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Star poll: Liberals head for majority

Voters believe McGuinty would be best premier
Situation dire for Tories, says EKOS Research pollster

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The Ontario Liberals are poised to win a huge majority in Thursday's provincial election, according to a Toronto Star poll released today.



LUCAS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR

Ontario Premier Ernie Eves acknowledges the support of the Empire Club at the Metro Toronto Convention centre yesterday following his speech. Despite being behind in the polls, Eves remains confident.

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With just six days left in the election campaign, the survey shows the Liberals, under leader Dalton McGuinty, with a commanding 47.5 per cent of decided voter support, compared with 31 per cent for the incumbent Progressive Conservatives under Premier Ernie Eves.

NDP Leader Howard Hampton's strong performance during the leaders' debate Tuesday night has given his party a slight boost, raising its support to 17 per cent, up from 13 per cent after the first week of the election campaign.

The poll of 1,023 voters was conducted on Sept. 24-25 — after the debate — by EKOS Research Associates. It is considered accurate to within 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The number of respondents who were undecided came in at 12.6 per cent.

If Liberal support holds until voting day, it could translate into more than 70 seats in the 103-seat Legislature.

When the Legislature was dissolved Sept. 2, the standings were 56 Tories, 36 Liberals, 9 NDP, 1 Independent and 1 vacancy.

The poll also found that McGuinty has overtaken Eves as the leader voters believe would make the best Premier.

EKOS President Frank Graves credited the Liberal success to a solid performance from McGuinty.

"McGuinty's solid performance, beginning with the initial wave of election advertising through to the debate, which has elevated him to the most likeable candidate and best Premier in the minds of voters."

But the situation, he added, is dire for the Tories under Eves, especially given that the party appeared to start the campaign on even footing with the Liberals after months of trailing.

"We have gone from the 'blackout bounce' for Eves to 'turn out the lights' for the Ontario PCs," Graves said.

He was referring to the boost in support the Tory leader enjoyed when he called the election on Sept. 2 after more than two weeks managing the aftermath of the Aug. 14 blackout.

An EKOS poll done for the Star and published Sept. 6 showed the Liberals with 43.5 per cent of the decided vote; the Tories with 42 per cent and the New Democrats at 13 per cent.

"In hindsight, the Tory attack strategy appears to have generated more heat than light, and was judged deficient by the public," Graves said.

The latest poll is especially bleak for the Tories because it shows them behind in every region, and behind in every age and income group.

Only among rural voters are the Tories and Liberals neck and neck.

In the 416 area code, the Liberals have 53 per cent support, compared with 21 per cent for the Tories and 22 per cent for the NDP. In the 905 region, the Liberals have 47 per cent support to 37 per cent for the Tories and 11 per cent for the NDP.

On the key question of who would make the best premier, McGuinty has surpassed Eves.

McGuinty was chosen as the best premier by 37 per cent of those polled, up seven points from a similar survey conducted just one week into the election campaign. Eves' support has dropped eight points to 33 per cent during the same period.

The NDP's Hampton was chosen as best premier material by 14 per cent of respondents.

The last three weeks have seen the Liberals run a smooth, gaffe-free campaign stressing a positive message that urged voters to "choose change."

The Tories started off with withering attacks on McGuinty.

They attempted to portray him as "still not up to the job" — a play on the phrase they used in 1999 when Mike Harris won a second straight majority.

In 1999, the Tories won their majority with 45.1 per cent of the vote, compared with 39.8 per cent for the Liberals, 12.6 per cent for the NDP and 2.5 per cent for other parties such as the Greens and the Family Coalition Party.

The latest poll shows that Ontario voters overwhelmingly rejected the negative tone of the Tory election campaign. Instead, they have bought into the Liberal message that now is not the time for tax cuts because the province's health and education systems need that money more.

Sixty-five per cent said they agree that money the Tories would spend on tax cuts should instead go to health and education. Adding a further boost to Liberal prospects, the poll found that 59 per cent of Ontarians feel it is time for a change in leadership at Queen's Park.

And, the number of Ontarians who now believe the Liberals will form the next government — regardless of their own voting intentions — has jumped to 63 per cent in this survey from 42 per cent three weeks ago.

Faced with dwindling numbers and a campaign that has stalled, the Tories have been feverishly accusing the Liberals in recent days of planning to hike taxes. The Liberals have said they will not proceed with a new round of personal income tax cuts that the Tories' have scheduled to begin on Jan. 1.

They will also reverse corporate tax cuts, a promised property tax credit for seniors and a tax credit for parents who send their children to private school.

The NDP's increased popularity among voters could be attributed to the public's response to a question about whether the province should have non-profit, publicly owned auto insurance. Sixty-four per cent of those asked agreed that such a system would deliver lower car insurance rates. Public auto insurance is the cornerstone of the NDP election platform.

Despite the hype surrounding the importance of last Tuesday's televised leaders' debate in this race, the poll shows that 87 per cent of the people who tuned in had already made up their minds which party they were voting for. Those surveyed could not come up with a clear winner in the debate, but when asked who was the loser, 33 per cent picked Eves, 20 per cent said Hampton and only 18 per cent said that McGuinty lost.

Another key issue facing the province's next government is securing enough electricity to meet the needs of Ontarians. When asked whether they were confident the power would be there in the future, 41 per cent said there would not be enough supply, while 40 per cent thought the situation was in hand. On that point, 17 per cent said they simply didn't know.

Another issue that candidates say is being mentioned by voters on the doorstep is same-sex marriage, even though the definition of marriage is a federal responsibility. When asked whether they agree or disagree with allowing gays and lesbians to marry, Ontarians were almost evenly split with 38 per cent in support and 37 per cent opposed. Twenty-two per cent of respondents said they did not have an opinion.

The details of the poll show that much of what the Tories consider their "core vote" has collapsed. Traditionally they could rely on the support of older, wealthier men in the province.

But the new numbers show that even those demographics, especially the higher income earners, plan to vote Liberal.

Geographically, the only part of the province where the Tories are even close to the Liberals in support is rural Ontario, where the Tories are still backed by 41 per cent of voters, compared with 42 per cent for the Liberals.

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