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Monday, September 22, 2003

[HOME](#) > [THE KINGSTON WHIG-STANDARD](#) > [LOCAL NEWS](#)



Inside Today

[Local News](#)
[Local Sports](#)
[Jack Chiang](#)
[What's Up](#)

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[Contact](#)
[Subscribe](#)

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[Classified Ads](#)
[Obituaries](#)
[Homes](#)
[What's Developing in Kingston and Area](#)
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[Thousand Island Open House Tour](#)
[Up Close & Personal](#)

Features

[Women in Business](#)

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Health care dominates voters' agenda, poll finds

By James Wallace

Monday, September 22, 2003 - 07:00

Local News - The east is the only region in the province that has seen Conservative support grow, though marginally, since the 1999 election campaign, an exclusive poll by Osprey Media/SES Research has found.

Support for Premier Ernie Eves's Conservatives is up in the east by a point since the 1999 race to 46 per cent, Liberal support has dropped to 42 per cent from 45 per cent and NDP moved to nine per cent from six per cent, the poll shows.

"The east is the best region for the Progressive Conservatives," said Nic Nanos, president and CEO of SES Research Inc. "These eastern Ontario ridings carried the PCs for years in opposition. They still represent the real core of the party."

However, poll results from other parts of the province suggest momentum is building for a Liberal majority government under Dalton McGuinty. A separate COMPAS Inc. poll released over the weekend showed the Liberals hold a huge lead in voter support, with 50 per cent. The Tories follow with 33 per cent and the NDP are a distant third at 14.

"The momentum is there [for the Liberals], a lot will depend on what happens in the leaders' debate," Nanos said.

Public concern over municipal amalgamation may play some role in regional results, with 47 per cent of voters in the Osprey Media/SES Research poll saying it's an important issue that will affect their voting decision. Mergers completed in the late 1990s realigned municipal borders throughout the Kingston region.

However, the top two issues on voters' minds in this region are education and health care.

"Voters want to hear about health care



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and education but they're being fed hot-button issues," Nanos said.

There are eight ridings in the east served by Osprey publications. Five are held by Liberal MPPs, including John Gerretsen in Kingston and the Islands and Leona Dombrowsky in Hastings-Frontenac-Lennox and Addington.

Gerretsen is seen as a very tough candidate to unseat, but the same was said of Conservative cabinet minister and popular MPP Keith Norton, who once held the riding.

Three eastern ridings have been Conservative for decades, including those of cabinet ministers Bob Runciman in Leeds-Grenville and Norm Sterling in Lanark-Carleton.

Despite core support, less than half of the region's voters, 38 per cent, think the Conservatives deserve to be re-elected and 45 per cent believe Premier Ernie Eves should be replaced.

The poll also found a large number of voters – 13 per cent in the region – remain undecided about how they will vote Oct. 2.

All three leaders will participate in a televised leaders' debate tomorrow evening.

Both Eves and McGuinty need to attract a significant share of undecided votes to form a majority government.

The poll suggests the Tories and Howard Hampton's NDP are on the wrong track as far as voters are concerned.

Despite all the attention the three leading campaigns have devoted to political hot button issues such as auto insurance, hydro, same-sex marriage and immigration, voters overwhelmingly identify health care and education as their top concerns, the poll found.

When asked what top two issues would affect their vote, 32 per cent in the region said health care and 26 per cent said education.

No other issues came close.

The Osprey Media/SES Research poll has a margin of error of 6.3 per cent 19 times out of 20.

When respondents in the Osprey poll were asked to state their own concerns, few of the hot-button issues came up.

Little or no concern was expressed for teachers' strikes, native issues, terrorism, gun control, debt, immigration, rent control, child care, homelessness or even, post-Walkerton, clean water.

Slight concern, ranging from less than one per cent to roughly three per cent of voters, was expressed over seniors' issues, hydro, auto insurance, honesty of politicians, jobs and the economy, debt and the potential deficit, the environment and social programs. Jobs and the economy were a concern for six per cent of voters in the region and eight per cent had concerns about high taxes.

“What we have here is a mishmash of wedge issues but nothing’s driving the vote,” Nanos said.

Some hot-button issues do stand out in terms of their ability to influence voters.

Party positions on auto insurance were important to 85 per cent of voters in the region while 48 per cent said stances on same-sex marriage were important.

However, 99 per cent in the region said access to health care was important or very important.

“That’s everybody,” Nanos said. “If politics was a buffet, health care would be the main course.”

To gain any further edge in this campaign, he said, all three leaders will have to convince voters they can address health care concerns ranging from doctor shortages to overcrowded hospitals.

So far in this election, Eves’s campaign has focused on a series of wedge-issue policies intended to appeal to voters with strong views on specific topics.

Those policies include tax deductions for mortgage holders and seniors, tougher immigration rules, a tougher stance on crime, a ban on teacher strikes and making it clear he opposes same-sex marriages.

At the same time, the Eves campaign has run negative television and radio ads attacking McGuinty and the Liberals.

“[Eves has] to articulate his vision on health care and education and do it without being negative,” Nanos said.

Similarly, Hampton, who has made hydro and auto insurance his top issues, needs to refocus on health care and education.

“Auto insurance is not a long-term issue,” Nanos said.

“The NDP strategy to focus on a public power anger campaign is just yelling at the wind,” he said. “They might have done better to focus on health care and accessibility.”

McGuinty has made health care and education core issues and needs to prove in the debate that he’s ready for the job, Nanos said.

“He’s got to come out and be seen as holding his own,” Nanos said.

ID- 43880

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