



PRESS RELEASE

ONTARIO PROVINCIAL ELECTION

September 5th, 2003

Ottawa, ONTARIO. A new EKOS/Toronto Star poll points to a tightly contested race for the October 2nd provincial election.

Highlights:

Out of the gates, the race is capturing higher public attention than was the case for the 1999 election and at this stage the final results of the campaign are highly uncertain.

Since the dropping of the writ, Ernie Eves has significantly improved the Tory outlook. A fairly solid and sizeable Liberal lead has essentially evaporated and Eves has vaulted the Tories into a virtual tie with the Liberals (Liberals: 43.5%, Tories: 42%). Positive impressions of the Premier's handling of the power outage have been coupled with favourable initial impressions of the Tory platform — particularly mortgage interest deductibility and rekindling lingering uncertainties about McGuinty's leadership and experience.

The public also see the outcome of the race as being in a dead heat. We agree with the public; the underlying factors render a prediction of the outcome highly hazardous at this stage.

Premier Eves and the Tories have prudently exploited positive reviews of the handling of the recent power failure to put themselves back within reach of a third government following a lengthy period of trailing the Liberals by a much wider margin. The NDP seems destined to finish a distant third.

Notably, the public say they are looking for a change in leadership, express displeasure with the Tory record and have higher confidence in McGuinty's Liberals on the pinnacle issues of health and education. They also have downgraded the issue of tax cuts dramatically since 1999 while health and education have risen in public importance. Despite these advantages, the Liberal lead has disappeared and they are by no measure a safe bet to win. In short order, the campaign has turned into a classic horse race.

Key Strengths and Exposures:

For Premier Eves and the Tories, their positives currently focus around ability to deal with taxes, crime and the future of the electrical system. Premier Eves also enjoys a significant advantage over Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty in terms of Ontarians' estimation of leadership abilities. Mortgage interest deductibility has strong surface appeal. Their main exposures are the environment, education and, to a lesser extent, health care.

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Dalton McGuinty and the Liberals' key strengths lie in education, health care and the environment — the issues the public cite as most important. Their exposures are around taxes, the electrical system and voters' uncertainty over Mr. McGuinty's leadership abilities.

Howard Hampton and the NDP garner favourable reviews from voters on a number of fronts, notably the environment, the electrical system, health care and education. Their main exposures are on tax cuts and crime. Mr. Hampton trails well behind both other main party leaders in terms of voters views on who would be the best Premier.

Analysis:

The salience of the electricity issue is notable and Premier Eves' "blackout bounce" may explain the missing Liberal lead. Whether the positive hydro image effect will survive a campaign and closer scrutiny will be key to watch. It will also be interesting to see if Eves can continue to separate himself from the Tory record and sustain the initial enthusiasm for mortgage interest deductibility.

The Tory record is judged as inauspicious, but is not totally panned. There is a sufficient (albeit diminished) constituency which is receptive to another Tory government. Premier Eves runs better than the Tories and has successfully detached himself thus far from the Tory record. He still holds an 11-point advantage over Mr. McGuinty in terms of who would make the best Premier (this gap narrows somewhat when Ontarians consider who best understands their needs).

While 50% agree that some of the challenges the province has faced (Walkerton's water supply, SARS, West Nile, blackout etc.) have been exacerbated by provincial cost-cutting measures and diminished public services, there remains a viable constituency (45%) who feel they were unfortunate events that were dealt with appropriately.

Ontarians say that the parties' platforms and policies will be the principal factors in determining who they vote for.

Just over a third of those polled allow that it is at least somewhat likely they will change their voting intention before the election, with the Liberals standing the most to gain as the strongest "second choice" party.

EKOS President Frank Graves characterizes the main challenges for the three parties:

- "Mr. McGuinty and the Liberals need to redirect voter attention to the Tory record (which is viewed inauspiciously) and their high ground advantage on the pivotal issues of health and education. Dalton McGuinty also needs to shore up confidence in his leadership bona fides, puncture the surface appeal of mortgage interest deductibility and have a more compelling critique and solution for the future of the electrical system."
- "For Premier Eves and the Tories, the challenge is to continue to instill doubts about Mr. McGuinty's leadership abilities, focus on their core constituencies (seniors, men and homeowners) and stress tax incentives and the Premier's leadership experience."

- "Mr. Hampton and the NDP have to stress restoring the electrical system to public hands and continue their attack on cuts to public services. Their core supporters are urban renters."

"The bottom line at this stage is an interesting, highly contested race which is certainly too close to call. The key determinants of the outcome will be the extent to which Mr. McGuinty can shift focus to his high ground and instill personal confidence. For Premier Eves the issue will be keeping the focus on his leadership and off the Tory record."

Methodology:

These data are based on a random sample of 1,002 telephone interviews conducted September 3rd and 4th with Ontario residents eligible to vote in the October 2, 2003 provincial election. A sample of this size provides a margin of error of +/- 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

The margin of error increases when the results are sub-divided (i.e., error margins for sub-groups such as regions within Ontario are larger). It should also be noted that the refusal rate and other measurement errors could also increase the margin of error.

All the data were statistically weighted to ensure the sample's regional, gender and age composition reflects that of the actual population of Ontario according to Census data.