

Debates set to be election turning points

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Despite the lack of fireworks to date, all indications are the Oct. 6 provincial election might to be something of a barn burner after all.

A Forum Research poll published by the Toronto Star on Saturday shows that despite all the campaigning, all the rhetoric, all the prognostications and all the claimed victories by each party, the public remains deadlocked — literally.

The poll, which surveyed more than 40,000 people — 400 in each of the 107 provincial ridings — shows the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives each at 35 per support with the NDP at 23 per cent, with a margin of error of only a scant 0.5 per cent

In Prince Edward-Hastings, Conservative Todd Smith leads with 38.2 percent of the vote followed by Liberal Leona Dombrowsky with 31.7 percent, NDP's Sherry Hayes at 22 percent and the Greens' Treat Hull at six per cent.

However, the local poll has a margin of error of five per cent, meaning the race could be much closer than the numbers indicate.

All of which make last night's local candidates debate and tonight's televised provincial leaders debate all the more critical.

The local debate, put on by the Belleville and District Chamber of Commerce is the biggest of nearly a dozen such meetings in the riding, both in scope and importance.

Situated in the riding's largest population centre, before potentially the most people and media, faring well — or poorly — on the Empire stage could easily swing significant votes as reports — and even water cooler talk — about the performance circulate.

The televised leaders debate, though, could be even more crucial.

While "knockout" moments in leaders' debates are few and far between, the debates themselves nevertheless have proved to be defining moments in elections over the years.

Most recently, the federal NDP saw a huge swing in its fortunes after leader Jack Layton's performance in the federal debate, even though few could remember a single great moment for Layton in the debate itself.

Provincially, Lynn McLeod took a major lead into the 1995 leaders' debate but it was Mike Harris whose fortunes turned after it.

All of which means that, despite what some people like to say about the format, the value of the interaction, the scope of the issues or even their entertainment level, debates matter.

That's why candidates take them seriously and that's why they are worth tuning into: they could go a long way toward determining who the next leader will be and if you miss them you may never understand why your fellow voters have gone one way while you went another.

At the very least they allow you to be a little better informed before you go to the polls — and that's a good thing, too.