



# FROM HARRIS TO McGUIINTY: THE ONTARIO ELECTION ROLLER COASTER

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SES regularly provides political analysis to the Sun Media Group nationally and Osprey Media in Ontario. The firm's polling information has appeared in Canada's major media outlets including the CBC, The Globe and Mail, the National Post and The Toronto Star. For more information visit the SES website at <http://www.sesresearch.com> or call (613) 234-4666.

## CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Presentation to the Professional Marketing Research Society of Canada (Ottawa Chapter)  
National Press Club, Ottawa, Canada  
Thursday October 30, 2003  
4:30 pm

Thank you Ric. Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. I would like to thank the Ottawa Chapter of the Professional Marketing Research Society of Canada for inviting me here today to share our internal SES polling data and analysis of the last provincial election in Ontario.

But before we delve into the polling data, I would like to set a broader context with which to analyze the Ontario political landscape.



In my opinion, it's not enough just to look at the polling numbers. They have to be placed in a political context. For Ontario, a key factor leading into the provincial election has been that since 1990, the party leading a campaign entering the writ has been defeated.

[SLIDE 3]

Also, a look at the distribution of party support and elected members clearly indicates that in the most recent provincial election a 6% increase in support for the Ontario Liberals resulted in the Liberals more than doubling the number of their seats from 35 to 72.

Therefore we must keep in mind that:

1. regardless of the strong trend in polling data between elections in favour of the Liberals, the 1990, 1995 and 1999 elections saw a potential Liberal victory, according to the polls, fail to materialize;
2. very small fluctuations in voter support across Ontario resulted in large fluctuations in the seat standings; and,
3. the name of the game is targeting resources and ensuring the most efficient distribution of party support.

The real genesis for the Liberal victory, in effect, started with the resignation of Premier Mike Harris. Although he had two successful elections under his belt in 1995 and 1999 he stepped down in the Fall of 2001 mid-way through his mandate.

[Slide 4]

Let's take a quick look at a snapshot of public opinion in the same month Mike Harris resigned:

1. the PCs trailed the Liberals by 16 points; and,



2. Harris was more likely to be the preferred choice as Premier over Dalton McGuinty by 21 points.

Popular wisdom among pundits and strategists was that:

1. Ontarians had tired of the Common Sense Revolution (CSR);
2. voters wanted a new less, confrontational tone; and,
3. Mike Harris had become too much of a lightning rod to win a third successive mandate.

Indeed, we all witnessed a PC leadership campaign which featured the return of an Ernie Eves cast as a “kinder, gentler Mike Harris”. Ernie Eves was to recast a softened tone for the Provincial PC Government. The Revolution was over and a new style and tone was promised to take shape.

Initial polling did point to improved electoral opportunities for the PCs under Ernie Eves. The political back-drop, however, was that at least one of every two voters still wanted change. The question remained, however, could Ernie Eves overtake Dalton McGuinty as the agent of change.

In the early days of the Eves premiership, 43% of voters thought the PCs had a better chance under Ernie Eves than Mike Harris with a net positive trade-off of about 30 points.

[Slide 5]

Even with a potential gain, “unsure” edged out the provincial party leaders in the Fall of 2002 and again in the Winter of 2003.

Likewise, polling showed that there were clear definitional problems for both McGuinty and Eves with more than four of every ten Ontarians either being unsure or thinking that neither scored well on a series of leadership attributes.



This was really the first indicator that although Eves had strong name recognition, his personal definition was at a level comparable to Dalton McGuinty.

However, a series of issues, including the flip-flop on Hydro Privatization and the perceived mishandling of the Ontario budget speech all positively drove leadership ratings for Dalton McGuinty.

[Slide 6]

Although support for Eves and Hampton remained relatively constant, approval ratings for McGuinty slowly climbed and in the Summer of 2003 leading into the election, McGuinty actually outscored a sitting Premier for the first time in his career.

Faced with a series of controversial issues and resignations from cabinet, Eves was looking more vulnerable. In the past under Mike Harris the PCs built a brand around:

1. the slogan “promises made – promises kept”; and,
2. more importantly the Common Sense Revolution created a certain level of message discipline and indeed, many voters could generally anticipate how a Mike Harris-led PC government would react to any given situation.

The hallmark of the Harris administration was consistency . . . love them or hate them . . . the Harris-led PCs were recognized for their consistency.

In the post-Harris environment, early direct interventions by Ernie Eves and controversial flip flops served to directly define him. Indeed, what emerged was a general perception that the Eves-led government lacked clarity and that Eves personally was inconsistent.

Let’s take a look at the overall issue environment leading up to the election.



[Slide 7]

Leading into the election the PCs continued to do relatively well on their core strengths:

1. about one of every two Ontarians said they were on the right track on law & order, taxes and creating jobs; and,
2. about an equal number of Ontarians thought they were on the wrong track on healthcare, education and to a lesser extent the environment.

The problem for the PCs was their strengths did not align with the issues of concern to average Ontarians. Healthcare and education consistently ranked as the top two issues of concern yet these were the two policy areas voters were most likely to say the PCs were on the wrong track.

This is in stark contrast to the successful 1999 PC Campaign strategy. For those that remember, the election was preceded by a government advertising campaign on the Provincial Health Record and also heavy messaging on education standards. After the government advertising finished, the PC campaign shifted into hard hitting political ads on Dalton McGuinty.

In 1999, the PC advertising effectively neutralized the top two issues and also undermined Dalton McGuinty's image. This combined with a strong fiscal agenda, a tightly-run campaign and a strong performance by Mike Harris led to the PC victory. This was so well orchestrated that once the campaign and the advertising were finished the Liberals regained their seemingly traditional non-election lead over the PCs – a lead which took them right into the first week of the 2003 campaign.

Whereas in 1999, the PCs had in advance laid the communications and advertising groundwork for the election, the period leading up to the 2003 campaign was characterized by fits and starts as the PCs geared up for an election in the Spring of 2003 and then stood down because of the SARS outbreak.



Even with all these challenges, one break Ernie Eves did get was the power black-out. It gave him a platform to demonstrate his leadership style and to connect with Ontarians. His daily press conferences showed a comfortable, reassuring Premier in command.

The black out in effect became the unofficial launch of the election and the PC campaign.

And indeed, in the week following the long weekend, it seemed that a PC turnaround similar to 1995 and 1999 might be possible. SES and a number of other polling firms all detected a jump in PC support. After the first week it was neck-and-neck. More importantly, a significant percentage of committed voters said they were likely to change their current vote. Polling data clearly indicated that the Liberal and PC support was soft and the situation was quite fluid.

Some may claim that the election was won in advance by the Liberals. Although the Liberals had a clear advantage over the PCs, polling and experience show that the outcome was not set in stone and that the McGuinty Liberals would have to work to consolidate their support.

The overall positioning and style of the campaign reflected the core constituencies of the two main parties. The provincial Liberals consistently polled better among female voters – therefore, a positive campaign would resonate best among women. Conversely, the PCs tended to do better among men – a group more likely to accept a hard hitting campaign style. Therefore, campaign style and tone mirrored the differing core constituencies for the two main parties.

[Slide 8]

On September 7<sup>th</sup> our survey of 500 likely voters showed the Liberals and the PCs caught in a virtual dead heat – Liberals 45%, PCs 43%, NDP 12%. The same poll showed that one in four committed voters were somewhat (5%) or very likely (19%) to change their vote.



In the week immediately following our poll on September 7<sup>th</sup> three major events had come into play which were to inalterably change the campaign –

1. the PCs negative ads “Still not up to the job” (September 8/9);
2. Dalton McGuinty signed the Canadian Taxpayers Federation - Taxpayer Protection Promise (September 10<sup>th</sup>); and,
3. PC Statement “Dalton McGuinty: He's an evil reptilian kitten-eater from another planet” (Black Friday - September 12<sup>th</sup>).

The combination of these three events in very close succession brought into clarity a number of factors for voters:

1. that the PCs and Ernie Eves had not changed or softened their tone but were combative, hard-hitting and negative;
2. that a perceived endorsement by the Canadian Taxpayers Federation made Dalton McGuinty a potentially safer choice for disaffected Conservative voters and men who tend to be more concerned about fiscal issues; and,
3. that the Eves team was subject to mis-steps and was not as strong as expected.

In the short span of ten days, the mood in the electorate had significantly swung against the PCs even before the leaders’ debate had occurred.

In effect, the more voters “tuned-in” to the unfolding Eves campaign, the more likely they were to be turned-off. The short span of 10 days would see a consolidation for the Liberals and a disintegration for the PCs.



Between September 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>, SES conducted six regional polls in Osprey Media Markets across Ontario. Polling indicates that the Liberals gained on all major policy areas and were tied with the PCs on the critical areas of taxes and creating jobs.

With the Liberals tied with the PCs on taxes and creating jobs during the campaign, the Tories were now losing ground on their core strengths. Likewise, the perceived advantage of Ernie Eves had melted away and indeed, the PC advertising brought into further clarity that maybe it was Ernie Eves and not Dalton McGuinty who was not up to the job.

Leading up to the debate, held on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, McGuinty was clearly on his way to victory.

I want to close with a look at the final trend line on the ballot.

[Slide 9]

At the beginning of the presentation, I noted that a 6% increase in popular support between 1999 and 2003 for the Liberals increased the number of seats from 35 to 72.

A look at the trend line shows that:

1. support for the Liberals remained stable from the beginning of the campaign (45%/46%) and that the positive campaign strategy consolidated Liberal support;
2. the PC campaign had in effect turned off accessible PC voters; and,
3. the NDP managed to register a minor gain in the close (12% to 15%).

**So what lessons can we learn?**

1. **It's not just what you say but how you say it** – Dalton McGuinty's campaign style and tone reinforced that voting Liberal was a break with the hard-edged tone of the Common Sense Revolution.





2. **Neutralize vulnerabilities** – By signing the Taxpayer Protection Promise, McGuinty effectively inoculated himself against his most likely vulnerability – fiscal issues.
3. **Define the ballot** – The Liberals effectively set the ballot question “change” and the PC strategy and mis-steps effectively reminded voters that the Eves-led PCs were not a desirable vehicle for change.
4. **Never build an advertising campaign around a factor you might not measure up to** – The PC strategy of focusing on McGuinty still not being up to the job was a two-edged sword.
5. **Voters reward a well run campaign** – In 1995 and 1999 voters overturned polling trends and rewarded the PCs with a mandate largely a result of a focused, well run, issue-driven campaign. In 2003 the McGuinty Liberals ran an error-free campaign on the right substance with the right tone. Polling in the first week of the campaign clearly shows that a Liberal victory was not a foregone conclusion. The Liberal victory, however, was well deserved.

## **SOME FINAL THOUGHTS**

### **Is wedge negative politics dead?**

No. Absolutely not. We know from experience that small voter swings can lead to a disproportionate impact on seat projections. The recent Ontario election proves that poorly planned and executed wedge politics does not work.

### **What challenges face Premier McGuinty?**

McGuinty's main challenge will be to ensure that he has a strong fiscal agenda. If he can hold the line on taxes, debt and grow the economy, he will effectively neutralize any threat from the right in the same manner that Paul Martin has federally. With a federal Liberal government, Premier McGuinty will have to tread carefully with Ottawa. His assumption of the Intergovernmental



Portfolio is a tacit acknowledgement of this. He must balance co-operation and federal Liberal goodwill with Ontario's traditional desire to have a provincial government which is not too cosy with Ottawa.

### **How can the Provincial Tories recover?**

Their short term future is really in the hands of the McGuinty Liberals. With today's news of a \$5 billion provincial deficit, rebuilding in the short term becomes more problematic for the Tories. If the McGuinty Liberals effectively manage fiscal issues they will crowd traditional PC territory thus potentially forcing the PCs to move further right. The new PC leader will need to be able to:

1. articulate a clear vision;
2. be consistent;
3. effectively fight the Liberals in the legislature to demonstrate that he or she is a potential Premier in waiting; and,
4. the Tories should not retreat but rebuild around their traditional core strengths, fiscal responsibility, taxes and law & order.

All this to say that we now have a new era in Ontario politics. The people of Ontario have put their trust in Dalton McGuinty to be that agent of change. He is in the driver seat. Now it's time to wait and see where he takes the province.

Thank you.

My remarks today and the SES polling data I touched upon are publicly available on the SES website (<http://www.sesresearch.com>).

I understand that we are now going to open the floor to questions.

The **PMRS Ottawa Chapter** would like to acknowledge the support of the following organizations.



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October 30, 2003

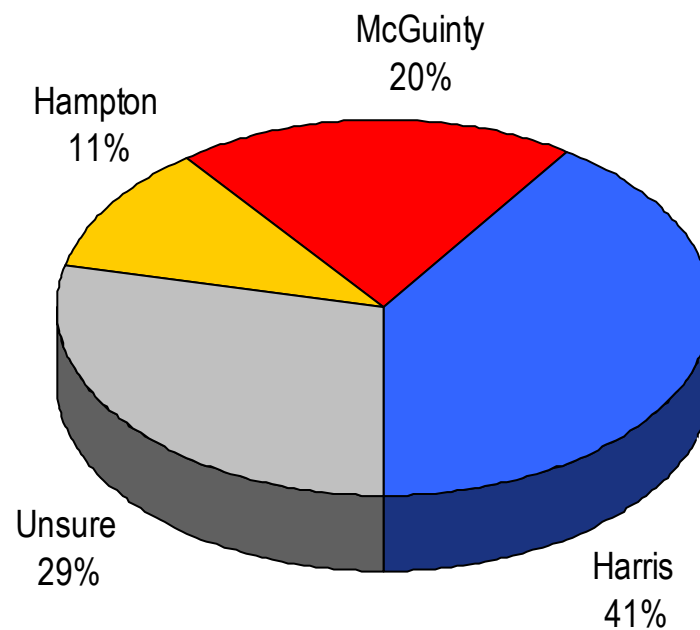
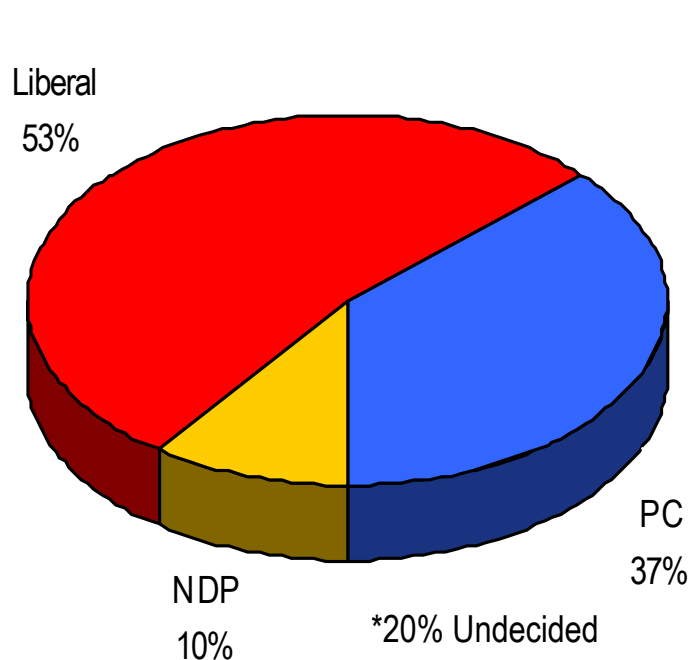
## Ontario Election Results

### Percentage of Popular Vote and Seats

(Source: Elections Ontario)

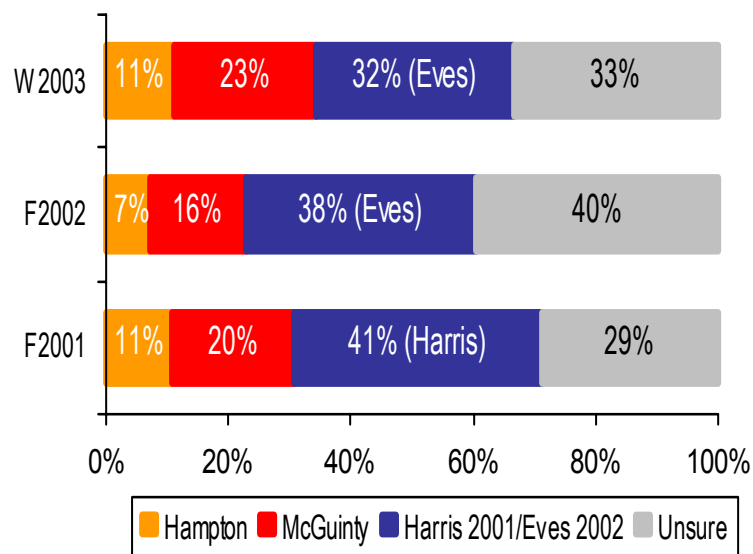
	1990		1995		1999		2003	
<b>LIBERAL</b>	32%	36	31%	30	40%	35	46%	72
<b>PC</b>	24%	20	45%	82	45%	59	35%	24
<b>NDP</b>	38%	74	21%	17	13%	9	15%	7

## Ballot and Leadership Preference at Harris Resignation (SES Research: Fall 2001)

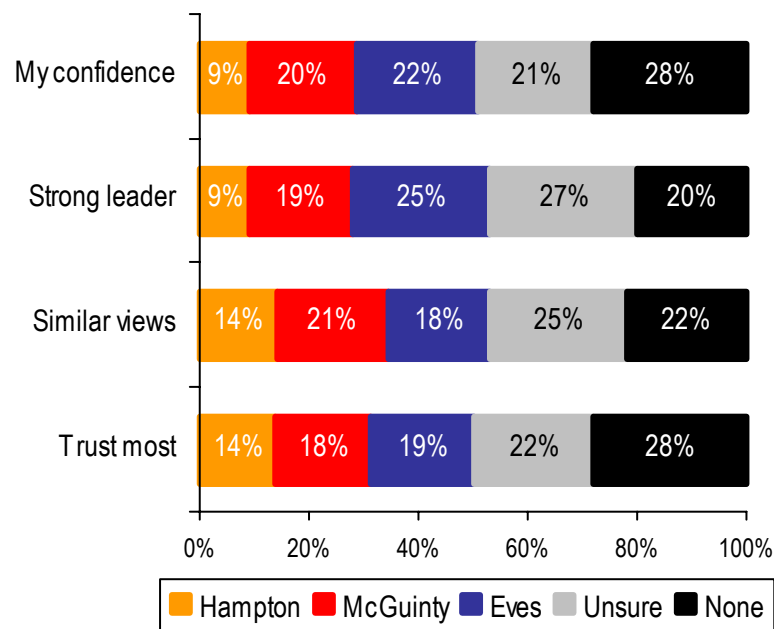


## Leadership Preference and Image (SES Research: Winter 2003)

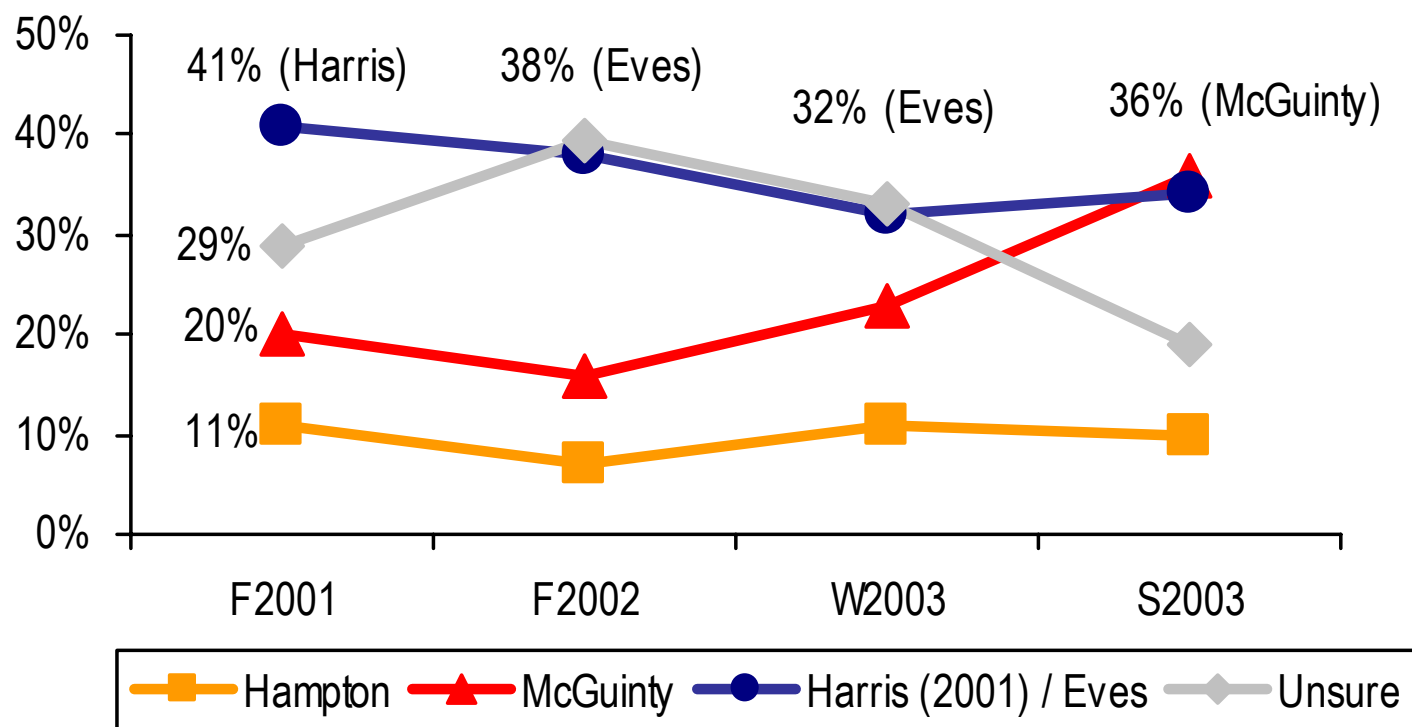
Thinking of the current provincial party leaders  
[rotate order] Ernie Eves (2002/3 wave)/Mike  
Harris (2001 wave), Dalton McGuinty and  
Howard Hampton....who, in your opinion,  
would make the best Premier of Ontario?



Thinking of the current provincial party leaders  
[rotate order] Ernie Eves, Dalton McGuinty and  
Howard Hampton....which of these leaders....  
[rotate questions]



## Leadership Trend Harris Resignation to Summer of 2003



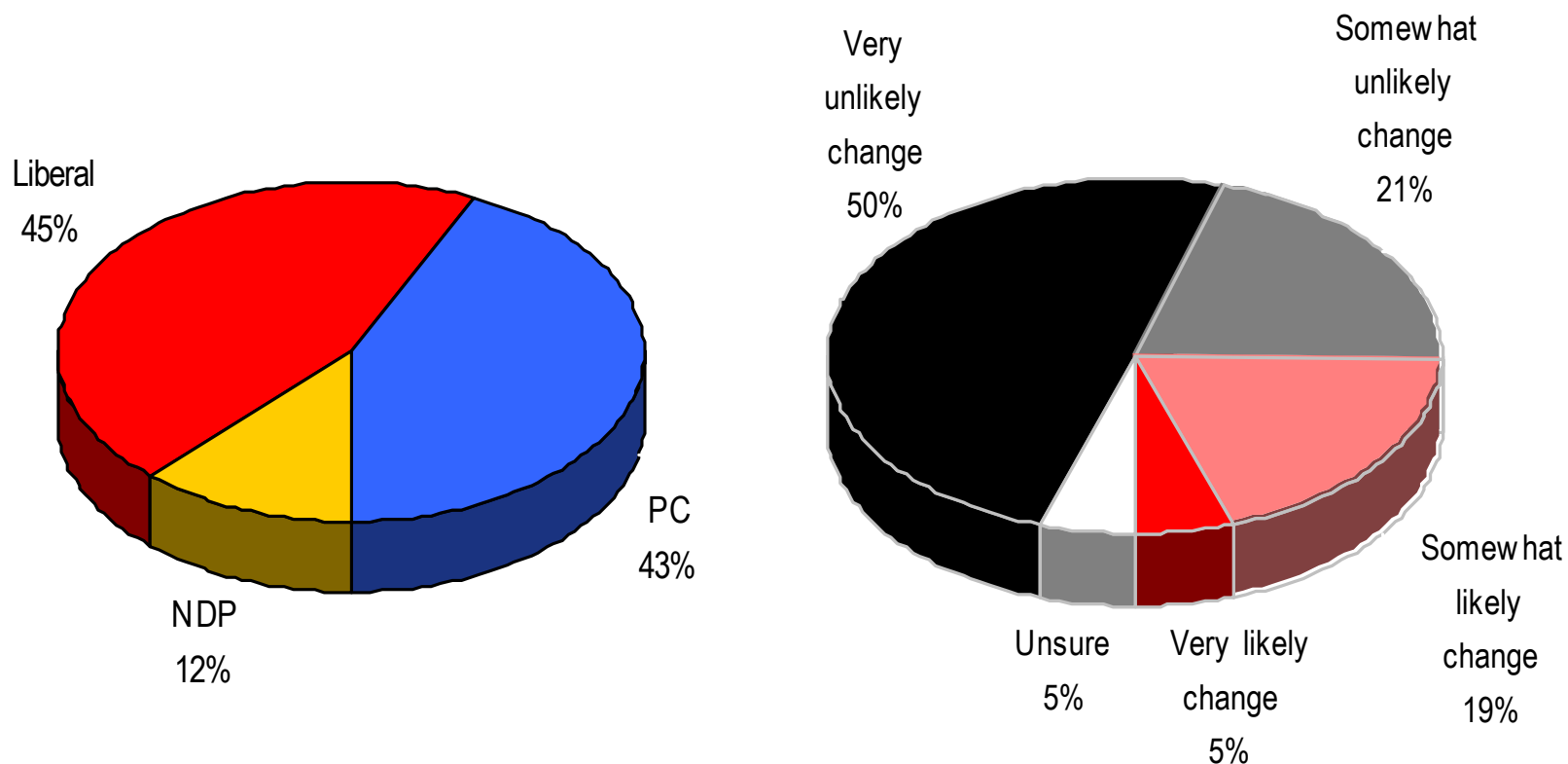


## Right and Wrong Track (SES Research: Summer 2003)

Now, I'm going to read you a series of issues and for each I'd like you to tell me whether you think the Ontario PC government led by Premier Ernie Eves is on the right track or the wrong track.

Issue	Right Track	Unsure	Wrong Track
Taxes	47%	23%	30%
Healthcare	39%	14%	47%
Education	39%	14%	47%
Environment	32%	27%	41%
Creating jobs	47%	25%	28%
Law and order	50%	26%	24%

## Ontario Ballot and Swing Voters (SES Research: September 7, 2003)



## Ontario Ballot Harris Resignation to McGuinty Victory

