

## Key issues, not leaders, driving vote

Faith-based school funding among the issues, poll finds

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TORONTO -- A SES Research-Sun Media poll shows concern over faith-based school funding and education has trumped leadership as driving factors influencing voters in the leadup to Wednesday's Ontario election.

Nik Nanos, SES Research president, said elections are traditionally "about nothing and the leader," but this campaign seems to be about issues, in particular the Conservative proposal to bring private religious schools into the public fold. "I think this is going to go down as the election about faith-based school funding. That's what people are going to remember."

Traditional Conservative issues don't appear to be resonating with voters. "There's a fundamental disconnect between the Conservative position and the way the campaign has unfolded. This election is not about taxes and not even about promises that the Liberals have broken."

Almost 35 per cent of voters said the party platform is the most influential factor in their decision-making process, followed by 16 per cent who plan to make their choice based on the local candidate and 15 per cent motivated by a single issue.

Only 14 per cent cited the performance of the party leader as important.

Nanos said Ontarians clearly believe they have "imperfect choices" in the two main contenders, Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty and PC Leader John Tory.

That means many voters will look hard at local candidates, which will likely be good news for veteran Tories outside Toronto, Nanos said.

"They're going to be able to hold on because of the strong incumbents they have," Nanos said.

SES Research asked voters what was the most important issue influencing their decision, and the top unprompted choice was health care, followed by education and faith-based school funding.

Taxes, crime and rural issues barely made the radar.

Nanos said education and faith-based funding combined were the unprompted choice of more than 20 per cent of respondents.

Nanos said there have been campaigns around single issues before -- Canada-U.S. free trade, for example -- but he could not recall one where the issue popped up almost out of nowhere and hijacked the debate.

"It's very unusual for part of a party platform to consume the whole campaign . . . it's very unusual for voters to associate a politician with a single issue," he said.

"Average voters have used this faith-based issue to make a decision about John Tory."

Liberals saw a vulnerability in Tory's school policy "and they just went for it," he said. "Ontarians haven't really seen the real John Tory."