

Minority government most likely, poll says

Too tight to call. Uncertain voters, two-way races could play big role in final outcome

ANDY RIGA

The Gazette

Saturday, March 24, 2007

With the election just two days away, the Liberals have managed to take back some voters who had moved to the Action démocratique du Québec, and the most likely scenario after Monday's vote is a Liberal government with a razor-thin minority, a new Gazette poll shows.

But the tight election - an unprecedented three-party battle - is still too close to call, with the final outcome dependent on results of 33 two-way races across the province, according to the Leger Marketing survey, which polled 1,000 Quebecers between Monday and yesterday.

And the vote is still very volatile - 32 per cent of respondents say they could still change their minds about who to back.

Such a high potential for vote shifting is unheard of at the end of a campaign, said pollster Jean-Marc Leger. At this stage before the last provincial vote, in 2003, only 23 per cent of voters said they might change their votes.

The poll pegs Liberal support at 35 per cent, the Parti Québécois at 29 per cent and the ADQ at 26 per cent. In the previous Leger survey, conducted in mid-March, the results were: Liberals 33 per cent, the PQ 30 per cent and the ADQ 30 per cent.

The latest poll - commissioned by The Gazette, TVA and the Journal de Montréal - put each party's support close to where it was at the end of February, a few days into the campaign.

But Leger cautioned there is no sign of Liberal momentum. Rather, voters who were going to vote ADQ to punish the Liberals are returning to the Liberal fold, perhaps because they do not want the ADQ to form the government, he said.

A Leger analysis indicates the Liberals will almost certainly win at least 43 of the 125 seats in the National Assembly, while the PQ is assured of 30 seats and the ADQ 19 seats.

The other 33 ridings - all two-way fights between various combinations of the three major parties - are too tight to call (see sidebar for a list of the close races).

Most ridings the ADQ will almost definitely win and in which the ADQ is in contention, largely in the Quebec City area and the province's central heartland,



CREDIT: JOHN MAHONEY, THE GAZETTE

Mario Dumont, leader of the Action démocratique du Québec, leaves the Ritz-Carlton Hotel yesterday after giving a luncheon speech to the board of trade.

are now held by Liberals, Leger said. "Guaranteed, the Liberals will lose seats - the question is how many."

It's "very, very improbable" Quebecers will elect a Liberal majority government, Leger said.

"Anything can happen, but the most plausible scenario is a very small Liberal minority."

The second-most likely outcome, though a long shot, is a minority PQ government, Leger said.

That's because among francophones - a key electorate because they form the majority of voters in most ridings - the PQ is the top choice, followed by the ADQ and then the Liberals.

In the previous Leger poll, the ADQ had surpassed the PQ among francophones.

That francophone shift away from the ADQ to the Liberals is good news for the PQ. It means the ADQ is not as likely to win some of the PQ seats it had been poised to take. And the PQ might win more than previously forecast.

Respondents also were asked what final election outcome they would prefer.

Forty per cent said they want a Liberal government - more than said they would actually vote for the party. A PQ government was the top choice of 27 per cent of respondents, followed by the ADQ at 22 per cent.

Even two in 10 ADQ voters said the outcome they would most like to see is a Liberal win.

Despite the ADQ's four-point drop in the overall party standings, ADQ leader Mario Dumont remains popular.

Among francophones, Dumont was the top pick when respondents were asked who would make the best premier.

Thirty-one per cent of francophones chose him over PQ leader Andre Boisclair (27 per cent and Liberal Premier Jean Charest (26 per cent).

But those polled were much less enthusiastic about Dumont's team, a collection of unknown candidates, several of whom have become entangled in controversies in the campaign.

Forty per cent said the Liberals have the best team, followed by the PQ at 29 per cent and the ADQ trailing far behind at 13 per cent. Even one in three ADQ voters said the Liberal team is best.

"Essentially, Quebecers want Mario Dumont as premier, they want the Liberal team and they want the PQ platform put into effect," Leger said.

Other key findings:

- Charest's bid to woo voters with a \$700-million tax cut this week is not translating into more support.

Asked whether the promise will make them consider voting Liberal, only five per cent of ADQ voters and four per cent of PQ supporters said Yes.

- The parties were tied on the question of which would "improve the quality of your personal life" if it was in power.

Six major factors make the election outcome hard to predict, Leger said:

- Almost one-third of voters might change sides. PQ support is the most solid, with only 24 per cent of its voters saying they may switch sides.
- It's hard to forecast the turn-out. If it's high, it'll be good for the ADQ, because it means the protest vote got out to the polls. If it's low, the Liberals will benefit because it will mean that few young people - who tend to support the PQ but are less likely to vote - will have cast ballots.
- It's Quebec's first real three-way race.
- The PQ and Liberals have strong election machines to get the vote out, while the ADQ, a much younger party, does not;
- Smaller parties have about 10-per-cent support, which is unusually high. In the last election, parties other than the big three collectively garnered only 2.6 per cent of the vote.
- Events occurred this week that have yet to influence voters but might, once they sink in. They include the federal budget, Charest's tax cut and Prime Minister Stephen Harper's comment about not negotiating with a separatist government.

ariga@thegazette.canwest.com

© The Gazette (Montreal) 2007

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2007 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.