

Tightening race puts Harper in minority territory

Tories drop to 34% support, poll shows

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FROM MONDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
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With eight days remaining until Canada votes and anxiety growing over the economy, the race between Liberals and Conservatives is tightening in Ontario and Quebec, sending Stephen Harper's hopes for a majority government fluttering further out of reach.

CTV News said last night that Scotiabank, in an economic report to its clients, is predicting a recession, marked by a housing slump, a drop in exports to the U.S. and rising unemployment.

Meanwhile, national polls taken at the end of last week had the Conservatives drooping at 34-per-cent support from decided voters, significantly below the majority government benchmark.


A Harris/Decima poll for The Canadian Press had the party 10 points ahead of the Liberals, and a poll by Nanos Research reported the Conservatives only four points ahead. The New Democrats were shown at about 20 per cent with the Greens and Bloc Québécois accounting for the rest.

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Dion, Layton take on each other

The leaders of Canada's two main opposition parties shifted their focus from fighting Prime Minister Stephen Harper to fighting each other Saturday after a new post-debate poll placed them in a statistical dead heat.

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In populous Central Canada, where the Conservatives have been counting on a voter surge to vault them into a commanding lead, they are falling farther and farther behind the Bloc Québécois in Quebec and are looking stalled in Ontario's 20 most tightly contested ridings.

Moreover, the party's key asset – the leadership attributes of Mr. Harper in comparison to those of Liberal Stéphane Dion and New Democrat Jack Layton – showed signs of not adding a boost to the party's fuel tank.

A Nanos Research poll on the weekend reported only 12 per cent of Canadians had a better impression of Mr. Harper than when the campaign started, while 29 per cent had a worse impression. The poll has a margin of error of 2.8 per cent.

And Strategic Counsel, polling for CTV and The Globe and Mail, reported that voters who watched last week's French debate gave Mr. Dion

a consistently higher approval rating than Mr. Harper.

There was one exception: they thought Mr. Harper sounded more prime ministerial than Mr. Dion.

But 43 per cent thought the Conservative Leader performed worse than they expected. And they showed a preference for Mr. Dion over Mr. Harper on issues of honesty, likeability and ability to deal with the U.S. financial crisis.

The crisis is a reminder that the economy has emerged firmly as the No. 1 issue on Canadians' minds – an issue that will take a firmer stand on the campaign's centre stage when the Conservatives release their party platform Tuesday and Statistics Canada on Friday releases its latest employment data Friday.

Mr. Harper has had to fend off intense criticism from leaders of the other parties over job losses in key economic sectors such as manufacturing and forestry, while he has argued that his previous minority government has been on the right track in managing the country economically.

Interestingly enough, although support for the Conservatives has either dropped sharply or stayed the same in the battleground ridings of the three most populous provinces of Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia, consistently more than half the electorate in those constituencies – with the exception of a brief dip below the 50-per-cent mark in Ontario – say they think the country is on the right track.

A Harris/Decima poll for The Canadian Press shows the Conservatives gliding downhill from a high of 41-per-cent support on Sept. 11 to 34 per cent on Oct. 4.

The most dramatic decline in their fortunes has been in Quebec. Strategic Counsel polling shows Conservative candidates in the key contest constituencies in the province to have less support now than they did in the 2006 election (although the number falls within the polls' margin of error which, because of the small sample, is plus or minus 4.9 per cent).

The drop corresponded with Conservative policy announcements on cuts in funding to the arts and changes to the youth justice system that would allow 14-year-olds to be imprisoned for life – two positions unpopular in Quebec.

“They allowed themselves to be seen as outsiders, as a party with views outside those of most Quebecers,” said Strategic Counsel pollster Peter Donolo. “The dream of building a majority in Quebec has evaporated. All eyes now are on Ontario.”

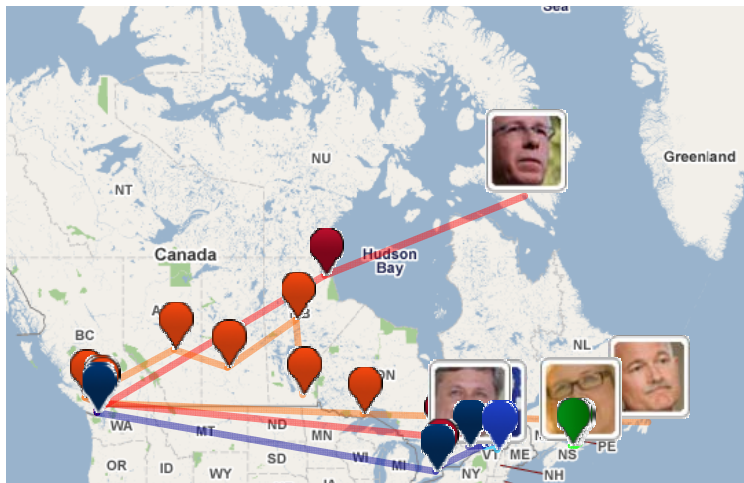
If, as Mr. Donolo suggests, the Conservative decline in Quebec is irreversible, then the battleground will be Ontario – and a campaign to squeeze every possible seat out of the voters who live in the 905 area-code ridings surrounding Toronto and the adjacent 519 ridings in southwestern Ontario.

But Harris/Decima shows Conservative support eroding while NDP support grows – and in many ways, the two parties are targeting the same swing voters: the so-called economic battlers with pressing kitchen-table concerns – and the Liberals are staying flat.

And while daily polling by Strategic Counsel of the closest 905 constituencies shows Conservative strength holding firm, it is fading in the populous 519 constituencies.

With a report from Kevin Carmichael

Week 5 of the campaign



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