Jan. 26 federal election, the Conservatives are looking

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to that province to provide the extra votes needed for a majority victory in the next election. But the current trend in Quebec makes it harder for the Conservatives to put together a majority win, Graves said.

"For a while, many Quebecers who were disenchanted with their traditional choice between the Bloc Québécois and the Liberals were moving to the Conservatives. However, as they become more familiar with the Harper government on a range of issues, including foreign policy, that growth has stalled."

Outside Quebec, the Conservatives are generally in a strong position. Their support comes in at 63 per cent in Alberta, 38.4 per cent in British Columbia and 49.9 per cent in Atlantic Canada.

The poll shows almost half of respondents believe Harper and his government have lived up to their expectations, while another 10 per cent say he has exceeded their expectations. At the same time, 36 per cent say the Conservatives have fallen short.

But Harper's success may be oddly limiting the Conservatives' growth potential. Nearly 40 per cent of voters say the performance of Harper and his government would be the same if they held a majority.

And Graves said "if there is a warning signal for the Tories, from a national perspective, it is that the comfort with the direction of the government is lower than the comfort with the direction of the country." Sixty per cent said the country is heading in the right direction, but only 50 per cent said the government was heading in the right direction.

With Parliament set to resume sitting today, the Tories hold 125 seats in the 308-seat Commons, the Liberals 102, the Bloc 50, and the NDP 29. André Arthur sits as an Independent MP and there is one vacancy.

On the international front, support for sending troops to Afghanistan is eroding but support for one of Harper's related goals — improving relations with Canada's U.S. allies — is strong.

Canada has about 2,200 troops in Afghanistan, most of them based in Kandahar. Thirty-two Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have been killed in the country since 2002.

Nearly nine in 10 respondents attach "some importance" or "high importance" to improving the quality of Canada-U.S. relations.

And 43 per cent say relations with the Americans are improving, while 35 per cent see no change. In contrast, 21 per cent say relations with the U.S. are worsening.

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