

COVER STORY / ELECTION 2009

LIBERALS LEAD, POLL SAYS, BUT NDP COULD GAIN

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VANCOUVER -- The B.C. Liberals have staked out a solid lead heading into the final days of campaigning, but a concerted wooing of the soft Green vote by the NDP could close that gap and allow the party to eke out a victory, a poll from Innovative Research Group indicates.

The poll, provided to The Globe and Mail, shows the Liberals with 46 per cent support, down three percentage points from a week ago, but in line with their showing in the opening week of the campaign. The New Democrats get 37 per cent support, down two points from last week. The Greens are at 11 per cent, up two points. Those slight variations aren't statistically significant, however.

Despite the nine-point lead for the Liberals, an NDP loss on Tuesday is far from a foregone conclusion, said Greg Lyle, managing director for Innovative Research Group. Swing voters - defined by Mr. Lyle as those who are uncommitted or may jump to other parties - account for a fifth of the electorate, more than enough to wipe out the Liberal lead.

And they are not likely to vote Liberal, meaning the party does not have much room to grow. "The Liberal support is peaked," he said.

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It's a different story for the New Democrats. Although the party's core vote is not quite as rock-solid as that of the Liberals, the NDP could pick up defecting Green voters, according to Mr. Lyle's analysis. Less than half of the 11-per-cent Green support is firmly committed. If much of the party's soft support bled to the New Democrats, the party would have cut the Liberal lead significantly. Mr. Lyle noted that the nature of voting patterns is such that the NDP could win a parliamentary majority even if its popular vote is three or four points lower than that of the Liberals, as was the case in the 1996 election.

But the key is to scoop up those Green votes. To do so, the party will need to convince wavering Green supporters that their dislike of Liberal Leader Gordon Campbell should decide their vote, not the NDP's promise - unpopular in this part of the electorate - to scrap the provincial carbon tax. In the first week of the election, the NDP campaign was hit by several broadsides from environmental groups unhappy with the carbon-tax promise. Any high-profile repeat this weekend, Mr. Lyle said, could prevent the NDP from gathering up the Green votes it needs.

For the Liberals, the road to victory is less complicated, he said. "At this point, the odds favour the Liberals." The party has stronger core support, and the dominance of economic concerns in the campaign has played to Liberal strengths.

The nine-point Liberal lead in the Innovative Research Group poll is in line with a Mustel Group survey released on Thursday that had the Liberals with 47-per-cent support and the New Democrats with 38-per-cent support. But an Angus Reid Strategies poll conducted for The Globe and Mail and CTV released on Thursday had the Liberals with just a two-point lead, similar to the findings of another online poll by Harris Decima.

The Innovative Research Group poll is an online survey of 753 panelists conducted from March 20 to April 15, with a second major survey of 610 panelists conducted from May 6 to May 9. A random sample of 600 with a 100 per cent response rate would have a margin of error of four percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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