



Poll

By James Wallace
Osprey News Network
June 3, 2003

Ontario voters favor more immigration powers for the Province

Ontario voters strongly favor a controversial Conservative election promise to assume more immigration powers, including plans to attract foreign doctors to rural and under-served areas, an SES Research/Osprey News poll has found.

The poll found 60% of voters support giving Ontario the same power as Quebec over immigration matters compared to 28% who oppose the idea and 12% who are unsure. Nikita Nanos, president of SES Canada Research, said there's a broad public perception that immigration matters are not being well managed.

"It doesn't mean people are against immigration but the public doesn't believe the federal government is doing its job," Nanos said.

That suggests immigration may become a hot button issue in the upcoming provincial election campaign, particularly plans to allow more foreign-trained doctors to practice in Ontario, he said.

"There's a fine line to walk on that one," Nanos said. "Conservative voters don't believe government should tell people where to live."

"On the other side, rural areas need doctors," he said.

It's estimated that Ontario needs more than 550 new physicians to fill the need for family doctors in 120 under-served communities across the province.

However, more than 1,000 foreign-trained doctors already live in the province and are waiting to be licensed to practice here.

All three provincial parties have announced election policies to tap into that supply of foreign doctors.



Poll

Premier Ernie Eves, in his Road Ahead platform promised to give “first priority” to fully-trained medical professionals who are “willing to settle where the need for their services is greatest.”

Eves expects to attract some 650 foreign medical graduates over the next five years by “increasing access” to Ontario and add additional new doctors by removing “barriers for qualified foreign physicians” already in the province.

He has also announced measures to pay tuition for medical students who agree to practice in under-served areas and build a new northern medical school in Sudbury with a campus in Thunder Bay.

Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty has also promised to alleviate Ontario’s doctor shortage in his Ontario Liberal Plan document by removing “barriers preventing well-qualified foreign-trained physicians from practicing in Ontario.”

McGuinty further promised to increase space for medical school students by 15%, to make medical school tuition cheaper, forgive loans to medical students and make family medicine “more attractive” by creating community-based “family health teams” of health care professionals.

NDP leader Howard Hampton promises in his “publicpower” platform to “relieve the doctor shortage by streamlining the training and accreditation of qualified internationally-trained physicians.”

Hampton plans to come up with a “fair” system to assess the skill and competency of foreign-trained doctors and compel provincial medical regulatory bodies to recognize the new standards.

He’d introduce a system similar to one used in Manitoba that sees foreign doctors fast-tracked and assessed for competency and given conditional licences.

Nanos said all three proposals to deal with doctor shortages will likely get close scrutiny during the election campaign but the public will want evidence the problem will finally be dealt with after years of chronic doctor shortages.

“They don’t want to see overly bureaucratic and complicated solution,” he said. More broadly, immigration moved up as an issue on the public’s radar following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the United States and people now worry more than ever before about their personal safety.



Poll

That helps Ontario's Conservative government in an election campaign because it reinforces the public perception that the PCs are the best party on law-and-order issues, Nanos said.

It also allows the provincial Conservatives to attack Ottawa's Liberal government on federal immigration policies, which again helps the Tories, he said.

Former Premier Mike Harris gained support by attacking the feds on health care during the last campaign and the same tactic, turned on immigration, may also garner support for Eves.

McGuinty, on the other hand, may suffer because of perceptions the federal Liberals are not doing enough to keep Canada's borders secure.

Finally, Quebec struck an accord with Ottawa in the 1970s to handle a range of immigration matters and Ontario voters think their government should have the same powers, Nanos said.

"There's a sense that if Quebec has certain powers, why doesn't the Province of Ontario," he 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.

30