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Liberals maintain lead over Tories

Layton overtakes Harper, poll shows
Martin still favourite choice for PM

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BANFF, Alta.—A new poll shows the federal Liberals are maintaining their lead on the Conservatives and leader Stephen Harper, who has now been overtaken by NDP Leader Jack Layton as favourite choice for prime minister after Paul Martin.

The survey, conducted by Ottawa-based SES Research from Aug. 4 to 8, shows the Liberals sit at 39 per cent support nationally among decided voters.

The Tories are 14 points behind, at 25 per cent, while the NDP are at 19 per cent, the Bloc Québécois is at 13 per cent, and the Green party is at 5 per cent.

The numbers don't yet point to a Liberal majority, but SES president Nikita Nanos said they suggest Prime Minister Paul Martin is on a "bad-news hiatus, at least for now."

The news isn't as good for Harper, whose personal popularity appears to have plummeted in recent weeks.

More respondents preferred "none of the above" to Harper, while the front-running Martin's rating slipped by only one point.

The survey is consistent with two other polls released in the past three weeks, which revealed a similar spread between the Liberals and Conservatives.

The poll is the first to be conducted since the naming of Michaëlle Jean as the next governor general, and it suggests the choice is a popular one among many Quebec voters. Jean will be installed on Sept. 27.

Martin's party has surged by 13 points in the province over the last three months — to 34 per cent — and Nanos suggested the appointment has created a "Liberal allophone honeymoon."

But the Bloc Québécois' commanding head start in the province is holding firm, and it currently sits at 50 per cent.

"It looks like the Liberal support has increased at the same time as the Tories have melted away," Nanos said.

The Conservatives, who registered 11 per cent support in Quebec three months ago, now find

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themselves at 4 per cent.

In Ontario, the Liberals have cemented their lead and enjoy 45 per cent support. The Tories have shed three points and are now at 28 per cent in the province.

On the question of who would make the best prime minister, 31 per cent chose Martin, and 15 per cent picked Layton, who edged out Harper by a single percentage point. Nineteen percent answered "none of the above."

Because of error margins, the gap is considered a statistical tie, but even that is unprecedented since Harper returned to active politics in 2002.

Nanos said voters don't appear to be any more enamoured of Martin or Layton, it's just that people seem to be turning away from Harper, whose tally on an identical question in late May was 27 per cent.

"People are moving from Harper to none of the above. The real message here is that folks just aren't happy with anything that's on the menu," Nanos said.

The poll surveyed 1,000 respondents nationally, and is considered accurate to within 3.1 percentage points 19 times out of 20.

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