

## Disconnect with voters could leave Tory out in the cold

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FROM TUESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL  
SEPTEMBER 11, 2007 AT 4:09 AM EDT

The Ontario election is Dalton McGuinty's to lose, but it may not be John Tory's to win.

As the campaign for the Oct. 10 vote gets under way, the limitations of the three parties become clear.

For Mr. McGuinty, the problem is that there is only tepid support for what his Liberal government has done since 2003. He is also plagued by the characterization that he can't be trusted because he broke too many of the promises he made to win the past election.

For Mr. Tory's Progressive Conservatives, the problem is that most voters don't share their priorities and they may not have enough potential voters to topple the Liberals.

For Howard Hampton's NDP, there is potential but likely no role beyond spoiler.

The Liberals enter the race with a modest five-point lead over the Conservatives in most polls, but that's the least of Mr. Tory's problems.

The Conservatives are not identified with the issues that voters think most important - health and education - and the things they would rank highest - taxes and other economic issues - are not rated highly among voters.

In addition, Mr. Tory's campaign has got off to a wobbly start with a lingering controversy over his support for public financing of religious schools and his musings about the value of teaching creationism.

An Ipsos-Reid survey released yesterday found 62 per cent of Ontarians oppose the idea of religious-school funding, including a majority of Conservative supporters.

But the killer for the Conservatives is that not enough people are willing to join their parade. When all the core supporters, probables, undecideds and possibles were tallied in a new poll by Innovative Research Group, the Conservatives had a total pool of 57 per cent of the electorate. The Liberals got to 62 per cent and the New Democratic Party 48 per cent.

Beyond this, there's a complex interplay between the Liberals and the NDP that largely leaves the Conservatives out in the cold. The NDP and the Liberals are each other's second choice, suggesting that there's a good deal of fluidity on the moderately left end of the political spectrum.

Some 41 per cent of New Democrats told Innovative Research that they could see themselves voting Liberal; the compliment is returned by 38 per cent of Liberals. Just 25 per cent of Liberals - and no New Democrats - offer Mr. Tory's party as a second choice.

Mr. McGuinty staked out his turf, saying voters faced a "watershed" moment in which social programs, particularly health and education, would be at risk if the Progressive Conservatives were returned to office.

Mr. Tory countered that Mr. McGuinty's leadership is the real election issue, while Mr. Hampton said the campaign will be "about Ontario's hard-working families and who they can count on to stand up for a fair deal."

"I think the real question is which one is the one that is going to break through," said Tim Woolstencroft, managing partner of the Strategic Counsel.

The Ontario political scene is harder to judge than in recent elections.

Even the fabled split between the 416 and 905 area codes in the Greater Toronto region is much more muted this election.

Analysts such as Greg Lyle, managing director of Innovative Research, say Mr. Tory's hopes rest on changing the channel on the religious schools issue and making the election a referendum on Mr. McGuinty's leadership. It was a tack the Conservative Leader tried yesterday. "You cannot lead if you have lost your credibility, if trust has been broken," he said. "Keeping promises matters."

The Liberals are starting the campaign in relatively good shape. Their "brand loyalty" is stronger than that of the Conservatives and their strongest issues, health and education programs, are the ones that voters say are the most important.

The polls show that most voters believe Ontario is on the right track but there is not much intensity to either the approval or disapproval of Mr. McGuinty's government. The Liberals also face a few problems. First, one in two voters says it is time for a change in government, which is near the critical threshold of 60 per cent that threatens governments.

Secondly, Mr. Tory is more highly regarded by voters than Mr. McGuinty - to the point that he is seen in polls as the person who would make the best premier.

Mr. McGuinty's salvation, oddly enough, may be that he does not excite voters and is neither loved nor feared in the same way that former premier Mike Harris was.

"There's no great passion for change and that's a critical fact," Mr. Lyle said. "No one may be very excited about [the Liberals] but no one's very passionate about them either."

The NDP, at about 17 per cent in the polls, will face a challenge to get the same amount of coverage as the other parties. They may be helped in this if the feeling grows that the Liberals can't win the 54 seats needed to grab a majority in the 107-seat legislature.

The party has the potential to grow if the public continues to rank social programs as its priority because those are the issues with which it is identified. It should also be able to woo voters of all parties who are uncomfortable with the pro-nuclear stands of the Liberals and the Conservatives.

It will be a different election this time. Tax cuts are no longer the magic bullets they once were. Voters chose change last time and now they are being asked to say if they got the change they wanted.

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