



August 29, 2008

Slight lead for Grits Liberals 35%, Tories 33% in new poll

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Call it a case of "Grit-lock."

The federal Conservatives, chomping at the bit for an election, can't shake off the Liberals. And the Liberals can't seem to pull away from the Tories.

The latest Nanos Research poll for Sun Media shows national support for the Liberals at 35%, and for the Conservatives at 33%, virtually no shift from the last time the pollster asked Canadians which federal party they would consider voting for.

In fact, there has been very little change in support for the two major parties since late 2007.

The NDP stands at 17% and the Greens at 7%.

The poll was conducted during the period in which Prime Minister Stephen Harper publicly floated the idea that he might pull the plug on his own minority government despite having passed a law setting the next election date in October 2009.

"If you look at the numbers, they really should not be having an election," said Nik Nanos, president and CEO of the polling firm. Harper has not been able to move the electorate in large numbers toward his party, and Liberal leader Stephane Dion remains a question mark for voters, Nanos said.

The party standings, however, show two intriguing developments: Continuing voter volatility in Quebec, and gains for the NDP.

Support for the NDP over the past three months has climbed from 13% from 5% in Quebec, whereas Bloc Quebecois support has plunged to 31% from 40%.

Nanos suggests that with sovereignty dreams waning among Quebecers, those who might previously have used the Bloc as a "protest vote" are now considering the NDP as a better place to park.

The New Democrats have made garnering Quebec support a goal in the past year.

Much of the new NDP support, however, is focused on the Montreal area, so the province is still difficult to read. In the last federal election, it showed the "greatest volatility," said Nanos. "Quebec is the province to watch."

In the other province that tends to determine election outcomes, Ontario, support for the Tories dipped to 29% from 33%.

Bad news for Tories

Again, the beneficiary was the NDP, whose numbers rose to 21% from 17%. Liberal support stayed flat, although at a healthy 42%.

The Ontario numbers "can't be good news" for the Conservatives, said Nanos. In 2006 they won seats by very narrow margins. This time, Tory candidates will have to stand on their government's record in very close races. "It's not going to be as easy as it was in 2006."

Surprisingly, while the Conservatives continue to lead lustily in the West, the Liberals have essentially held their own there, despite the summer launch of Dion's "Green Shift" environmental-economic plan.

Many had predicted Westerners would be intensely hostile to the plan, hurting the Grit leader's poll numbers in the West.

The poll was conducted Aug. 20 to Aug. 27 among 1,000 adult Canadians and is considered accurate to within +/- 3.4 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.