

Liberals and Tories in dead heat: poll

Harper still leads Ignatieff as best for PM

Megan O'Toole, National Post

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Chris Wattie/Reuters

A new poll shows that the Liberals and the Tories are in a virtual tie. But Prime Minister Stephen Harper still holds a slight edge over Michael Ignatieff.

The Tories and the Liberals are moving into a dead heat in public support as speculation swirls about a possible fall election, a new poll shows.

The gap between Stephen Harper and Michael Ignatieff as Canadians' preferred prime minister is also narrowing, with only about three percentage points separating the two federal leaders, compared with about five points in the spring.

The latest poll by Nanos Research, completed by a random sample of about 1,000 Canadians between July 30 and August 2, shows 33.8% of the electorate would cast a ballot for the Liberals, versus 31.3% for the Conservative Party. The numbers are considered accurate to within 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

From a leadership standpoint, 29.5% of Canadians said Mr. Harper would make the best prime minister, while 26.2% opted for Mr. Ignatieff.

"What the polling shows is neither of the two major parties has any significant advantage," pollster Nik Nanos said on Monday. "Tough talk aside, it's really in the interest of neither of them to have an election. It would be risky for both."

Perhaps most worrying to the Conservatives, Mr. Nanos said, is while they are maintaining their solid base of western support, their numbers in the key battleground of Ontario dropped seven percentage points in the past month.

The New Democrats, however, appear to be gaining steam countrywide as the party works to craft a more mainstream image, even considering a name change to eliminate the word "new." Support for the NDP rose about two points from a month earlier, and leader Jack Layton's popularity received an equivalent boost.

While the party is still firmly in third place, noted Stephen Clarkson, an expert in Canadian politics at the University of Toronto, the NDP could be motivated to trigger an election should the upward polling trend continue.

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