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Ontarians fear, respect Harper: poll

Survey gives Conservatives four point advantage in the key battleground province

by [Charlie Gillis](#) on Wednesday, April 6, 2011 6:00am - [8 Comments](#)



Conservatives hoping for a breakthrough in “Battleground Ontario” are once again running up against suspicion of Stephen Harper, a survey done for *Maclean's* and *680 News* indicates.

When asked how they would vote if the election were held today, 37 per cent of respondents on [Innovative Research Group's](#) Canada 20/20 panel said they would cast ballots for the Conservatives, while 33 per cent indicated they would vote Liberal. NDP support stood at 14 per cent, while the Greens scored nine per cent.

The spread between the two front-running parties is well below that shown at the beginning of the campaign, when polls suggested Conservative support in Ontario was running as high as 47 per cent and Grit support around 33 per cent. Those [early results](#) led to speculation of a Conservative majority, as southwestern Ontario and the heavily populated areas around Toronto are home to a slew of hotly contested ridings that could tilt the outcome of the election.

Unfortunately for the Tories, the recent findings suggest Ontarians still have reservations about both Harper and the party.

Nearly six out of 10 respondents agreed with the statement “Stephen Harper scares me”—an increase over the number who said so in 2008. One out of two said they found the Conservative Party too extreme, and almost as many said they had a strongly unfavourable impression of the Prime Minister.

Still, Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff shouldn't plan his victory party just yet. While many Ontarians fear Harper, they also respect him: 34 per cent said they think he would make the best prime minister, compared to 26 per cent for Ignatieff and 15

per cent for the NDP's Jack Layton. Five per cent gave the nod to the Green party's Elizabeth May.

Moreover, notes Greg Lyle, Innovative's managing director, the proportion of respondents voicing a strongly favourable impression of the PM has ticked up a couple of points since 2008, to 20 per cent. Between these true believers and the 17 per cent who said they have a "somewhat favourable" view of the PM, says Lyle, the Tories would still be the top vote-getters in many Ontario ridings. "If you can get 40 per cent of voters excited about you, and that happens in particular areas, it can turn into seats," says Lyle. "That's the nature of their game."

But it is clear, adds Lyle, "there are some pretty good fundamentals for the Liberals in Ontario." Some 72 per cent of respondents now see the campaign as a two-horse race between the Conservatives and the Liberals, suggesting few Liberal votes will leak away to the NDP.

The task now for the Liberals, says Lyle, is to solidify that support, inspiring the sort of passion for their cause that committed Conservative voters tend to show for Harper.

"They're on a road to uniting the people who are opposed to Mr. Harper. But they haven't done it yet," he says. "They haven't got the NDP voters scared enough about splitting the vote to crystallize their potential."

The survey results were drawn from 754 randomly selected respondents who live in the province, and are part of Innova nation-wide online panel. Responses were gathered April 1-3 and the margin of error is plus or minus 3.57 percentage p 19 times out of 20. To join Innovative Research Group's Canada 20/20 panel, visit www.canada2020.com.



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