



# THE KINGSTON WHIG-STANDARD

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## Tories gaining ground on Liberal lead: Poll

By James Wallace

Wednesday, September 10, 2003 - 07:00

**Local News** - Although Conservative Premier Ernie Eves has narrowed the gap on Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty, Ontario's provincial election campaign remains a wide-open race, an SES Research poll obtained by Osprey News Network has found.

A quarter of decided voters say they may change their minds and that the Sept. 23 televised leaders debate will be pivotal in determining the outcome of the election.

The SES poll pegs support for the Opposition Liberals at 45 per cent and shows the Conservatives trailing at 43 per cent.

Liberal support has dropped nine percentage points in the past 90 days, the Tories are up eight points and Howard Hampton's New Democrats are almost unchanged at 12 per cent, up a point.

"What this confirms is the momentum in the campaign has shifted to the PCs," said Nik Nanos, president and CEO of polling firm SES Research.

"The next two weeks will witness either a Tory consolidation of momentum or the McGuinty Liberals fighting back an Eves-led Tory surge," Nanos said.

The campaign could shift either way because support for both frontrunners is soft.

One out of four decided voters admits they may change their mind before the campaign ends.

"We know from our poll that 25 per cent of Ontarians are likely or very likely to switch their vote," Nanos said.

"That's a huge potential swing."



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While the Tories picked up ground, in particular because Eves was perceived to have handled the power blackout well, support for the ruling Conservatives remains weak.

"Currently, voters have switched from the Liberals to the PCs, but it's not 100-per-cent committed," Nanos said. "It's soft."

"They could just as easily, over the rest of the campaign, switch back."

Forty-two per cent of decided Ontario voters and 57 per cent of undecided voters believe the debate will influence the results of the Oct. 2 vote.

"The debate is going to play a critical role [in deciding the campaign]," Nanos said.

"Realistically, someone could land a knockout punch and there would be no way to recover. There's going to be no margin for error or mistakes."

Despite soft support, the SES survey, conducted on Sept. 7, shows Tory support has increased in a number of key areas.

Going into the campaign, two-thirds of Ontarians believed the Tories were doing a poor, or at best average, job of running the province. More than half thought it was time for a change of government at Queen's Park.

Voter dissatisfaction on both those counts has dropped and the number of people calling for change is down nine percentage points.

The percentage of Ontarians who think the Conservatives deserve to be re-elected increased to 41 per cent from 32 per cent in the past 90 days.

On personal popularity, most Ontarians believed McGuinty would make a better premier than Eves before the campaign got underway, the first time in decades an opposition leader enjoyed such popularity.

The two leaders have since switched positions with 41 per cent of Ontarians now saying Eves would make the best premier (up seven points) compared to 24 per cent who chose McGuinty (down 12 points) and Hampton at 10 per cent (unchanged).

Tellingly, when asked who would win the provincial election campaign, 41 per cent chose the Conservatives, 33 per cent chose the Liberals and 2 per cent chose the NDP.

Eves has gained support in large part because of perceptions he handled himself well during the recent provincewide power blackout.

"He had seven full days of uncritical media scrutiny," Nanos said. "He was front and centre."

"There was no way you could have missed Ernie Eves during the blackout."

The blackout ended up being a "stroke of luck" for Eves so McGuinty

will have step up the intensity of his campaigning to turn things around for the Liberals, Nanos said.

“The Liberals have to do something,” he said. “In a vacuum, the Conservative momentum will continue.”

With all three parties rolling out television ads today, the somewhat sleepy campaign may get a boost.

Much of Eves campaign so far has focused on attacking McGuinty, but it's unclear how that will go over as voters start to pay more attention to the election.

“Ontario voters are pragmatic,” Nanos said. “They’ve got a mind of their own.”

“I think voters are going to be teaching everybody a lesson in this election, as they did in the past two.”


The poll is part of SES's Ontario Omnibus Survey, which is conducted every four months.

It is based on a random telephone sample of 500 Ontarians, 18 years of age and older and was conducted Sept. 7.

The margin of accuracy for the survey is 4.5 percentage points, plus or minus, 19 times out of 20.

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