

Alberta's Wildrose Alliance poised to take official opposition status in spring vote: poll

Tristin Hopper Jan 23, 2012



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Alberta's Conservative majority remains solid, but right-wing rookies the Wildrose Alliance Party appears poised to take Official Opposition status in an upcoming spring vote, according to a poll commissioned by the *National Post*.

The four-year-old Wildrose emerged from the 2008 election with only one MLA — but gained three more as members defected from the Progressive Conservatives. With 29% support (up from 23% in December), if Wildrose can maintain its popularity until the provincial election — expected to take place in April — it is projected to win 17 seats.

The Progressive Conservatives are projected to take 57 seats, down from a current 72.

Forum Research president Lorne Bozinoff lays credit for Wildrose's increase in popularity with leader Danielle Smith, a former Calgary Herald columnist who took the party leadership in October 2009. The 40-year-old leader enjoys 40% support among Albertans, compared with 39% for Premier Alison Redford.

"Danielle Smith's approval ratings are the highest of the province's three main party leaders," said Mr. Bozinoff.

With opposition status in their sights, Wildrose has been in campaign mode for at least the past 12 months. In early December, the party released a pair of online campaign videos attacking the Progressive Conservative record on health care and education.

According to the Forum poll, Wildrose's support has sprung mainly from older voters, rural areas and Calgary, where the party is particularly popular among oil circles. In Edmonton, however — home of Alberta's only non-Conservative MP — the party remains in fourth place.

Since December, Progressive Conservative support has remained virtually unchanged at 38%, indicating that Wildrose is likely mustering its growing support from independents and the centrist Alberta Party. "As the possibility of election gets closer, people are concentrating on the main parties," said Mr. Bozinoff.

The poll surveyed 1,077 Albertans on Jan. 17. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 3%, 19 times out of 20.

Securing opposition status is a "do-or-die" proposition for Wildrose, wrote Alberta political blogger David Climenhaga in a recent post. If the party "doesn't elect enough members to form the Official Opposition, the party is likely to quickly wither and disappear," he wrote.

In a December 2010 survey by Environics Research Group, the Tories and Wildrose were in a virtual dead heat, with 34% of decided voters supporting the Conservatives and 32% favouring Wildrose.

"No one's talking about them forming governance any more — aside from Danielle Smith," said Dave Cournoyer, a political blogger at Daveberta.ca.

Part of the problem is that Wildrose — formed largely as a reaction to Premier Ed Stelmach — does not have the former premier to kick around anymore. “Alison Redford poses a different challenge to the Wildrose alliance, you don’t get that kind of gut response from people who really had a distaste for Ed Stelmach, especially in Calgary,” said Mr. Cournoyer.

Since the Progressive Conservatives began their unbroken 40-year reign in 1971, Official Opposition status has passed from the Christian conservative Social Credit party in the 1970s to the NDP in the 1980s and the Liberals ever since 1993. If Wildrose dominates the opposition benches come May, it would be the first time since 1982 that both Alberta’s ruling and opposition parties will be right-of-centre.

Nevertheless, according to Mr. Cournoyer Wildrose’s surge in the polls should not denote any “rightward trend” in Alberta politics — especially since the PC ranks are packed with members that would be Liberals or NDPers in other Prairie provinces. In 2010, Ms. Smith denounced the Progressive Conservatives to a crowd of supporters as “socialists and liberals masquerading as conservatives!”

National Post, with files from Postmedia