

Pollsters' corner

Expert analysis of the latest numbers

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In the new battleground ridings poll, the Conservatives seem to be making major gains in Ontario, Quebec and B.C. In which province(s) are those gains likeliest to hold?

Peter Donolo, Strategic Counsel: It's pretty early to tell just how solid these gains are. Indeed, four in ten voters in the Ontario battleground ridings and just under a third of the voters in the Quebec and B.C. battlegrounds have said they were likely to change their votes — and the data shows that those currently leaning Tory are more likely to switch.

Pay particular attention to Quebec. There may well be something major afoot there regarding the Bloc vote. In fact, after a high water mark in their first election in 1993, the Bloc went into steady decline in 1997 and 2000, with the Liberals actually beating them in popular vote in that last election. The sponsorship scandal gave the Bloc a new lease on life in the quick succession elections of 2004 and 2006, but that likely masked a longer term reconsideration that started in 1997 among Quebec voters about the continued relevance of the Bloc in Parliament.

With the sponsorship scandal now fading, that reconsideration has picked up steam. The chief beneficiaries of any re-examination at this stage are the Conservatives - outside the island of Montreal.

Grey Lyle, Innovative Research Group: B.C. looks the best for the Conservatives.

The introduction of B.C.'s own carbon tax has created a backlash that is perfect for the Tories. The NDP could gain, but its message is yes to a carbon tax - just not this one. The Conservatives have an unambiguous message, and simple sells.

Ontario is complicated by listeriosis, which has been used to evoke Walkerton. That could potentially create some fear about a majority Conservative government.

In Quebec, the Tories are trying to gain from the Bloc, who benefit from a strong core vote and a stronger constituency organization than the Conservatives. So B.C. looks like the best bet for the Conservatives today.

Both the Liberals and NDP seem to have lost ground in battleground ridings since the last election. Which party has a better chance of reversing the trend?

Donolo: Stephane Dion really put the Liberal proposition in a nutshell today when he said only one party (the Liberals) could replace the Conservatives as a government, and he urged those who oppose the Conservatives not to vote for "protest" parties such as the NDP, the Green Party and the Bloc. He needs to squeeze those voters - to pressure them and force a choice if the Liberals are to have a chance. So the Conservatives moving closer to a majority may well shake free enough of those voters to vote Liberal to pre-empt a Harper majority.

The NDP, for its part, is keenly aware of this and is trying to paint itself as the most authentically and consistently anti-Tory party. Jack Layton's claim that he's running to be PM rings a touch hollow, given his party's status. That said, in doing so, he's embellishing his own leadership gap over Mr. Dion and trying to position his party in the event of Liberal collapse.

Lyle: It is unclear which party has the edge.

In Ontario and in B.C., in ridings where the Conservatives are fighting Liberals, they have a clear organizational edge. In most 50/50 ridings, the Tory organization will win.

In B.C. against New Democrats, the Tories will be fighting an organization that may be better than theirs in an even fight. The NDP understands all the Tory tools, plus it has a tradition of dropping in strong local organization to swing and deliver the vote on a poll-by-poll basis. So the Tories will likely win most close races with the Liberals but be hard-pressed against the NDP.

The Greens are polling more than double their 2006 numbers in B.C. battleground ridings, and more than triple them in Ontario ones. Could that translate into seats, or just cause headaches for the other opposition parties?

Donolo: That's the million-dollar question. The Greens have never pulled in the kinds of votes that they poll up to and during campaigns. But then again they've never had such a high-profile and evidently well-liked leader before.

The risk for them is that even if Mr. Dion's Green Shift falls flat with many voters, it may be hot with a majority of Green supporters. And if this *raison d'être* on their part is undermined, their numbers will shrink.

It should be noted, on the other hand, that in recent elections — particularly last year's Ontario election — the Green Party benefits from a more generalized protest vote than just from environmentalists. Indeed, in a poll we did on fuel taxes earlier this year, Green voters were even more likely than supporters of other parties to favour the lowering of fuel taxes, even if it meant the government going back into deficit — an odd position for supporters of a pro-environment party, but a clear sign that the party is supported by more than just dyed-in-the-wool environmentalists.

So if frustration grows with the more traditional parties, the Greens could stand to benefit as a "none-of-the-above" option.

Lyle: Right now, the Greens are defeating Liberals and maybe New Democrats - not electing Greens. With less than 20 per cent of the vote across the B.C. and Ontario swing ridings, the Greens just are not in the running to win a seat today.

However, this level does provide a foundation for a breakthrough *if* Elizabeth May can make it into the leaders' debate. Gordon Wilson in BC.. in 1991 and Sharon

Carstairs in Manitoba in 1988 have shown us that third party leaders can make a breakthrough if they can get voters to see them head-to-head against the established leaders.

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