

## **Liberal Revival Stalled Despite New Leader**

### **Key Drivers of Public's Lack of Confidence in the Liberals—**

- Ignatieff Appointment Process Seen as Disenfranchising Rank-and-File Party Members and Unfair to Backers of Other Candidates**
- New Liberal Policy of *Coalition if Necessary But Not Necessarily a Coalition* Widely Rejected— Almost Half See It as the Same as Stéphane Dion's Policy**



**COMPAS Inc.  
Public Opinion and Customer Research  
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*Liberal Revival Stalled Despite New Leader—  
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## 1.0. Overview

Despite the quick replacement of Stéphane Dion with Michael Ignatieff as party leader, Liberal support remains in the doldrums with 30% of national vote intentions. Conservative support is at 43%—more than enough to win a majority of seats in the House of Commons if an election were held today.

One key reason for the Liberals’ unexpected weakness is that Canadians are troubled by the process that led to Stéphane Dion being replaced by Michael Ignatieff:

- ❑ A huge majority of Canadians opposes the 19th century practice of politicians choosing their own leaders—the public wants party leaders chosen either by leadership conventions (42%) or in U.S. style primaries (39%) and not by politicians themselves (19%);
- ❑ A majority (57%) believes that the insider-type process used to replace Dion with Ignatieff was unfair to rank-and-file party members who wanted Bob Rae or preferred an outsider who had not been involved in the three-party coalition deal that got voters upset (e.g. former Deputy Prime Minister John Manley).

Another key reason for the Liberals’ unexpected weakness following the departure of Dion is their new policy of “a coalition if necessary but not necessarily a coalition”;

- ❑ A clear majority of the Canadian public (58%) opposes the new policy;
- ❑ A large minority of Canadians (46%) sees essentially no difference between the new Liberal coalition policy and Stéphane Dion’s coalition policy, whose unpopularity led to his immediate resignation.



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## 2.0. The Key Findings Described

### 2.1. Public Wants Rank-and-File Party Members to Choose Party Leaders

Canadians want leadership selection to be an open process that allows rank-and-file party members to have a say through leadership conventions or U.S.-style direct elections or primaries, as shown in table 2a. Fewer than a fifth of Canadians opt for the 19th century practice of politicians choosing their own leaders.

The public’s strong view on the matter helps explain voter discomfort with the Liberals within days of the party choosing its leader without a leadership convention or direct U.S. primary-style consultation with the membership.

*Table 2a: (Q6) Generally speaking, is Canada better off when national party leaders are chosen ... RANDOMIZE (in percent)*

	All	West	ON	QC
At conventions attended by rank and file members of the party	42	45	42	39
In direct elections by party supporters as the political parties do in the United States	39	40	41	37
By elected politicians	19	16	17	24
Excluded from calculations				
None of the above	3	1	3	2
Don’t know	7	6	7	6
Refuse to answer	1	1	1	0



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## **2.2. The Public Feels that the Liberals Were Probably Right to Dump Dion because of the Coalition Agreement But Wrong to Appoint Ignatieff ahead of a Leadership Convention**

Normally, Liberal party rules would have allowed Stéphane Dion to remain in his post til the leadership convention expected in the Spring. Canadians are divided in their own minds about whether Dion should have been allowed to stay until then.

Canadians are divided about 50:50 as to whether Dion had a right to stay on until the leadership convention when they are asked about his right to stay on without any reference to his unpopular coalition agreement, as shown in table 2b.

Once the coalition agreement is mentioned in a question, public opinion changes. When the coalition agreement is mentioned in a question about Dion’s departure, a clear majority believes that Liberal politicians were right to force him to step down immediately, as shown in table 2c. In an effort to reconcile these two slightly conflicting results, we conclude that Canadians believe that the Liberals were *probably* right to force out the party leader.

While Canadians tend to think that it was right for the Liberals to force out Dion, they do not believe that the Liberals were right to choose Ignatieff ahead of a leadership convention. A majority believes that choosing a leader ahead of the convention took away the rights of rank-and-file Liberals and was unfair to Liberal party members who preferred Bob Rae or another potential candidate, as shown in tables 2d and e.



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*Table 2b: Divided Opinion about Whether Dion Had a Right to Stay on<sup>1</sup>*

			Excluded from calculations	
	Agree	Disagree	DNK	REF
Stephane Dion had a right to stay on until the upcoming leadership convention and it was wrong for politicians force him out				
All	49	51	9	2
West	46	54	9	1
ON	53	47	11	3
QC	44	56	6	1

*Table 2c: Majority Support for Forcing Dion to Step Down Because of the Coalition Agreement?*

			Excluded from calculations	
	Agree	Disagree	DNK	REF
Liberal politicians in Ottawa were right to force Stephane Dion to step down immediately because his coalition with the NDP and Bloc Quebecois was so unpopular				
All	63	37	9	2
West	69	31	6	2
ON	59	41	11	2
QC	58	42	9	1

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<sup>1</sup> The preface read as follows: As you know, Canadian political parties normally choose their leaders at national conventions attended by delegates chosen in ridings from across the country. Jean Chretien, Paul Martin, and Stéphane Dion were chosen as leaders of the Liberal Party in this way. Earlier this month, Liberal Senators and MPs obliged Stephane Dion to resign immediately and they chose Michael Ignatieff as interim leader. Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following opinions on this situation.



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*Table 2d: Choosing Ignatieff ahead of a Leadership Convention  
Took Away the Rights of the Rank-and-File*

			Excluded from calculations	
	Agree	Disagree	DNK	REF
Liberal politicians in Ottawa were wrong to chose Michael Ignatieff as interim leader because this takes away the rights of rank and file Liberal party members across the country to have a direct say in the election of their national leader				
All	58	43	12	1
West	62	38	12	1
ON	62	38	13	2
QC	43	57	10	1

*Table 2e: Choosing Ignatieff ahead of a Leadership Convention  
Was Unfair to Supporters of Other Leadership Candidates*

			Excluded from calculations	
	Agree	Disagree	DNK	REF
In choosing Michael Ignatieff as interim leader, Liberal politicians in Ottawa were unfair to rank and file Liberals who either preferred another MP for leader or wanted someone from outside Parliament who had not been involved in the recent backroom deals that got voters upset				
All	57	43	16	2
West	60	40	16	1
ON	66	35	16	2
QC	40	60	17	3
QC	44	56	6	1



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### **2.3. Current Liberal *Coalition* Policy Widely Rejected**

The Liberals are not successful at distancing themselves from the coalition policy that enraged Canadian voters and led to Dion’s premature departure in early December. Almost half of Canadians (46%) consider the current policy of “a coalition if necessary but not necessarily a coalition” to be essentially the same as the Liberal policy under Dion, as shown in table 2f. Irrespective of whether they perceive the policy as the same or different from under Dion, a 58% majority considers the new Liberal policy as bad policy, as shown in table 2f.

The continuation of the Liberal commitment to the coalition idea is a major reason explaining why Liberal support is stalled despite having a new leader.

Liberal commitment to the coalition idea harms the Liberals not only because of public opposition to the policy itself but also because the policy reinforces public perceptions of the party as unauthentic. During the height of the controversy over the coalition in early December, most Canadians believed the Opposition parties were motivated mainly or entirely by a desire for power rather than by an honest belief that Harper was a bad manager of the economy.<sup>2</sup>

To make matters worse for the Liberals, the inauthenticity associated with the Liberals’ coalition policy reinforces the image of inauthenticity associated with the process by which Ignatieff replaced Dion.

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<sup>2</sup> COMPAS poll for *Canadian Business* magazine (December 5, 2008).



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*Table 2f: (Q5) “A coalition if necessary but not necessarily a coalition” is how the Liberal party describes its position about replacing the Harper government with a government run together with the NDP and backed by the Bloc Quebecois. Which of the following opinions is closest to your own? This policy is...  
RANDOMIZE (in percent)*

	All	West	ON	QC
Essentially Liberal policy under Stephane Dion and a bad one	30	34	32	21
Different from Liberal policy under Stephane Dion and a bad one	28	34	29	18
Total: bad policy	58	68	62	39
Different from Liberal policy under Stephane Dion and a good one	26	19	27	35
Essentially Liberal policy under Stephane Dion and a good one	16	14	13	25
Total: good policy	42	33	40	60
Excluded from calculations				
None of the above	4	4	3	3
Don’t know	19	15	25	14
Refuse to answer	2	2	2	1





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### **3.0. Challenges Facing the Liberals**

As shown in table 3, the Conservatives would have little difficulty forming a majority government if an election were held today. At 43%, the Conservatives are well past the threshold necessary for a majority of seats.

Liberal support appears to be at the same level as in 2006 and temporarily a little higher than in October, 2008. The hint of a small recovery in Liberal fortunes appears to be mainly at the expense of the Bloc and NDP, the Liberals' partners in the coalition agreement. It is as if the support by Jack Layton and Gilles Duceppe for the Liberal-led coalition encouraged some Bloc and NDP voters to trust the Liberals and jump to them in December. It is difficult to imagine Duceppe and Layton continuing to make favourable comments about a Liberal-led coalition government in light of the resulting risks for their own parties.

By mid-winter, the Liberal party can expect to have to fight an electoral war on several fronts, not just against the Conservatives. For the Liberals, the big challenge will be that the policies that help keep Bloc and NDP voters in the Liberal fold will be different from the policies that might bring back erstwhile Liberals who had jumped to the Conservative camp.



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*Table 3: (Q2-3) If a federal election were now, would you vote  
for... IF UNDECIDED Then, which party would you lean to?  
(in percent)*

	All	West	ON	QC	Actual 2008 Election	Actual 2006 Election
The Conservatives led by Stephen Harper	43	59	45	16	38	36
The Liberals led by Michael Ignatieff	30	19	32	42	26	30
The NDP led by Jack Layton	13	14	15	7	18	17
The Green Party led by Elizabeth May	8	9	8	7	7	4
The Bloc led by Gilles Duceppe	6	0	0	28	10	10
Excluded from calculations						
Undecided	9	8	9	7	NA	NA
Would not vote	6	4	8	10	NA	NA
Refuse to answer	7	2	3	4	NA	NA

## 4.0. Methodology

The representative sample survey of n>600 voters was interviewed by professional interviewers using CATI December 20-23, 2008. By convention, samples of this size are deemed accurate to within 4 percentage points 19 times out of 20. The principal investigator was Dr. Conrad Winn, reachable at 416-460-5844.

