

Neck-and-neck Ontario race favours McGuinty three weeks in

Eric Grenier - Sep 26, 2011



With less than two weeks to go in Ontario's election campaign, voters remain split on who should form the province's next government. But that is good news for the incumbent Liberals, since were an election held at the end of last week Dalton McGuinty would have likely won a razor-thin majority.

A weighted aggregation of the most recent polls shows the Progressive Conservatives hold an insignificant lead over the Liberals, with 35.4 per cent support to 34.9 per cent. Since last week's projection, the gap between the two parties has narrowed by 2.4 points as the Liberals have drawn a little more than a point away from the Tories. The New Democrats have slipped slightly to 23.4 per cent support, while the Greens are up even less to five per cent.

Both polls that were added to the aggregation last week showed a statistical tie between the PCs and the Liberals, whether it be in Léger Marketing's 36 per cent to 33 per cent split in favour of the Tories or Forum Research's massive survey pegging support for the two parties at 35 per cent apiece. But Liberal voters are more advantageously situated, and an even split translates into more seats for Mr. McGuinty than it does for Tim Hudak.

According to ThreeHundredEight.com's seat projection model, the Liberals are likely to win 55 seats – one more than is needed to form a majority government (and with a Liberal acting as the Speaker, the bare minimum to avoid ties in the Ontario legislature). That is a gain of five seats since the last projection but a net loss of 15 for the party compared to its standing in the Legislature at dissolution.

The Progressive Conservatives are projected to win 32 seats, a drop of four since last week, but a net gain of seven since the writ dropped. The New Democrats stand to win 20 seats, down one over the last seven days but double what the party had after the 2007 election.

The Tories continue to shed seats in and around Ontario's largest city, as three of the four that have flipped to the Liberals were in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area. The other came in Southwestern Ontario, where the New Democrats also lost to the Liberals a seat they had been projected to win last week. This puts the Liberals in a strong position in every part of the province except central Ontario (dominated by the Tories), Northern Ontario (which favours the NDP), and the Hamilton/Niagara region, which is split between the two.

Though many races remain close, the Liberals no longer appear at risk of losing the election to the Progressive Conservatives in the province's tight races. With support sitting at roughly 35 per cent for both parties, the Liberals can likely win as many as 60 seats if all close races go their way. If they lose them all, however, they could win as few as 44 seats.

But that is still more than the Tories, who could likely win as many as 43 seats if they prevail in every close race. They are still on track to win more seats than they did in 2007, however, as they bottom out at 28 seats. The New Democrats are involved in fewer projected close races, and their seat range stands at between 18 and 21 seats.

Though the vote is quickly approaching, the campaign is far from decided. The debate, which can often be the turning point of any campaign, has yet to take place. On the one hand, an inspired performance could easily give one of the leaders the needed momentum to carry him or her ahead in the final days of the campaign. On the other hand, a mistake would cripple any hopes of victory.

This last phase of the campaign will be tremendously important for all three major parties. There are enough tight contests in the province that even a small uptick or slip could make the difference between minority and majority (and all that entails for the NDP), and a government led by either Tim Hudak or Dalton McGuinty.

ThreeHundredEight.com's projection model aggregates all publicly released polls, weighing them by sample size, date, and record of polling firm accuracy. The seat projection model makes individual projections for all 107 ridings in the province, based on shifts in support from the 2007 election and including the application of factors unique to each riding, such as the effects of incumbency.

These projections are a reflection of the likely result of an election if an election were held at the end of last week. They are subject to the margins of error of the opinion polls included in the model, as well as the unpredictable nature of politics at the riding level.