

## Harper's support sags in post-debate survey

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After Conservative Leader Stephen Harper spent last week's English and French debates fending off attacks from his four opponents, Tory support has slipped across the country in a broad range of categories, a new poll shows.

The poll was conducted for The Globe and Mail and Montreal's La Presse over the five days since the debates ended. Released Wednesday, it shows overall support dropping for the Conservatives and the Liberals since last month, with the other parties picking up small gains. The Tories are still in the lead, consistent with other polling. About 26 per cent of Canadians remain undecided.

But after enduring attacks from all four other leaders throughout each debate, Mr. Harper's Tories are slipping. They dropped in every poll category since the same questions were asked one month ago: best on crime, cutting taxes, the economy, delivering results, ethics, health and the environment, responding to the needs of each province, women's rights, relationship with the United States, vision for the future, representing Canada globally, understanding people like me, and securing the ability to live and work in French.

The biggest swings came in Quebec, which now appears to be favouring with New Democrat Leader Jack Layton.

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More people also now agree with the statements "Stephen Harper scares me" and "Conservative party too extreme," though such questions were asked only about Mr. Harper and his party.

And emerging between the lines of the poll are subtle signs that major policy announcements in the past month may indeed be swinging voters, some 20 per cent of whom the poll says have changed their mind, since the election was called, on who they plan to vote for.

For instance, the Conservatives have lost much ground in the "best on crime" category, while one of their more controversial pledges has been to stiffen penalties for young offenders of serious crimes. The Liberals, pushing a Green Shift that would base taxes on pollution rather than income, have seen an increase in the "best on cutting taxes" category, eating away at Tory support there. And Mr. Layton, who has loudly supported arts funding after a series of cuts made by Mr. Harper, has seen his own popularity and that of his party surge in Quebec – a province where the arts are valued heavily, and one where the NDP held just one seat when the election was called.

Quebeckers declared Mr. Layton the runaway winner of the English debate, and now think he would make the best Prime Minister of all the leaders, the poll shows.

The worsening economy, dominating the news over the past two weeks, also appears to have hurt the Conservatives. Asked which party is best on the economy a month ago, 33 per cent of Quebeckers and 43 per cent of the rest of Canada chose the Tories.

After the debate and the market losses, those percentages had dropped to 24 and 38, respectively.

While in Quebec this translated to a boost for the Liberals, it was the NDP who gained on Tory losses in the rest of Canada, indicating a split between French and English Canada on which party now offers the best economic platform.

If Quebec is to be a battleground next Tuesday, the Liberals don't appear set to be a factor. Mr. Layton and Mr. Duceppe are scoring very highly in the province as leaders, while the Bloc Quebecois has surged past the Tories and Liberals on several Quebec issues. And while 33 per cent of Quebeckers identified themselves as Liberal during the 2006 election, just 21 per cent do today, the poll says.

Also troubling for Tories are Quebec's perceptions of their leader. A full 46 per cent of Quebeckers find Mr. Harper "strongly unfavourable" (more than double

the number, 22 per cent, who thought that in January) while just 11 per cent find him "strongly favourable." The unfavourable totals are easily the highest of any party leader.

In comparison, 7 per cent of Quebecers find Mr. Layton strongly unfavourable, while 13 per cent find him strongly favourable. Mr. Duceppe's favourable numbers rose several points since his well-reviewed debate performances. Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion has also improved in the eyes of Quebecers, with his "strongly favourable" rating reaching per cent from just 3 per cent in the province a month ago.

For the debates, the poll showed mixed results as to which leader won. Mr. Harper and Green Party Leader Elizabeth May are shown to have been the best performers in the English debate, as judged by nearly all the provinces. Quebec, with separated poll results, instead declared Mr. Dion and Mr. Duceppe winners of the French debate.

When Canadians outside Quebec were asked which leader would make the best Prime Minister, 35 per cent said Mr. Harper, 22 per cent Mr. Layton, and 21 per cent Mr. Dion, whose numbers have gone up since last month. But in Quebec, it was Mr. Layton who won that category entirely, edging out Mr. Harper.

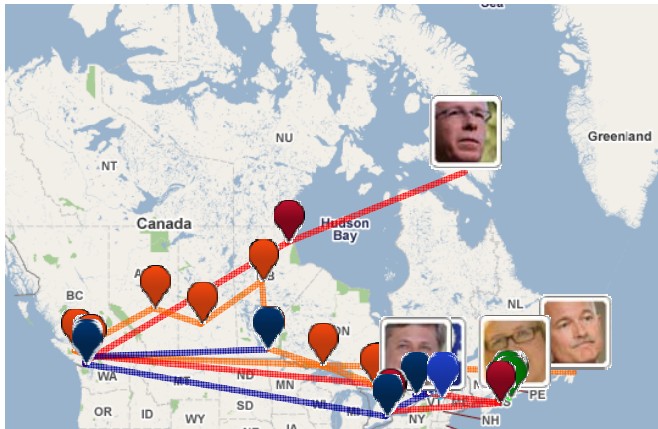
Ms. May's Green Party appears to have made steady progress, as her numbers have gone up in nearly every category since last month, though she often remains well-behind of the other leaders. One third of respondents across Canada said Ms. May did "a lot better than expected" in the debates. In comparison, seven per cent had the same opinion of Mr. Harper.

In Quebec, more than half of respondents said Mr. Harper failed to meet debate expectations, while 11 per cent thought he exceeded them. Mr. Dion surpassed the expectations of two-thirds of Quebecers.

For the rest of Canada, 29 per cent thought Mr. Harper performed best in the English debate, with 26 per cent saying Ms. May, in her first such debate, was the winner.

The poll, conducted by Innovative Research Group, is based on 3,722 responses across the country between Oct. 3 and Oct. 7, and the sample is considered representative of Canadian census data. The poll has a margin of error of 1.6 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

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