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Canada's Liberals in Dead Heat With Conservatives (Update1)

May 31 (Bloomberg) -- Canada's governing Liberal Party lost support in the first week of a national election race, dropping its lead over the second-place Conservative Party to 3 percentage points, according to a poll of 600 voters by Toronto-based SES Research.

Prime Minister Paul Martin's Liberals had the support of 34 percent of voters yesterday, down from 41 percent on May 25, SES said in a press release. That compared with 31 percent for the Conservatives of Stephen Harper, who gained 3 percentage points of backing. The margin of error is 4.1 percentage points.

That suggests the two parties are in a dead heat in the race for support when voters go to the polls June 28. Martin, whose party had about 50 percent support when he took over in December, has been hurt by a government spending scandal and by a provincial Liberal government in Ontario that reversed an election pledge and raised taxes.

"They dipped primarily in Ontario," SES President Nikita Nanos said from Ottawa. "Martin took a heavy hit on the Ontario budget. The sponsorship scandal is the wallpaper for the campaign. It's everywhere."

More Seats

Ontario is Canada's most populous province and holds 106 of 308 House of Commons seats up for grabs in the election. Liberal candidates won all but two of the province's districts in the last election in 2000, when there were 100. The province got additional seats this time because of population growth.

The percentage of nationwide support isn't always a reliable indicator of the number of seats a party will win, because Canada doesn't use a proportional-representation system. Voters in each district vote for a local representative, and the leader of the party that wins the most districts becomes prime minister.



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Because of that, a party with a small percentage of popular support nationwide can win seats if its backing is concentrated in one area, such as the Bloc Quebecois in Quebec. A party with support that's thinly spread can have trouble winning seats.

Best Prime Minister

Martin would make the best prime minister, according to 32 percent of those in the latest survey, little changed from May 25. Harper was the choice of 17 percent, also unchanged, and backing for Jack Layton, the former Toronto city councilor who leads the socialist New Democratic Party, rose 3 percentage points to 12 percent. Twenty-two percent were undecided.

SES says it will release daily polling throughout the campaign. It started with a sample of 600 and will call 200 random voters each day of the campaign, dropping the oldest sample of 200 with each new result. The pollster says its margin of accuracy is 4.1 percentage points, 19 times of 20.

The survey was commissioned by Cable Public Affairs Channel, or CPAC.

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