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Battle of the B Team

Federal Liberal Leadership

By [GREG WESTON](#)

OTTAWA -- With another federal election likely in the coming months, Liberals gathering in Montreal to choose a new leader Dec. 2 will necessarily be asking themselves which candidate has the best chance of beating Stephen Harper for the keys to 24 Sussex Drive.

While the question has spawned a predictable blizzard of spin from the various Liberal leadership camps, they are all in for a cold shower from a new SES Research public opinion poll conducted this past week for Sun Media.

The SES-Sun poll asked Canadians from across the country how they voted in the last election, and which of the four frontrunning leadership candidates would make them more inclined -- or less -- to support the Liberals on the next federal ballot.

The national sentiment so far, it seems, is a choice clear as mud.

Let's start with Michael Ignatieff, the likable Harvard brainiac and international guru of liberalism who is heading into the leadership convention with the most first-ballot votes, and the most campaign gaffes likely to sink him in the end.

Popular wisdom has been that Iggy is the Liberal leadership candidate who would be best able to attract votes from across the political spectrum, and particularly among Conservative swing votes from the centre to the soft right.

But that's not what the SES-Sun poll says: Only 14% of Conservative voters in the last election said they would be more likely to vote Liberal with Ignatieff at the helm, while 17% said they would be even less inclined to go Grit with Iggy. Fully 55% said he wouldn't make any difference at all to their ballot intentions.

Even among those who voted Liberal earlier this year, Iggy winning the leadership would turn off almost as many as it would turn on.

Forget the great liberal thinker inspiring former NDP supporters to join the Grit cause, either -- our survey says Ignatieff would scare away twice as many as he might attract.

Finally, for someone who is gambling his leadership on recognizing Quebec as a "nation" Ignatieff certainly isn't inspiring voters to jump ship from the BQ -- the SES-Sun poll shows the net shift of those votes to the Liberal cause under Iggy would be roughly zero.

Bob Rae doesn't fare much better.

While the SES-Sun poll shows the former NDP premier of Ontario has considerable draw on the left, not all Dippers are in love with the former socialist, whose legacy of running Ontario includes his having screwed the public service unions.

While almost 30% of NDP voters indicated they might be inclined to support the Liberals under Rae, another 22% said he would make them be even less inclined to switch to the Grits the next time at the polls, a net gain of only 8% and not exactly the stuff of electoral victories.

Ditto for those who voted Liberal in the last election -- 32% would be inclined to stick with the Grits under Rae, but 27% would be equally inclined to vote for someone else.

And forget about the traditional Liberal-Conservative swing vote -- almost 79% of those who supported the Tories last time out would either be less inclined to vote for the Grits under Rae (30%), or not even think about switching (49%).

Nor is Rae likely to spark any Liberal resurgence in Quebec, where Bloc voters (who tend to be lefties already) would be far more likely to reject than embrace his leadership.

So much for Stephane Dion supposedly being the Liberals' sleeper candidate who could put the Grits back in the saddle in Quebec, while holding on to the party's existing seats in Ontario and elsewhere.

The SES-Sun poll indicates only 14% of voters of all stripes would be more inclined to vote Liberal with Dion at the helm, while 23% would be less inclined to support the Grits.

Among past Liberal voters, the prospect of Dion's leadership elicits a near-even split between those who would be more likely to vote Grit again and those who would be less so.

But in every other category of voters -- Conservative, NDP, Bloc, Green -- our polls suggest Dion winning the leadership would do more harm than good in the next election.

Finally, for a former federal environment minister who has been running around the country touting his contribution to protecting Mother Earth, Dion hasn't even impressed voters who supported the Green Party last time, only 6% of whom said he would make them more inclined to vote Liberal.

Finally, pity poor Gerard Kennedy, the dynamic former Ontario cabinet minister who held out the promise of locking up enough Liberal seats in his home province to steal away the Conservative minority.

Instead, the SES-Sun poll suggests a Liberal party led by Kennedy into an election anytime soon would get creamed.

Overall, 21% of those surveyed said they would be less likely to vote for a Kennedy-led Liberal party, while only 12% said they would be more inclined to support the Grits.

Even among past Liberal supporters, Kennedy would drive more away than he would attract, and his effect on potential swing voters among Conservatives and NDP would be equally skunkish.

Bottom line: A party that runs its B Team for the leadership shouldn't be shocked to be second with voters