

Voters volatile, party loyalty weak

Liberals ahead but pollsters differ on whether gap is insurmountable



BY MARK HUME

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VANCOUVER -- The polls are pointing to a Liberal victory in today's election, but the electorate is volatile and party loyalty among voters is weak.

Given that combination, plus disagreement among pollsters as to whether the gap between the Liberals and the other parties is insurmountable or marginal, about the only sure thing is that there will be some surprises when the polls close at 8 p.m.

Here are some things to watch for when the results come in from British Columbia's 79 electoral districts:

Could the Liberals win but see their leader, Gordon Campbell, fall?

The scenario seems unlikely, given the way their campaign has focused so heavily on Mr. Campbell and the credit he has been given for turning the B.C. economy around.

But polls have shown the leader has never had a strong personal rating with voters.

Even in 2001 when the Liberals took 77 of 79 seats, he did not seem unbeatable in his own riding.

In Vancouver-Point Grey, Mr. Campbell got about 13,000 votes in 2001 for a solid lead over the Green Party (with 5,000) and NDP (4,000) candidates. But that was more a reflection of anti-NDP sentiment than an endorsement.

In this election, voter support of the Liberals is less certain and both the NDP and Greens are running stronger campaigns.

At dissolution, the Liberals held 72 seats and the NDP three while two were vacant, one was held by an independent and one held by Democratic Reform B.C.

While Mr. Campbell's re-election seems certain, the Vancouver-Point Grey outcome is worth a look.

Will the leader be more or less popular in his own riding than four years ago?

Victoria-Beacon Hill is another riding with a leader as candidate. In 2001, Carol James, then new to provincial politics, lost by a mere 35 votes to Liberal Jeff Bray, who is her main opponent again.

This time, Ms. James is the official face of the NDP and has won wide praise for her handling of the televised leaders debate.

In addition, Victoria is a civil-service town where voters are unlikely to forget that the Liberals instituted widespread layoffs of government workers.

Green Party Leader Adriane Carr faces her own challenge in trying to get elected for the first time.

In 2001, in Powell River-Sunshine Coast, she finished third, 33 votes behind the NDP in a riding that went Liberal.

Now she has a much higher profile, but the Liberal candidate, Maureen Clayton, and the New Democrat, Nicholas Simons, will give her a tough run.

The Greens have never won a seat at the provincial level anywhere in Canada.

Over all, the Greens are polling a distant third with 12 per cent of the vote.

That's not likely to translate into a victory, but Powell River-Sunshine Coast, Saanich North and the Islands, Victoria-Beacon Hill and Nelson-Creston are possible points for a breakthrough.

Of all the ridings to watch, Kamloops has long been on analysts' radar screens because it historically goes with a winner.

If Liberal candidate Claude Richmond holds off NDP challenger Doug Brown convincingly, it could signal a provincial trend. If he falls, an upset could be in the making.

Two other key ridings are Langley, where Liberal candidate Mary Polak is seen as a right-wing standard-bearer for the party, and Prince George-Mount Robson, where high-profile Liberal candidate Shirley Bond, the Deputy Premier, is trying to hang on.

The loss of either would be seen as a sign of broader voter dissatisfaction with the direction the Liberals are taking.

In Surrey-Newton, star Liberal candidate Daniel Igali is in a tough fight with New Democrat Harry Bains.

While Mr. Igali has the lustre of the Olympic gold medal he won in wrestling, Mr. Bains is well connected in the politically active Indo-Canadian community. It's glamour versus grassroots clout and the outcome will be an interesting subtext.

Vancouver-Langara could also be loaded with symbolic value. Star Liberal candidate Carole Taylor is expected to win easily.

A loss would be a shocking rebuke of Mr. Campbell, who hand-picked Ms. Taylor. A resounding victory might signal the arrival of a future leader.

Other areas to watch are the electoral districts of North Coast, Skeena and Bulkley Valley-Stikine, where voters are torn between the economic benefits of port development in Prince Rupert, for which the Liberals get credit, and the environmental threat of increased salmon farming at the mouth of the Skeena River, for which the Liberals are blamed.

The collision of values puts three Liberal seats at risk.

Also on the ballot today is a question about whether B.C. should switch to a single transferable vote system.

"If it doesn't get the 60 per cent it needs to pass, but gets more than 50 per cent, it will send a clear message that voters are disaffected from the Liberals and NDP.

"The STV vote will be a barometer for how people feel about the status quo. No matter [which party] wins, they'll have to deal with that," observed Mike Geoghegan, a political consultant in Victoria.

72: Liberal seats at dissolution

49%: Liberal support in latest Strategic Counsel poll. The NDP were at 36%, the Greens at 13%.

8 p.m. PDT: polls close

82% of B.C. voters say they know little or nothing about the single transferable vote, a proposed electoral system that is subject of a referendum.

32% think the NDP's Carole James would be the best premier for B.C. 43% picked Liberal Gordon Campbell.

71% of eligible voters cast ballots in 2001.

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