

Fierce fight for Ontario

New poll shows Liberals far ahead in Toronto

But in surrounding areas, Tories have taken slim lead

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SEAN GORDON

OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—The Liberals are way out ahead in Toronto with just over two weeks left in the election campaign, but the rest of Ontario is turning into a tight battle with the opposition Conservatives, a new poll shows.

The Liberal lead in Toronto, where the party holds all but one seat now, is 46 per cent to 24 per cent for the Tories.

Overall in Ontario, the Liberals hold a slim lead, with 38 per cent support to 36 for the Conservatives.

In the highly prized 905 region surrounding Toronto, the poll shows the Tories have now eked out a four-point lead, which remains within the margin of error for those ridings. They also lead in eastern Ontario, the poll, conducted by EKOS Research Associates for the *Toronto Star* and *La Presse*, shows. The Liberals lead in Toronto and Northern Ontario. The two parties are neck and neck in southwestern Ontario.

The good news for the Liberals, according to an analysis done by EKOS, is that they seem to be down to a solid core of voters, whose commitment is strong and "whose suspicion of Stephen Harper and the Conservatives is, if anything, stronger."

And the pollsters see possible growth for the Liberals among NDP supporters. NDP strength in Ontario is pegged at 20 per cent.

When the election was called Nov. 29, the Liberals held 74 of Ontario's 106 seats, the Conservatives held 23, the NDP seven and there were two independent MPs.

Nationally, the poll shows the Conservatives maintaining the lead they established earlier this week, with 36 per cent support to 30.8 per cent for the Liberals. The NDP is at 17.5 per cent, the Bloc at 10.6 per cent and the Green party at 4.7 per cent.

The margin of error for the national figures, based on a sample size of 1,968 canvassed Jan. 3 to 5, is plus or minus 2.2 percentage points, 19 times in 20.

The margin of error for the Ontario figures is 3.7 points.

In the 2004 federal election, the Liberals won a minority government with 36.7 per cent of the vote. The Tories had 29.6 per cent support, and the NDP 15.7 per cent.

Nationally, the new poll indicates NDP support is waffling and the Tories remain in the ascendancy in Quebec.

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The election is in a crucial phase that will culminate in the leaders' debates on Monday and Tuesday nights.

"This is a volatile stage of the campaign, this is where things will start to coalesce," said EKOS president Frank Graves.

Despite a slight downturn from midweek, the Conservatives appear to be holding what has become a clear advantage over the Liberals. If the numbers hold, they would be enough support to give Tory Leader Stephen Harper a minority government.

But the poll also shows that the electorate remains volatile, and that Harper's gains remain tenuous.

"This is far from over ... but what it shows is that (Harper) has managed to elevate his game beyond being a one-issue, accountability and ethics-driven leader," Graves said.

Harper is seen as a more credible leader than in the past — he has nosed ahead of Prime Minister Paul Martin as the leader with the most positive vision of the country — and while most voters still foresee a Liberal victory, a growing number are predicting a Conservative minority.

What was a good news week for the Tories can only be seen as a deflating turn for the Liberals, and perhaps more significantly for the NDP.

According to a series of indicators used to measure the intensity of party allegiances, EKOS has found that the Liberals and the Bloc benefit from the most committed voters, while NDP supporters are the most likely to switch parties before election day.

"The NDP has the least sticky vote. It's not that people don't like what they're saying, or don't like Jack Layton ... the idea of a Stephen Harper government, which has become less objectionable throughout the rest of the political spectrum, is just as anathema in the NDP camp as it was the last time around," said Graves. "They are highly prone to a Liberal message that 'We're going to have a Conservative government.'"

Though the road ahead for the NDP remains perilous, the party is the second choice of a plurality of voters, and could still make gains.

There are also a few glimmers of hope for the Liberals.

First, the Tory surge mirrors a mid-campaign swing in the 2004 election, which the Liberals won.

Graves said the Conservative support in Quebec is still rickety, and that Martin may be able to tantalize younger voters with a message that's heavy on environment policy — a key policy issue in Quebec that is also seen as a Harper weakness.

Given the Liberals' foot-dragging on the Kyoto protocol on climate change, the strategy presents certain risks, but Graves says it has the potential to salvage Liberal support among disengaged younger voters.

On the Tory side of the equation, Graves said crime and ethics, while subsidiary issues, are gaining importance, and could provide an opening for further gains in British Columbia and Ontario.

Digging down in to the regional breakdowns, there are indications Tory support is solidifying in Quebec at the expense of both the Bloc and the Liberals.

In Quebec, the situation appears to have changed radically in the last week or so, with Tory support

doubling and surging to the point where they now lead the Liberals in the Eastern Townships — which holds the party's best hopes for seats.

While the Tories are now the second-choice of a growing number of Quebecers, Graves cautioned that the province's electorate may still be trying the Tories on for size, and that the situation could change.

In terms of key issues in the campaign, health care was listed as the overwhelming priority, followed by the environment. Accountability, crime and the economy followed.

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