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Merger works for Conservatives

Former Tories hanging in, poll shows

Predictions of huge defection off mark

SUSAN DELACOURT
OTTAWA BUREAU CHIEF

OTTAWA—"Progressive" is gone from the name, but Progressive Conservatives are hanging in with the new party.

The merger of the old Canadian Alliance and PC parties appears to be working, a new Toronto Star poll shows.

According to the poll, the new Conservative Party of Canada, formed in late 2003, has attracted big blocks of support from the two former parties, defying critics — especially the Liberals — who wanted to portray the new entity as a hostile takeover of the old PC party by the Alliance.

A full 71 per cent of the people who voted Progressive Conservative in the last election have flocked to the Conservative party in this campaign, the poll shows. The Alliance contingent is there in greater proportion, with 92 per cent of its supporters in 2000 ready to vote Conservative in the June 28 federal election.

But predictions of a large-scale defection of PC voters to the Liberals turn out to be off the mark. Only 18 per cent of Progressive Conservative voters from the last election are now calling themselves Liberals, says the poll, which was carried out this week by EKOS Research Associates.

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

The poll shows Liberals have 38 per cent support among decided voters, with the Conservatives at 30.4, the NDP at 18 and the Bloc Québécois at 10.7.

Prime Minister Paul Martin has been castigating the new Conservative party for doing away with the word "progressive," arguing it signals a hard-right shift in its politics. He has pointed to former Tory MP Scott Brison, who defected to the Liberals in December in protest against the merger, as an example of how Liberals would ultimately reap the benefits of this shift.

Joe Clark, who led the Progressive Conservatives in the 2000 election, has also issued dire warnings about the merged party and actually endorsed Martin in backhanded fashion a few weeks ago, calling him "the devil you know."

But neither Clark nor Brison appear to be typical, with fewer than one in five former PCs crossing over to the Liberals in this election.

In fact, it appears to be Martin and his party who are having the tougher time holding on to former Liberal support from the 2000 election.

Only 58 per cent of the people who voted Liberal in 2000 are ready to vote with the party again this time, according to the Star poll.

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Moreover, 22 per cent of those former Liberal voters are now saying they're with the merged Conservative Party of Canada. Another 15 per cent have moved to the NDP, which has become an important, second-choice contender in this election.

A full 23 per cent of respondents identified the NDP as the party to which they could move if their support changes before the vote.

Interestingly, the Liberals have only lost 3 per cent of their 2000 vote to the Bloc, but that 3 per cent is concentrated in Quebec, where the ruling party is expected to suffer major setbacks.

All in all, the Liberal voters of 2000 appear to be the least faithful to the party "brand." New Democrats, for instance, have hung on to 78 per cent of their voters from the last election, while the Bloc Québécois has retained 89 per cent of its support in 2000.

"There's a looseness of connection there with the Liberals that you don't see with the other parties," said EKOS president Frank Graves.

Graves speculates that some of the Liberals' missing support can be blamed on the internal party strife of the past few years, which divided the party between supporters of Martin and former prime minister Jean Chrétien.

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