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Despite Rocky Start Liberals Still on Right Track

By James Wallace
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One out of every two Ontario voters think Dalton McGuinty's Liberal government is on the right track, an exclusive Osprey Media/SES Research poll has found.

Despite a rocky start to McGuinty's rookie term as premier, 49% of those polled said they were satisfied with the general progress of the new provincial government.

Just one in four thought the Liberals were actually on the wrong track and the same number were unsure or wanted the government to move in a different direction.

"Most people see that there's basically no choice for this government, there really is only one track because of the deficit," said SES president Nikita Nanos.

In its first 100 days of power, the McGuinty government has broken, backpedaled or abandoned a number of key election promises - ranging from a pledge to maintain hydro price caps to shrugging off a signed commitment to balance the province's books.

McGuinty has argued he inherited an unexpected \$5.6 billion deficit from the former Conservative government and must wrestle with the deficit before making good on every election promise.

That argument has some traction with the public, the poll found.

"Voters may not be happy with the Liberals or Dalton McGuinty but the deficit is a hard reality and they're getting some credit for dealing with it," Nanos said.

The challenge for the Liberals in the days ahead will be how they proceed with specific initiatives, programs or cuts.



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“When they start articulating specific initiatives, like photo radar, they annoy voters,” Nanos said.

And in fact, the poll found there’s broad public cynicism about political parties in general in this province and cynicism about the ability of any party to govern well.

Almost half of those polled – 46 percent – have lost faith that any political party would keep its promises and 35 percent believe that none of the three major parties would be responsible with public tax dollars.

“I think the best word to describe how people feel is let down,” Nanos said.

The loss of confidence started with broken promises and failed expectations out of the former Conservative government in its declining days and the track record of the new Liberal regime.

The public was willing to believe the Liberals would keep their promises but those hopes are being dashed, Nanos said.

“Their promises haven’t been kept,” he said.

While the poll suggests broad, voter antipathy toward the new government and political parties in general, it also reveals the utter collapse of Ontario’s Progressive Conservative election machine and shows the failure of Ontario New Democrats to capture lost ground.

The Tories were dealt a “body blow” when former provincial auditor Erik Peters released a report concluding the province faced a \$5.6 billion deficit, Nanos said.

“Unless they can rebuild confidence and credibility on taxes and fiscal responsibility they have a long trail back to competitiveness,” he said.

The NDP also has an uphill battle with public confidence. Even committed NDPers have lost faith in the fiscal abilities of their party.

“A lot of that has to do with their leader,” Nanos said. “Howard Hampton has not been able to inspire confidence.”

The Osprey Media/SES poll found few voters believe the provinces political parties have a vision for the future, share their views, keep their promises or would be responsible with tax dollars.

Voters were asked six questions to gauge public views of the parties with the following results.

- When asked which party kept their promises, 18 per cent said Liberal, 19 per cent said PC and eight per cent said NDP;



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- When asked which party was responsible with tax dollars, 26 per cent said Liberal, 20 per cent said PC and six per cent said NDP;
- When asked which party has a vision for the future, 32 per cent said Liberal, 18 per cent said PC and 15 per cent said NDP;
- When asked which party has “views like me”; 33 per cent said Liberal, 21 per cent said PC and 13 per cent said NDP;
- When asked which party could make tough choices, 31 per cent said Liberal, 28 per cent said PC and eight per cent said NDP;
- And when asked which party would create jobs, 30 per cent said Liberal, 25 per cent said PC and 14 per cent said NDP.

Nanos said all three parties have been tarred with the same brush.

“The winning formula for any one of these parties is clarity and consistency,” Nanos said.

And while the Liberals remain as popular as they were on election day, the public has begun to form negative opinions about Premier McGuinty.

An SES poll published by Osprey last week, voters were asked what they disliked about the new premier and 27 per cent said “breaking promises.”

Nanos said McGuinty is earning a reputation as a promise breaker in part because he’s failed to do a good job selling his motives and reasoning to the public.

As a result, the new premier has been defined by his failures, retreats and inconsistencies.

“On any given day, when Ontarians read the newspaper, they don’t know how the Dalton McGuinty is going to act or react.”

Unless that trend changes, life won’t settle down for the new government.

“It might take 30 days for a negative perception to take hold,” Nanos said. “It’s easy for people to form an opinion but very difficult to change.”

The Ontario Survey of 500 voters was conducted between Jan. 18 through Jan. 21 and are accurate to within 4.5 percentage points 19 times out of 20.

James Wallace is the Queen's Park bureau chief for the Osprey News Network.

Contact the writer at: jwallace@ospreymedia.ca.