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Liberal support slipping: Poll

Gap closing in Ontario as Liberal support falls
Canadians witnessing 'remarkable turn of affairs,' Pollster

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The federal Liberals are headed toward minority government, according to a Toronto Star poll released today.

Prime Minister Paul Martin's party is slumping in support in the first week of the federal election campaign, according to the poll, conducted by EKOS Research Associates.

The Liberals have 38 per cent support among decided voters — a three percentage point drop since last month — while the Conservatives and New Democrats are climbing, especially in Ontario.

The poll conducted for the Star and La Presse, shows Liberal support bleeding to the Conservatives, at 30.4 per cent, and the NDP, at 18 per cent. The Bloc Québécois is at 10.7 per cent and support for other parties is at 2.8 per cent. The Tory and NDP numbers nationally represent two percentage point climbs for each of them since April.

EKOS interviewed 1,306 Canadians 18 years or older between Tuesday and yesterday. Results are considered accurate to within 2.7 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

"A minority Liberal government would seem to be an optimistic conclusion for (Prime Minister) Paul Martin," says EKOS president Frank Graves, who believes Canadians are witnessing a "remarkable turn of affairs."

The Liberals held 168 of the seats in the House of Commons when Martin called the election last Sunday for June 28. The Conservatives held 72, the Bloc Québécois 33, and the NDP 14. There were 10 independents and four vacancies.

There are 308 seats up for grabs in the election.

Under Jean Chrétien, the Liberals won three consecutive majority governments, in 1993, 1997 and 2000.

A party needs to win more than 154 seats to form a majority government.

Canada is in the middle of a real political race, nowhere more so than in Ontario, the EKOS poll shows. The Liberals are still in the lead at 40 per cent, but the margin over their rivals is much closer

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- > [Election section](#)
- > [Voices: Layton comments](#)
- > [Graphic: May 28 poll results](#)
- > [David Olive's election blog](#)
- > [Conservative platform](#)
- > [Liberal platform](#)
- > [NDP platform](#)
- > [Voices: Election issues](#)

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than it has been in a decade. The Conservatives are now at 35 per cent in Ontario, while the NDP is at 22 per cent.

This is a radically different Ontario than in the past three elections, when Liberals won nearly all of the province's 103 seats, Graves says.

He noted that in 2000, the ruling Liberals went into the fall election campaign with a 50-point lead over any other contender in Ontario. Now, that lead is just five percentage points ahead of the newly merged Conservative party, led by Stephen Harper.

Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty and his recent budget played a large part in making Canada's largest province such a volatile place for the Liberals, Graves says.

He says his polling shows an unusually high degree of interest in the May 18 Ontario budget — which raised taxes to pay for health care — and a record-high level of antipathy toward McGuinty and the budget measures. "It may well have been the most poorly received budget in contemporary political history in Canada," Graves says.

A full 80 per cent of Ontarians were interested in the budget and disapproval outpaced approval for its tax-hiking measures by about five to one.

"Ontarians are furious with Dalton McGuinty and his budget. They're looking for someone to get," Graves says. "Dalton McGuinty is four years away from his day of reckoning at the polls, so guess what? Paul Martin gets it."

In addition to the budget, Graves says there are two other "principal forces" behind the Liberal decline.

One is the sponsorship scandal, which broke in February when Auditor-General Sheila Fraser reported that \$100 million from a \$250 million program went to Liberal-friendly advertising agencies in Quebec without any accountability, prompting recent criminal charges.

And, Graves says, there continues to be "a broad questioning of whether Mr. Martin has revealed the right stuff to justify leading the country."

If the trend toward the opposition parties continues, Graves says, it could lead to "serious, perhaps insurmountable obstacles to a majority government.

"In fact, the plausibility of a Stephen Harper-led government is rising dramatically."

Apart from Ontario, the only region the Liberals lead in is Atlantic Canada, where they're at 61 per cent support.

But they are running in second or third place everywhere else.

In Quebec, they are well behind the Bloc Québécois, with 36 per cent compared to the Bloc's 45 per cent support. In British Columbia, Liberals are in third place, with 29 per cent, behind the NDP's 30 per cent and well behind Conservatives who have 37 per cent.

B.C. candidates are feeling the heat of that tight race.

"There's a large undecided vote, there's a large antipathy toward politics in general," says Keith Martin, a Liberal candidate in British Columbia who was once a member of the Canadian Alliance party.

"We have to prove that we can do the job, with strong leadership, on the issues that people really care about. And obviously, accountability, health care and the economy are three really important issues."

Conservative candidate Gary Lunn told reporters, "I've never seen this level of anger yet. It's enormous. People want change."

Alberta remains a Liberal wasteland, with 55 per cent of respondents solidly Conservative, while Liberals have just 31 per cent. The Prairies show the Liberals and Conservatives virtually tied, at 36 per cent for the governing party and 38 per cent for the Tories. The NDP has 23 per cent support in the Prairies.

"Voters are actually seeing this race as offering better and clearer choices than the last federal election and the zest and appetite for change is strongest amongst the growing cadre of Canadians who feel it is time for a new party in Ottawa," Graves said.

Voters, however, seem still unaware or skeptical that this election has developed into a real race, with more than two-thirds of respondents — 67 per cent — saying they expected the Liberals to win. But 61 per cent of respondents believe there will be a Liberal minority government.

Almost half of the voters polled across the country are still not settled on which party they will support. A full 46 per cent said they were somewhat or very likely to change their minds before voting day on June 28.

The most committed voters are supporters of the Bloc Québécois, with more than three-quarters of them, 76 per cent, saying they were unlikely to change their minds before June 28. Among Liberal, New Democratic and Conservative party voters, leanings are much softer.

The poll is good news for the NDP, Graves said. It can boast about a doubling of its support in vote-rich Ontario, and serious billing as the party most likely to be cited as voters' second choice.

He gives some credit to the performance of new leader Jack Layton.

Twenty-two per cent of respondents said they would move their vote to the NDP if they abandoned their first choice, while 20 per cent said the Conservatives were second choice and 17 per cent identified Liberals as the next-best thing.

The Green party enters that mix too, with 5 per cent of voters saying it could be a second-choice ballot pick.

There are some pockets of comfort for Martin in these otherwise bleak polling figures, Graves noted.

In Quebec, the Liberal slide seems to have abated, and overall in Canada, Martin and his Liberals are still seen as the party to beat.

But that is going to require strategy and messages that have not yet surfaced in the campaign to any

demonstrable effect in boosting Liberal fortunes, Graves said.

Rather, the party seems to be going down rather than up — not unusual for a governing party, but dangerous when its support is so thin at the outset of the campaign and voter sentiment so volatile.

With files from Les Whittington

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