

Latest polls suggest Conservatives can't break past electoral numbers

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OTTAWA (CP) - The issues of Mideast politics, defence and environmental stewardship have helped unravel Conservative plans to sail ahead into majority-government territory, a new poll suggests.

A Decima poll over the holiday weekend and released to The Canadian Press on Wednesday said support for the Conservatives was at 34 per cent among decided voters, or two points lower than the level reached on election day. Nationally the Liberals were at 30 per cent, the NDP at 14 per cent and the Bloc at 11 per cent.

The Green Party, with new leader Elizabeth May, came in at a surprising 10 per cent - more than double the 4.5 per cent they garnered on election day.

In Ontario, the leaderless Liberals held 41 per cent compared with 35 per cent for the Tories.

But perhaps most troublesome for the party were the standings in Quebec, where the Tories slipped to 20 per cent from 25 per cent on election day in late January. The province is where many Conservative strategists saw their best hopes for securing a majority government.

The results are consistent with other polls released in recent weeks by SES Research and Quebec-based CROP.

Decima's Bruce Anderson says the situation in the Middle East, and the conflict in Afghanistan in particular, has slapped a ceiling on Conservative support.

"The real point of concern for some number of Canadians seems to be whether Canada was articulating a point of view that was significantly independent from that of the (U.S. President George W.) Bush administration," Anderson said.

"I think the Conservatives pay more of a price in Ontario and Quebec when that issue rears its head, especially among women and in the large urban areas."

Women, especially those who live in suburban areas like Greater Toronto, had been one of the key groups that Conservatives were targetting for the next election.

Part of the problem has been precisely their inability to break through with voters who wouldn't normally consider casting a ballot for the Conservatives, said Lisa Young of the University of Calgary.

She agrees that appearing too close to the United States government has been a continuing hindrance to the party, despite their relatively gaffe-free record.

"Under the circumstances they really have been able to project an image of competent government - that certainly hasn't harmed them at all," Young said.

"But it's an uphill battle, there are still significant parts of the country, where there are a lot of seats, that are suspicious of them."

The Decima poll was based on telephone interviews with 1,008 Canadians between Aug. 31 and Sept. 4. Results are considered accurate to within plus or minus 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The margin of error is higher for smaller provincial samples.

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