



Pollster predicts cliff-hanger

23% say anyone but Ignatieff Pollster sees a cliff-hanger

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STAFF REPORTER

Dark horse candidate Stéphane Dion appears to have the most potential for growth in voting at the upcoming Liberal leadership convention, according to a new Ekos poll for the *Saturday Star*.

The current front-runner, Michael Ignatieff, who leads on everything from first-ballot support to fundraising, appears the candidate most likely to stall. Dion is the leadership candidate most often picked when delegates are asked who their second choice is, and again when they are asked their third choice.

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Ignatieff, on the other hand, trails the other three top contenders in both categories.

EKOS surveyed 1,124 delegates to the Nov. 28-Dec. 3 convention, about a quarter of delegates.

Asked if there is "any candidate you would definitely NOT like to see win," only 3 per cent of those polled said the former Quebec cabinet minister. Meanwhile, 23 per cent identified Ignatieff (Etobicoke-Lakeshore) and 18 per cent named Bob Rae, former NDP premier of Ontario. Gerard Kennedy, who resigned as Ontario education minister last spring, scored the lowest at 2 per cent.

The poll is the first to give any sense of delegate intentions beyond the first ballot.

Dion is the "man everyone seems prepared to consider," said EKOS president Frank Graves, adding he could end up with the momentum coming off the second ballot in Montreal.

But so could anybody else among the top four —



Former Harvard professor Michael Ignatieff (left) and former federal environment minister Stéphane Dion will face off against former Ontario education minister Gerard Kennedy for the leadership of the Liberal party.

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Stéphane Dion.

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although Kennedy appears to be the weakest in terms of picking up potential support.

Still, the picture isn't all rosy for Dion, who could face problems with delegate attendance.

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While Graves believes the poll results raise the most warning flags for Ignatieff, he predicts a cliff-hanger at the convention.

"This looks like it will be one of those leadership conventions that people will talk about for years," said Graves. "With a race this tight, a great convention speech, a last-minute gaffe, or the manoeuvres of the (four) lower-tier candidates and their organizers could provide the puff to put one of the candidates over the top."

The EKOS sample was weighted to reflect the population of voting delegates at the convention. It mirrors "Super Weekend" delegate selection results, with 30.2 per cent of delegates surveyed supporting Ignatieff, 20.3 per cent for Rae, 17.3 per cent for Kennedy and 16 per cent for Dion.

Delegates are bound to vote for their "Super Weekend" choices on the first ballot in Montreal. On subsequent ballots, they become free agents.

EKOS found 21 per cent of delegates prefer Dion as their second choice, ahead of Rae and Kennedy. Trailing was Ignatieff, with 8 per cent.

Ignatieff advisers have argued that, starting at 30 per cent, all their candidate requires is incremental growth. But the EKOS poll suggests Ignatieff's lead could be hugely reduced after the second ballot, a significant boost to his rivals.

The undecided vote is also a big unknown. Asked for their second choice, 38 per cent of delegates declined to answer.

While Kennedy didn't necessarily shine, Graves said he couldn't be counted out. His delegates are "fiercely loyal, determined to come to the convention and convinced he is the man to beat the Conservatives in the next election."

In contrast, Dion had the lowest delegate attendance intentions, with 13 per cent of his delegates saying they are unlikely to be able to travel to Montreal.

The poll shows Ignatieff's support for the resolution recognizing Quebec as a nation could be his "Achilles heel," Graves said. A majority of delegates polled not only oppose adopting the "nation" resolution at the convention, they reject the term conceptually.

Ignatieff's position, while popular with his own delegates, "has no resonance among the supporters of other delegates," said Graves. "In order to prevent stalling on the third ballot, he must soften his attachment to, and ownership of, the recognition concept."

Ignatieff's strongest asset, said Graves, is that he's seen as having the best chance of winning an election against Prime Minister Stephen Harper. On this question, Ignatieff scored 36 per cent, while Rae was second with 24 per cent, followed by Kennedy and Dion tied at 12 per cent.

Rae did well as a second and third choice, according to Graves, arguing that his challenge is to ensure that he will be seen throughout the voting as the best Ignatieff alternative.

Rae also has lower negative ratings than Ignatieff. When Kennedy and Dion supporters were asked who they don't want to see win, 32 per cent of Kennedy's supporters and 39 per cent of Dion's listed

Ignatieff, compared to 18 and 7 per cent, respectively, for Rae.

"Clearly, there is an ABI (Anybody But Ignatieff) movement," said Graves. "There is also resistance to Rae, though not as deeply entrenched."

Four other leadership candidates — Toronto lawyer Martha Hall Findlay and MPs Joe Volpe (Eglinton-Lawrence), Ken Dryden (York Centre) and Scott Brison (Kings-Hants) — each scored under 5 per cent of the vote on "Super Weekend."

The EKOS poll was conducted using a delegate list of ridings, commissions, clubs and other organizations, obtained by the *Star*. It did not include about 850 *ex officio* delegates such as MPs and riding presidents.

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