

Polls chip at Bloc

Both the Liberals and Conservatives continue to make gains

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Two polls released in the last few days caused a bad day at the office for Gilles Duceppe.

The really bad news for the Bloc Quebecois was in a Leger Marketing poll, which showed the Conservatives moving to a seven-point lead over the Liberals, 38-31, with the NDP at 14 per cent and the Bloc at eight per cent nationally.

When those numbers were broken out regionally in Quebec, the Liberals were at 32 per cent, the Bloc at 31 per cent and the Conservatives at 24 per cent.

This confirms a CROP poll two weeks ago that found both the Liberals and the Conservatives growing at the expense of the Bloc, in different pools of accessible voters, the Libs in the Greater Montreal area, and the Conservatives in Quebec City and on the South Shore.

The merely bad news for the Bloc was in an SES Research poll released Friday, which showed the Bloc at 39 per cent, the Liberals at 27 per cent and the Conservatives at 20 per cent.

But even in the SES poll, the Liberals and Conservatives were both growing to the detriment of the Bloc. The Bloc was down 11 points compared with three months ago, while the Liberals gained two points and the Conservatives were up eight points.

Nationally, SES had the Conservatives and Liberals tied 33-33, with the NDP at 17 per cent, the Bloc at 10 per cent and the Greens at seven per cent.

The discrepancy between Leger and SES at the national level is within acceptable margins of error. And it's largely explained by Ontario, where Leger has the Conservatives ahead 40-35, while SES has the Liberals in the lead 38-36. While these would produce very different seat distributions, both polls mean that outside metro Toronto, where the Liberals lead by huge margins, the Conservatives are ahead in the 905 area code belt around Toronto, 519 in southern Ontario and 613 in eastern Ontario.

The difference in the two polls, says SES president Nik Nanos, "just shows how volatile things are."

But the discrepancy in Quebec is beyond the normal margin of error.

While Leger and SES agree the Bloc is in decline, it has already fallen a lot farther in



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Things are not looking up for Gilles Duceppe and his Bloc Quebecois.

the Leger poll to levels not seen since before the sponsorship scandal.

Here's one likely explanation for the difference between them. Most research firms poll federally and provincially at the same time. SES does not.

"We never ask federal and provincial voting intention in the same poll," says Nanos. "We don't like to mix them up."

As a result, Nanos generally avoids spillover effects from federal to provincial, and provincial to federal.

For one thing, there's the Liberal Party, separate organizations on the ground in Quebec, but the same brand as far as many voters are concerned. In the worst days of the sponsorship storm in 2004, Jean Charest's Quebec Liberals took a 10-point hit in the polls, even though the scandal had nothing to do with them.

Similarly, Duceppe is probably taking an extra hit in the Leger poll from the nosedive of Andre Boisclair and the Parti Quebecois.

Nanos tends to err on the side of caution. SES asks its ballot question first, so that voting intention isn't driven by responses on satisfaction, leadership and other attitudinal questions.

It worked for Nanos in the 2006 federal election, in which he called each of the four parties' vote to within one-tenth of one percentage point.

His Quebec numbers, Bloc 39, Libs 27, Cons 20, would still leave Duceppe with a clear majority of Quebec's 75 seats.

The Leger numbers, Libs 32, Bloc 31, Cons 24, would produce quite a different seat model.

Consider that in 2006, the Bloc won 51 seats with 42 per cent of the vote, the Liberals won only 13 seats with 20 per cent, while the Conservatives won 10 seats with 24 per cent, right where they stand today in the Leger poll.

This distribution of the vote would give the Liberals another 10 seats in the Montreal area, and the Conservatives another five to 10 ridings in Quebec City and eastern Quebec, all of them at the expense of the Bloc.

There's no doubt that Boisclair's bad roll is causing collateral damage to Duceppe and the Bloc. To that extent, it's probably in Duceppe's interest to get the Quebec election behind him, so that if Boisclair loses badly, the Bloc can step up as the primary defenders of Quebec's interests.

But it might be that the Bloc's problems run deeper, as a party of regional grievance condemned to opposition. While the Liberals and Conservatives offer different visions of federalism, both can now claim to be parties of government.

The Bloc, which benefitted for 15 years from the polarization of federal elections, and from its symbiotic relationship with the Liberals, is now the one being squeezed.

This is new and very unpromising territory for them.

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