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New poll shows NDP in lead in B.C. with Conservatives surging into tie with BC Liberals

Doug Ward, Vancouver Sun

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B.C. Liberal Premier Christy Clark has failed to stem the growing appeal of the provincial Conservatives to centre-right voters, a new poll suggests.

The survey by Forum Research Inc. found that 34 per cent of British Columbians support the NDP, with the governing B.C. Liberals and the Conservatives in a dead heat at 23 per cent. The Green party trails with 15 per cent.

Clark's backers in the B.C. Liberal nomination contest earlier this year believed she could revive the party's brand, which had been battered under her unpopular predecessor, former premier Gordon Campbell.

But the Forum Research survey found that Clark has been unable to stop a shift of previous B.C. Liberal voters to the resurgent B.C. Conservatives under new leader John Cummins.

"The Conservatives are really cannibalizing the B.C. Liberals right now," said Forum Research president Lorne Bozinoff.

"It looks like the NDP could come up the middle."

The findings are consistent with results from other recent political polls, which show the Conservatives cutting into B.C. Liberal support.

Bozinoff said that while the NDP is hanging on to its core support of between 30 and 35 per cent, the B.C. Liberal Party has seen a steady erosion of its base.

“The problem for the B.C. Liberals is that they are in the middle and they bleed both ways,” said the pollster.

“They are pinned down on both sides. We saw that happen to the federal Liberals in the recent election.”

Bozinoff cautioned that the poll is a snapshot of current voter attitudes and that the B.C. Liberals have plenty of time to improve their status before the scheduled election in May 2013.

The Forum Research poll also found strong discontent with Clark herself. Fewer than one in three voters approve of Clark’s job performance. Twenty-nine per cent of British Columbians approve of Clark compared to 45 per cent who disapprove and 27 per cent with no opinion.

Clark’s approval rating trails NDP leader Adrian Dix, who has an approval rating of 37 per cent, compared to 28 per cent who disapprove and 35 per cent without an opinion.

Bozinoff added that Dix is well placed to improve his standing, given that “don’t know” respondents typically come to reflect the opinions of those voters who do have an opinion.

“Dix’s approval rating is higher than his disapproval rating so he’s got a good base to grow from going forward.”

The survey also suggests that the growing popularity of the provincial Conservatives is due to disenchantment with the B.C. Liberals rather than because of Cummins’s leadership.

Cummins’s approval rating is 23 per cent compared to 32 per cent who disapprove and a whopping 45 per cent who have no opinion.

“The B.C. Liberal party has tried to reinvent itself with a new leader,” said Bozinoff. “But there is just too much baggage.”

Since becoming Conservative leader in May, Cummins has been busy travelling around the province, pushing his brand of right-wing populism.

Cummins, who represented Delta-Richmond East in Parliament for 18 years, has been criticized by former federal Conservative colleagues for joining the provincial Tories.

They have argued that a revived B.C. Conservative Party could split the centre-right vote and give power to the NDP — a fear backed up by the Forum Research poll results.

The survey also found that support for the NDP was significantly higher among voters aged 35 to 64, while support for the B.C. Liberals was higher among those aged 65 and older.

The telephone survey of 1,045 British Columbians was conducted on Dec. 15. The sample has a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points, 19 times out of 20.