

Greens 2nd choice for some Tories

Party eyes breakthrough

New leader to be chosen today

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OTTAWA—Rising prospects for an electoral breakthrough are surging through the Green Party of Canada convention today as it chooses its new leader.

Nearly one in three Canadians has considered voting Green and the party is now, surprisingly, the second choice for more than a third of Conservative voters, pollster Nik Nanos told delegates to the Green convention yesterday.

In 2004, Greens were second choice mainly among New Democrats, but now more Tories call the Greens their next-best selection, according to SES Research's most recent findings, released yesterday.

A full 36 per cent of Conservative voters identified Greens as their second choice this year — up from 23 per cent who said the same in 2004.

Meanwhile, 43 per cent of New Democrats said Greens were their next choice in 2004, but only 29 per cent say that in 2006.

"You're on the agenda and engaging Canadians," Nanos told about 400 delegates.

"The reality is that the Green party right now is more of a movement (that's) on the cusp of being more of a traditional, challenging party," Nanos told reporters later.

"The Greens also tap into the protest vote in the same way that the New Democrats do. We may see in the future, if the Greens can be more competitive, a fight for who is the protest vote in Canadian politics."

Today's leadership selection will provide a strong indication of how the Greens intend to capitalize on these ambitions.

It's a tight race expected to come down to a choice between high-profile environmental activist Elizabeth May and the well-respected, long-time Green party stalwart David Chernushenko. Jim Fannon, a St. Catharines real-estate agent and founder of the Nature's Hemp company, is also running.

May, a newcomer to the party after years of heading up the Sierra Club of Canada, would bring a flair for publicity and a VIP network of supporters.

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Chernushenko, who has run two strong campaigns in Ottawa Centre and is deputy leader of the party, would be expected to focus on better organization. Policy-wise, the two front-runners say they are virtually indistinguishable. So this is a contest about leadership style — and pointedly, which one has the winning formula.

Winning is much on the delegates' minds here. The leadership race has swelled party ranks from 5,000 earlier this year to 9,000 today. Most of those members are in Ontario — 4,000, with 1,200 of those in the GTA, party officials say.

Outgoing party president Jim Harris hailed Nanos' findings as exciting news for the Greens and tangible evidence that they're on the way to winning a solid foothold in the Canadian political establishment.

In the Jan. 23 election, Greens won 665,940 votes or 4.5 per cent of the ballots cast — but no Commons seats. Only eight Green candidates received more than 10 per cent of the votes in their ridings.

Still, the 2003 changes to electoral financing laws have proved a boon for the Greens, because parties receive about \$1.79 for every vote they get in an election. That amounts to about \$1.2 million this year.

Nanos showed the party that it has one of the biggest gaps between the number of people considering voting for it and those who actually do. "The vote that we get is the tip of the iceberg," Harris said. "We're only seeing one-sixth of what we have the potential to do."

Chernushenko, in an interview, said he hopes the party chooses him so that he can apply the lessons. "It's not about any magic tricks, being famous or anything. It's about building the party, capitalizing on the goodwill that's already there, showing who we really are to the people who are favourably inclined toward us so that they see we are a full-platform, legitimate choice," he said.

May said that the four leadership debates have seen the candidates in what she likes to call "violent agreement" on policy.

"The differences are more about what we bring to the party and David brings party experience. ... What I bring to the party comes from working across Canada as a somewhat better-known person ... the credibility I can bring to the party immediately."

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