

## **2011 Ontario Election:**

### **A Review of the Leaders' Debate and Campaign to Date**

#### **The Leaders' Debate**

Few Ontario elections have seen as much riding on debate night as in the current campaign. Both the Liberals and Conservatives went into last night's debate within striking distance of victory and even the NDP with a long-shot potential to form the government (but more likely to play king maker in a minority situation). In a low-key election where major issues have been in short supply and public interest sated after federal and municipal elections, the debate performance may be conclusive.

For PC leader Tim Hudak, this was the critical opportunity to convince the public to endorse him as Premier, after a summer and early campaign that has seen Liberals surge back from an early Conservative advantage.

That most observers rated the debate as a draw is not good news for Hudak. Even worse is the fact that the only instant poll of the debate (with a respectable sample of 1,400 Ontarians) had McGuinty as the winner and Horwath as a strong second and the person who most exceeded expectations. (See <http://www.ipsos-na.com/news-polls/pressrelease.aspx?id=5350>).

Here is our take:

- McGuinty started slowly but improved steadily throughout. While the predictable recipient of attacks from both opponents, he also pushed back, mocking Hudak and Horwath for attacking the HST but planning to keep it in place, and presenting himself as the only leader able to stand up to Ottawa. Overall a strong performance, but his excessive hand motions were incredibly distracting!
- Hudak was calm and prosecutorial with the Premier, but failed to present his own alternative and came across as too negative. People want to see positive alternatives not just attacks. Even when specifically asked about "big new ideas" he spent his time attacking the Green Energy Plan rather than referencing his own platform.
- Horwath had low expectations going in and easily exceeded them. Her quips were good and she was aggressive, clearly determined not to be left out. But we thought she could have done a lot more. Her outfit was nun-like and she failed to use her best feature - her smile. (She should have learned from Layton about the power of a positive projection).

Media coverage this morning was fairly predictable. The National Post and the Sun columnists had Hudak winning; most other media outlets declared a draw or leaned slightly to Horwath or the Premier.

Overall, it is hard to know how the positive McGuinty-Horwath perceptions will impact voting. If they both go up even a point or two, it would spell the end of Hudak's hopes to be Premier. But the public may simply sit on their hands.

So, can the Liberals pick up a few points to head to a majority? Will Horwath's NDP continue to rise into the mid or high 20's, denying any party a majority and making her kingmaker? Can Hudak resurge, especially in the cities?

It all comes down to how the three leaders' performances will be spun over the coming eight days.

### **The Polling Trends**

Several months ago, polls and pundits had Hudak well on track to his goal - as was reported in articles such as ['Hudak Tories roaring towards a majority'](#), printed in the *Toronto Star* on June 26<sup>th</sup> 2011.

However, the Tory lead of 10-15% in May and June was whittled down considerably over the course of the summer. By the time the actual election campaign begun, the Tories held only a narrow lead over the two other parties: a Nanos Research poll released September 5<sup>th</sup> put the PCs at 35.4%, the Liberals at 31.9% and the NDP 22.8%. Over the next two weeks a variety of polls suggested that the Liberals had had closed the gap entirely or moved into a slight lead and the NDP had moved solidly into the mid 20's. (See attached polling table in Appendix 1).

A massive 40,000 respondent Forum Research poll released September 24<sup>th</sup>, underlined how tight this election had become, with the PCs and Liberals level at 35% a piece and the NDP at 23%. The Forum results, allocated by riding, showed the Tories and Liberals holding 47 seats each at Queen's Park, with the NDP picking up 13 seats under such circumstances. (However, there were some very questionable losses among these seat predictions, including Elizabeth Witmer's riding in Kitchener-Waterloo, and Jim Bradley in St. Catharine's. It also had Dalton McGuinty barely squeaking through in Ottawa South).

Electoral success in Toronto and the GTA is essential if the Tories are to win a majority on October 6<sup>th</sup>: this poll suggests that, on current data, the party is set not to win *any* seats in Toronto while making only small gains in the GTA. This is consistent with a number of other surveys showing PC weakness in our largest city. Toronto *may* prove to be the electoral roadblock for the PCs as October 6<sup>th</sup> draws closer.

Perhaps the keenest observer of polls and election tracking in the country, Eric Grenier at [www.threehundredeight.com](http://www.threehundredeight.com), views the composite trends as pointing to a Liberal victory and perhaps even a bare majority, based on a high concentration of "wasted" Tory votes in rural ridings and their apparent failure in all polls to break through in Toronto and the GTA. (See <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/ontario-election/neck-and-neck-ontario-race-favours-mcguinty-three-weeks-in/article2180043/>).

## The Campaign So Far

The release of the Liberal platform, *Forward. Together*, on Monday 5<sup>th</sup> September, and the dropping of the writ the following day marked the official beginning of the month long Ontario election campaign. But anyone who has been watching Queen's Park closely knows that the parties have been in election mode for many months.

Moving to fixed term election dates has meant that for the past year all three parties have been fine tuning messages, focussing on key issues and repeating attacks on opponents. However, as was demonstrated in May's federal election, **actual** election campaigns matter – it is when the public tunes in and decides which leader/party best represents their views. Here's a review of the two-thirds of the Ontario election campaign and what to watch out for in the remaining eight days.

The first week of the election campaign was dominated by a commitment made in *Forward. Together* in which the Liberals outlined plans to provide a \$10,000 tax credit for businesses that give training and work experience to 1,200 “highly skilled Canadian citizens, trained elsewhere already living in Ontario for under five years.” The PCs immediately went on the attack, labelling this as a “foreign worker subsidy”, and spinning a narrative that Premier McGuinty is ‘out of touch’ and puts the priorities of foreign students, workers and corporations ahead of Ontarians. The Liberals responded by criticising the Tories for the acrimonious, anti-ethnic nature of their attack, with Premier McGuinty likening the PCs to the conservative Tea Party movement in the U.S.

While it is not entirely clear how the respective attacks played out with the public, the Forum Research poll showing dismal Tories prospects in Toronto suggests it has not been to the PC's advantage, other than solidifying support amongst their core supporters in rural Ontario. The nature of the PC attack may have had a detrimental impact on levels of support in the particularly diverse provincial capital.

During the following weeks both the Liberals and PCs returned to familiar campaign issues. For the Liberals, the focus was on jobs, specifically jobs in the green energy sector, as the party continued to tout the economic and environmental benefits of the *Green Energy Act*. The PCs returned to issues that they had consistently broached at Queen's Park over the past year: government waste (the e-Health scandal); crime (outlining plans for a sex offender registry); and taxes.

The governing party has shown a disturbing willingness to ignore provincial needs (not to mention business investment and contracts) in dealing with two high profile projects which were causing them local political challenges: the so-called mega-quarry in Melancthon, north of Shelburne, which will be forced to undergo an unprecedented Environmental Assessment; and Eastern Power's gas-fired generation plant in Mississauga, which the Liberals have pledged to kill outright and relocate, even though construction is well underway.

NDP leader Andrea Horwath kept a relatively low profile in the first half of the campaign as the back and forth between McGuinty and Hudak dominated the first three weeks of the election campaign. This strategy may prove to be fruitful for Horwath in the coming weeks; rising above such a divisive campaign may be the best way to persuade Ontarians that only the NDP offers the real change that people

seemingly crave. Certainly in NDP ads and in her leaders' debate performance, Horwath tried to reinforce this message.

### **What to watch for in the remaining weeks of the campaign**

The next eight days are likely to be more action packed and interesting than the first half of the campaign. Below are a few factors to watch out for as we head towards Election Day:

- **Potential rise of the NDP:** Current polls put the NDP strongly in the 22-25 % range (with one outlier at 29%), and this is despite having run a relatively low key campaign to date, and before her fairly positive debate reviews. Furthermore, an Ipsos Reid poll released September 20<sup>th</sup> demonstrated that 26% of Ontarians agree that the impact of federal NDP leader Jack Layton's death will influence the way they vote in this provincial election. If the NDP has a good week they could come into the reckoning on October 6<sup>th</sup>.
- **The bandwagon effect:** If the next polls to come out with an increase for either major party, the public may well jump on the winning bandwagon and swing to a majority government. This appears more likely for the Liberals than the PCs currently, but given public volatility (polls still show 25-30 % of voters undecided) either is possible.
- **The Ford factor:** How will the ongoing controversies at City of Toronto regarding conservative mayor Rob Ford's planned spending cuts impact the Tories chances in Toronto? An Ipsos Reid poll released September 21<sup>st</sup> showed that 53% of Torontonians say Ford being Mayor of Toronto makes them less likely to vote for the PCs in this election. Will the fact that he 'compromised' on some proposed cuts boost the Tories chances in the city?
- **The debate:** As discussion of the debate unfolds over the coming days, this will quite possibly have the biggest impact on the campaign. Will the public embrace the idea that Hudak lost? Will Horwath gain new stature as a serious contender?
- **The economy:** What impact will the recently released IMF report, which lowered the global growth outlook, and warned that "the global economy is in a dangerous new phase", have on the election campaign? The Liberals will try to successfully appeal to voters, in the same way Prime Minister Stephen Harper did in May, with the message that what is needed is experience and stability.

**Appendix 1: 2011 Ontario election polling data: 14 May 2011 – 27 September 2011**

<b>Polling firm</b>	<b>Date of Polling</b>	<b>Date of release</b>	<b>Link</b>	<b>Liberal (%)</b>	<b>PC (%)</b>	<b>NDP (%)</b>	<b>Green (%)</b>
EKOS Research	21/09/2011 – 25/09/2011	27/09/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	<b>34.9</b>	31.4	24.7	6.3
Abacus Data	23/09/2011 – 25/09/2011	26/09/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	33	<b>37</b>	23	6
Forum Research	22/09/2011 – 23/03/2011	24/09/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	<b>35</b>	<b>35</b>	23	5
Leger Marketing	12/09/2011 – 15/09/2011	19/09/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	33	<b>36</b>	29	2
Angus Reid Public Opinion	13/09/2011 – 15/09/2011	17/09/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	32	<b>36</b>	26	6
Nanos Research	10/09/2011 – 11/09/2011	12/09/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	<b>38.1</b>	34.7	24.3	2.7
Ipsos Reid	07/09/2011 – 11/09/2011	12/09/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	<b>38</b>	37	24	1
Harris-Decima	25/08/2011 – 04/09/2011	08/09/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	<b>40</b>	29	24	6
Nanos Research	30/08/2011 – 01/09/2011	05/09/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	31.9	<b>35.4</b>	22.8	4.1
Forum Research	29/08/2011 – 30/08/2011	31/08/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	30	<b>35</b>	26	7
Angus Reid Public Opinion	25/08/2011 – 28/08/2011	31/08/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	31	<b>38</b>	24	6
Nanos Research	10/08/2011 – 13/08/2011	14/08/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	37.6	<b>42.1</b>	16.2	3.4
Ipsos Reid	29/07/2011 – 04/08/2011	10/08/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	36	<b>38</b>	23	3
Forum Research	27/07/2011 – 28/07/2011	30/07/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	28	<b>38</b>	24	7
Ipsos Reid	07/06/2011 – 07/07/2011	13/07/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	31	<b>42</b>	22	5
Forum Research	21/06/2011 – 22/06/2011	26/06/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	26	<b>41</b>	22	8
Ipsos Reid	17/05/2011 – 09/06/2011	12/06/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	34	<b>40</b>	20	6
Nanos Research	14/05/2011 – 15/05/2011	24/05/2011	<a href="#">Link</a>	34	<b>41.3</b>	18.7	5.4