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Sep. 23, 2002. 01:00 AM

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Liberals lead Tories in voter support: Poll

But Eves beats McGuinty as 'best premier'

By Theresa Boyle
QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU

Ontario Liberals still lead the Conservatives in popular support but the gap is narrowing, with Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty "seriously" trailing his own party, according to a poll released today.

And education could be the issue that tips the scales in the next election, expected in less than a year, says Nikita Nanos, managing director of SES Canada Research Inc., which conducted the poll this month.

It shows that 47 per cent of Ontarians support the Liberals, 39 per cent the Conservatives, 13 per cent the NDP, and 1 per cent the Green Party.

Education has become the "top unprompted issue of concern" for 31 per cent of Ontarians, up from 22 per cent just four months ago. This is likely driven by news of the provincial takeover of school boards that ran deficits, a move that's particularly unpopular among female voters, Nanos says.

"If the Conservatives don't change their tact on this, they could be quite vulnerable because it is almost statistically impossible for them to form a third majority government without performing better among women," he says.

The survey, which involved telephone interviews with 500 Ontarians 18 or older, found the Liberal lead fell to 8 percentage points, down from 16 percentage points, over the last year.

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On the eve of Mike Harris' resignation in September, 2001, Liberals enjoyed 53 per cent of voter support, compared to 37 per cent for the Tories and 10 per cent for the NDP.

"Although the Liberals still lead, the downward trend must be worrisome," Nanos said.

"Of greater concern for the provincial Liberals is the fact that their leader seriously trails his party."

The poll found 16 per cent believe McGuinty would make the best premier, compared to 38 per cent who favour Premier Ernie Eves and 7 per cent who'd back NDP Leader Howard Hampton.

Eves continues to enjoy a post-leadership honeymoon, he noted. As well, the Premier has picked up support from voters, particularly women, who approve of his repositioning of the government toward the political centre.

But given that 40 per cent of voters are unsure whom they'd support, an election is still up for grabs, Nanos said.

"The dark cloud on the horizon is the education issue. It directly impacts the one group (Conservatives) need to do better among, which is women," Nanos said.

Some 38 per cent of women rated education as their top concern, compared to 23 per cent of men.

Meantime, the NDP needs to watch out for the Green Party, he noted. The environmental party has the potential to lure away traditional NDP supporters as concerns such as the Kyoto protocol, smog and the Walkerton water tragedy inch their way up the agenda.

The poll was conducted Sept. 10-13. Results from a poll of 500 people is considered accurate to within 4.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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