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## Ontario Liberals top poll

**Election seems McGuinty's to lose, pollster says**

**Campaign called 'extremely important'**

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QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU CHIEF

Premier Dalton McGuinty's Liberals appear to have weathered recent political problems and hold a comfortable lead over the Progressive Conservatives led by John Tory, a new poll suggests.

The Toronto Star-EKOS Research Associates survey shows the Liberals at 42.4 per cent to the Conservatives' 36.2 per cent with Howard Hampton's New Democrats surging to 19.6 per cent.

The survey of 584 Ontarians was conducted Oct. 10-12 and is considered accurate to within 4.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Despite the Liberals' by-election loss to the NDP in Parkdale-High Park a month ago, a continuing standoff involving native protestors in Caledonia, problems in hospital emergency rooms, and ongoing funding problems with some school boards, McGuinty's party leads in most of Ontario.

Ontarians will vote in a provincial election next Oct. 4, and EKOS president Frank Graves said the results of this poll mean that the vote "looks like it's McGuinty's to lose, but that the campaign will be extremely important."

"We're well out of the honeymoon period. (The Liberals) had serious wobbles right out of the gate, so I think the public are making a relatively informed judgment," Graves said yesterday. "If the economy stays strong — particularly the labour market — I think they'll be very difficult to dislodge."

Fully 57 per cent of those surveyed said the Liberal government is moving in the right direction, while 33 per cent said it was moving in the wrong direction and 10 per cent didn't know.

That compares to a February 2004 EKOS poll showing 43 per cent thought the Liberals were moving in the right direction, 41 per cent believed they were moving in the wrong direction and 16 per cent were unsure.

In Toronto, the Liberals are at 46.2 per cent, the Tories at 31.1 per cent and the New Democrats at 22.7 per cent. But in the 905 — former Conservative premier Mike Harris's political stronghold — the Tories and Liberals are tied at 40.9 per cent apiece with the New Democrats at 18.2 per cent.

It's a three-way race in Northern Ontario with the Tories at 34.4 per cent, the Liberals at 32.3 per cent and the New Democrats at 29.9 per cent.

In Eastern Ontario, the Liberals are at 45.8 per cent, the Tories at 42.4 per cent and the New Democrats at 9



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

Premier Dalton McGuinty, shown last month at Queen's Park, says "the only poll that's going to count is the one that they take on election day." Right now, the Liberals are leading in voter support in all regions of the province, according to a new poll.

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per cent.

In southwestern Ontario the Liberals are at 44.7 per cent, the Tories at 32.5 per cent, and the New Democrats at 19.2 per cent.

"There's really nowhere that (the Liberals) are losing," said Graves, noting Progressive Conservative leader Tory has yet to register with voters.

"He hasn't really managed to grab the podium effectively on an issue that's really going to seize Ontarians."

Graves said Hampton's NDP has "a little wind in their sails" after winning the Sept. 14 Parkdale-High Park by-election.

"Normally, a strong NDP works better for the Conservatives, but I'm not sure that's as clear this time around," he said.

All three leaders were wary about discussing public opinion surveys so far from the next election.

"The only poll that's going to count is the one that they take on election day," said McGuinty.

"It's really important for us to keep our eye on the ball and that's fundamentally about improving the quality of health care and getting wait times down, getting class sizes down and test scores up and graduation rates up, working where we can with the business sector and labour to strengthen our economy," the premier said.

Tory, mindful that most other recent surveys show his party closer to the Liberals, shrugged off the findings.

"At the end of the day, polls come and polls go. We're staying the course and offering people an honest, straightforward alternative that's going to get results for people," he said.

Hampton said he's not surprised his party's fortunes are improving.

"The issues that we've been raising are the issues that matter to the average working person in Ontario. It resonated in Parkdale-High Park, it resonates in places like Toronto, places like Northern Ontario, major urban centres of the province," the NDP leader said.

"They're issues that aren't going away. These guys aren't fixing the emergency room problem in hospitals. It's getting worse. The funding formula for our schools is not getting fixed."



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