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HOME > THE KINGSTON WHIG-STANDARD > > LOCAL NEWS



Inside Today

Local News
Local Sports
Jack Chiang
What's Up

About Us

Advertise
Classified
Contact
Subscribe

Classified

Classified Ads
Obituaries
Homes
Homes website directory
Memorial Verses

Advertising Features

2003 Salute to Kingston & Area
Businessmen

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Read Feedback
Post Feedback



Liberals take huge lead in polls

By James Wallace

Saturday, May 31, 2003 - 07:00

Local News - TORONTO

For the first time since David Peterson held power in the late 1980s, Ontario voters believe the province would be best served by a Liberal premier, an exclusive

Osprey News/SES Research poll has found.

Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty has nosed out Premier Ernie Eves as the province's most popular political leader in the run-up to an anticipated fall election campaign.

The poll also found the Opposition Liberals enjoy a commanding 21-point lead over the governing Conservatives and that the government's credibility as a good manager has been eroded during the past year.

Two thirds of Ontarians believe the Tories are doing a poor, or at best average, job of running the province, according to SES, a firm founded in Kingston in 1988 by Queen's University graduate Nikita Nanos.

"A pretty significant number of voters think the government is on the wrong track," said Nanos, president of SES Canada Research.

"They see a premier they haven't gotten to know very well and a government that's gone from being proactive to reacting from one issue to the next, whether it's hydro privatization, Walkerton or SARS," Nanos said.

McGuinty, meanwhile, has steadily gained in popularity since Eves assumed power and was viewed as the top choice for premier by 36 per cent of voters polled this past week.

Eves has fallen just behind McGuinty, with 34 per cent of those polled



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Liberals t
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sights on
Canada ti

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at fencing
champion

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WWE tak
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believing the premier is the best leader for the job while 10 per cent said they'd like to see NDP Leader Howard Hampton in charge.

A significant number of voters, 19 per cent of those polled, were unsure which party leader would make the best premier.

McGuinty managed to increase his numbers by attracting support from the pool of undecided voters, not by stealing many votes from either Eves or Hampton.

"If you take a look over the last six months, all of those soft voters are now parking with McGuinty," Nanos said. "Eves's numbers have been fairly static and so have Hampton's."

When Eves inherited the premier's job by winning the Conservative party leadership race in March 2002, he was widely perceived as less confrontational than former Premier Mike Harris and as the best candidate to woo traditionally middle-of-the-road Ontario voters.

However, the Osprey News/SES poll reveals the current premier's first year in power has pretty much been a wash in terms of attracting new supporters.

When asked whether the change in leadership had affected their voting intentions, 19 per cent of those polled said they were more likely to vote PC; 19 per cent said they were less likely; 56 per cent said the change made no difference and six per cent were uncertain.

"The promise of Ernie was a strong fiscal agenda, a better manager for health care and education with less confrontation," Nanos said. "But his coattails aren't very long right now."

Eves has failed to adequately define himself and suffered from the contrast with former Premier Harris.

"The one thing people knew about Mike Harris, love him or hate him, the average guy in the doughnut shop could probably guess how Mike would react because they knew what he stood for," Nanos said.

Eves has postponed a planned June election to deal with the second SARS outbreak and a Toronto Catholic school lockout that is keeping 69,000 elementary school children out of class.

There's also little doubt Conservative campaign organizers were concerned about weak polling numbers for their party and their leader.

The Osprey News/SES Research poll, conducted after Eves received favourable reviews for his "Road Ahead" election platform, found 53 per cent of decided voters back the Liberals; 32 per cent support the Conservative government and 15 per cent support the NDP, confirming comparable numbers in other recent public opinion polls.

"These numbers are very indicative of a governing party," Nanos said.

And while it's not unusual for a governing party to lag behind the opposition between elections, the governing Tories have additionally suffered from a string of controversies during the past year, ranging from criticism over botched plans to privatize hydro to a recent decision



to unveil the provincial budget at a Brampton auto parts plant.

More fundamentally, the poll results suggest the Conservatives have a lot of work to do before the next election, which could come as early as July or as late as next spring.


"They came to power with an agenda and they wanted to do the right thing and a damn the torpedoes attitude," Nanos said. "To win, they've got to recapture what they were."

For the Liberals, the trick will be to hold onto the gains they've made over the summer and cement the notion that McGuinty is a credible alternative to Eves.

"This is the beginning of a trend for McGuinty and the question will be can he maintain the trend," Nanos said.

The poll of 500 Ontario voters was conducted on May 26 and May 27. It is statistically accurate within 4.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20 and was registered with the Canadian Survey Research Council.

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