

Only Howie's rep improved

Voters are not at all impressed

By JAMES WALLACE AND [ANTONELLA ARTUSO](#), QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU

A month of campaigning has left Ontarians largely unimpressed with the leaders they'll vote for today at the ballot box, an SES Research-Sun Media poll shows.

Heading into today's vote, just a third polled -- 29% -- think Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory would make the best premier, only 27% believe the current Liberal premier, Dalton McGuinty, is up for the job, while NDP Leader Howard Hampton gets the nod from a modest 15% of voters.

"I think what it shows is for this election, on a personal basis, neither John Tory nor Dalton McGuinty have come out a winner," said SES Research president Nik Nanos.

A frequently negative campaign that was sidetracked by Tory's religious school funding promise damaged all the leaders and the two front-runners in particular, Nanos said.

"On the one hand, the Conservative attack ads on McGuinty's broken promises did their job," Nanos said. "On the other hand, this whole faith-based school funding issue has been an albatross around John Tory and his personal image."

At the end of a month-long campaign, the SES-Sun Media poll shows the Liberals poised to win a second majority government with 42.6% of the vote, the Conservatives headed back into Opposition at 30.5%, the NDP on track to retaining third-party status at 17.5% and the Green party at 9.4% struggling to win a single seat.

Voter impressions about the leaders have clearly played a role in determining the outcome of the election, the poll suggests.

For McGuinty, there was a bit of a wash, with 18% of voters saying their impressions of the premier improved during the campaign and 24% saying their views of him were worse. Roughly half hold the same view of McGuinty that they had a month ago.

That doesn't particularly help the Liberals win re-election, and in fact it makes local races and local candidates a more important factor in this campaign, Nanos said. But neither does it particularly hurt the Liberals' chances of forming another majority government.

Tory, meanwhile, has been hurt by negative voter impressions fuelled by concern over his proposal to extend public funding to private, faith-based schools.

TORY DOWN

The poll shows 20% of voters hold a more favourable impression of Tory than they did a month ago. However, 33% think less of him. Just 38% felt the same.

"Think of it this way: If this election was a mud-slinging event, twice as much mud stuck to John Tory as it did to Dalton McGuinty," Nanos said.

Hampton, despite having failed to significantly improve his party's prospects during this campaign, fared the best among the three leaders.

The poll shows 23% of voters have a better impression of Hampton than they did last month, 55% feel the same and only 10% have a worse impression. "On the image front, he's the only one who really came out ahead," Nanos said.