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Harper heads for minority

NDP at 19% nationally, Bloc at 54% in Quebec
Tories now leading among voters in Ontario

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The Conservatives are poised to win a minority government on June 28, according to a Toronto Star poll released today.



LUCAS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR
Conservative Leader Stephen Harper waves to supporters at the Latvian Canadian Cultural Centre near Eglinton Ave. E. and the Don Valley Parkway yesterday.

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Now the front-runners in the election campaign, the Conservatives have 33.8 per cent support nationally compared to the Liberals' 30 per cent, and are leading in almost every region of the country, including Ontario, where more than a third of the seats in the House of Commons are up for grabs.

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In Ontario, Conservatives now have 38 per cent support while the Liberals, who now have almost all the province's seats, are at just 34 per cent. Ontario has 106 of the 308 seats across the country.

The New Democrats are holding strong nationally, with 18.9 per cent, and even more in Ontario, with 21 per cent support.

The big news, though, is that the Conservatives have translated their forward momentum in the election campaign to a clear lead over a ruling Liberal party once expected to waltz to a fourth consecutive majority government under the new leadership of Prime Minister [Paul Martin](#).

Canadians may be getting used to the idea of Conservative prime minister [Stephen Harper](#) instead, the poll shows.

"The public is catching up with the notion that a Conservative government is entirely possible and those turning to the Conservatives do not appear to be alarmed," said Frank Graves, president of EKOS Research Associates, which carried out the survey for the Toronto Star and La Presse.

"The Conservative party is moving into a position to win."

Graves said "the key move is declining support for the Liberals, rather than burgeoning support for the Conservatives.

"Somewhat astonishingly, the prospect of a Conservative majority government is now coming into focus."

The Conservatives' surge into the lead was tracked from Monday to Wednesday, through 2,117 interviews with Canadians 18 years of age and older.

The results are considered accurate within 2.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

But while the poll shows that Canadians may not be alarmed at the prospect of a Conservative victory, they also may not be fully aware that it's a real possibility yet.

When EKOS asked which party people expected to win the election, more than half, 52 per cent of respondents said the Liberals would emerge victorious.

More than two-thirds — 69 per cent — said they believed Canada would end up with a minority government after June 28.

Yet the Conservatives' new, front-running status would appear to indicate that any minority government would not be led by the Liberals.

Poll respondents did not show any clear preference on whether a Liberal or Conservative government, minority or majority, would be best for the country. In fact, 26 per cent thought that a Liberal minority would be best, while almost that same number, 25 per cent, thought a Conservative majority would be the best thing for Canada.

EKOS found a lot of volatility in the electorate as well as areas where there is potential for the tide to turn against the Conservatives.

Women and young people are most resistant to the Conservatives' lure, the poll found.

For instance, while 38 per cent of the male respondents were leaning to the Conservatives, just 30 per cent of the women polled were Conservative-inclined.

'Somewhat astonishingly, the prospect of a Conservative majority government is now coming into focus.'

EKOS Research president Frank Graves

"If the election was held today with only women, the Liberals would clearly win," Graves says.

Martin is due to make a major speech to business women in Toronto today.

The age divide shows up in the under-25 set, who are more likely to vote Liberal than for any other party, the poll shows.

But they are also far less likely to vote.

In the meantime, the Conservatives are the favourite of 38 per cent of people aged 45-64 and 43 per cent of respondents over the age of 65.

These are also the people who told EKOS researchers in greater numbers that they were more likely to be voting on June 28.

"Younger Canadians, who are overwhelmingly more optimistic, progressive and tolerant in their outlook, appear to have ceded the future of the country they will inherit to a much more pessimistic, intolerant and skeptical cohort: the 'grumpies,'" Graves says.

Voters' interest levels in this election are running high, with 68 per cent of people saying they were "absolutely likely" to cast a ballot.

Another 17 per cent of people said they were very likely to vote.

During the 2000 election, voter turnout hovered at just 60 per cent.

Conservative-leaning voters seem most highly motivated, with 74 per cent saying they were absolutely likely to cast a ballot.

The poll also shows that fully 38 per cent of Canadians are either somewhat or very likely to change their minds about their voting choice between now and June 28.

"Little has gelled; there is still substantial superficiality to current attachments, which are capable of profound movement," Graves said.

The problem for Liberals wanting to counter the Conservative trend is that their vote is loose and apparently uninspired by the campaign to date.

"Current Liberal supporters are united more by a fear of Harper than by the vision put forth by the Liberal party," Graves said.

Liberal fortunes continue to plummet in Quebec.

The Bloc Québécois is now soaring at 54 per cent, with its voters least likely to change their vote, while the Liberals are down at 22 per cent support.

EKOS is finding good news for the New Democrats in its polling, describing the party as currently in the midst of a "renaissance."

"The NDP (is) well over double their support from 2000 and now appearing poised to exert considerable influence in a minority parliament," Graves said.

NDP support is concentrated in key areas where there is real prospect of electoral gains, EKOS found, such as in Toronto, British Columbia, the Prairies and the Atlantic region.

The big problem for the NDP, Graves said, is that the polling reveals some worry that supporting New Democrats would lead to a Conservative victory.

A full 29 per cent of NDP supporters expressed this concern, while 41 per cent of Liberals — who might be tempted to back New Democrats — were worried about inadvertently casting a vote that would increase the chances of a Conservative government.

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