

Liberals cruising to victory, poll finds

By **ANTONELLA ARTUSO AND JAMES WALLACE, SUN MEDIA**

TORONTO -- The Ontario Liberals are poised to win tomorrow's election, with a commanding 12-point lead over the Progressive Conservatives, an SES Research-Sun Media survey suggests.

After a 31-day campaign dominated by one issue, faith-based school funding, the vote looks set to produce the first back-to-back Liberal majority governments in 70 years.

The SES Research-Sun Media poll, conducted between Thursday and Saturday, indicates Dalton McGuinty's Liberals will win, with only the margin of victory in question.

"Basically what the poll shows is that the Liberals are cruising to a victory," said pollster Nik Nanos, the SES Research president.

The survey shows the Liberals with the support of 42.6 per cent of committed voters, John Tory's Progressive Conservatives at 30.5 per cent, Howard Hampton's New Democrats at 17.5 per cent and the Green party at 9.4 per cent.

The final hours of campaigning by the Tories and the NDP will be critical, as they try to scoop up undecided voters -- a small but significant minority who do their voting like they do their Christmas shopping, at the last minute, Nanos said.

"What has been interesting is that in the last week, the New Democrats have picked up some support directly at the expense of the Tories," he said.

Hampton has spent the past week chastising the media for focusing on the Tory faith-based school funding proposal at the expense of other issues.

Hampton's bid to focus on issues is drawing back female voters, who tend to dislike aggressive, personal attacks during campaigns, Nanos said.

Tory's numbers reveal his attempt to turn around his campaign by offering a free vote on his controversial religious school proposal has failed to gain him any ground.

"In the last election under Ernie Eves, the Conservatives got 35 per cent of the vote and that was considered a pretty poor outcome," Nanos said.

The latest survey, he said, "shows John Tory's attempt to stem the bad news related to the faith-based school issue has not had any traction."

Nanos said the Tories face the doubly daunting task of striking hard at McGuinty in the campaign's final hours and trying to attract women voters, who now favour the Liberals by an 18-point spread.

A relatively small portion of voters can make a big difference in the number of seats a party wins, Nanos said.

"There's reason to fight to the very end, until the last ballot is cast," he said.

The SES-Sun Media poll also looked at the referendum question that will let voters decide whether they want to keep the existing first-past-the-post system of choosing MPPs or trade it in for a partial proportional system called mixed-member proportional or MMP, in which some MPPs would be appointed based on total vote from lists drawn up by their party.

Such a system generally favours smaller parties that find it tough to get a seat even though they may have support spread across the province.

Nanos said two in three Ontarians believe comfortable voting in the referendum, but earlier polling shows they're unlikely to support MMP.

The Liberal government has required MMP get 60-per-cent support in the majority of Ontario's 107 ridings to pass.

"It's an extremely high threshold to me," Nanos said. "That kind of appetite for change is just not there."