

## **NEW MANDATE, NEW CONCERNS: HOW CHANGING VOTER PRIORITIES MAY CHALLENGE AN HISTORIC RE-ELECTION VICTORY**

Darrell Bricker and Sean Simpson

### **Introduction**

Premier Doug Ford and his Progressive Conservative Party accomplished something remarkable in the 2022 Ontario election. The last time an Ontario government won a greater number of seats in its second mandate than in its first was in 1945 under P.C. leader George A. Drew. The time before that was in 1908, under Conservative Party leader Sir James Whitney, for whom the building housing the Premier's Office at Queen's Park is named.

One might assume that such a conclusive victory – winning 83 of 124 seats, an increase from 76 seats in 2018 – means the Ford Progressive Conservatives held a commanding policy advantage over the Liberals, NDP and Green Party in the election. For this to be true, however, the 2022 election would have to have been fought on matters of policy. It wasn't. If it had been, the survey evidence shows we would be writing about Premier Andrea Horwath and the NDP.

Policy didn't drive this election even though there is no shortage of difficult issues confronting Ontario today. COVID-19 and the resulting fallout on healthcare and the economy, increasing inflation, budget deficits, housing shortages, climate change, and the decline of social cohesion could all have emerged as ballot-driving election issues. The televised leaders' debate tried to focus Ontarians (and the party leaders) on many of these issues. But an Ipsos poll conducted in the aftermath of the debate showed only half of Ontarians said the leaders were talking about the issues that were most important to them.

Critical to the lack of success of the opposition parties is that no single policy issue became the central focus of the campaign, or the so-called ballot question. While management of COVID-19 was poised earlier in the year to be the ballot question, declining case counts and loosening restrictions meant that the pandemic was no longer top of mind when Ontarians voted. Further evidence that policy was not central to voter choices was gathered in the polling conducted by Ipsos throughout the campaign. It shows that the NDP was competitive and even dominant on the issues that mattered most to Ontarians, including healthcare and the price of housing. Had issues driven the campaign, the NDP should have performed far better than they did.

If not policy then what? It certainly wasn't leadership. Each of the major party leaders had a greater proportion of Ontarians viewing them in an unfavourable light than a favourable one. Moreover, a majority (56%) of Ontarians said they wished there were different party leaders from which to choose.

In the end, what drove the vote on June 2, then? It was a desire for stability. Ontarians had been through so much change over the last few years that they just wanted to hit pause for a bit. This is reflected in the record low voter turnout, which demonstrated a lack of desire to mobilize behind change, and in survey responses showing stronger support for maintaining the status quo than for change. Over four in ten (43%) of Ontarians believed the Ford government had done a good job and deserved to be re-elected, and these voters coalesced around the PCs, which was plenty for another majority mandate in our electoral system. Conversely, 54% thought it was time for another party to take over, but they couldn't agree on which party was best suited to lead. Ultimately, that vote splitting aided the Progressive Conservatives in their decisive victory.

The lack of a clear signal about issues does not mean that Ontarians don't have priorities for the new government. The challenge for the Tories is that the priorities today are different from what they were when they were first elected. Ford and his Progressive Conservatives were initially elected to put right what many Ontarians believed had gone wrong after 15 years of Liberal Party rule. But 2022 is not 2018. A lot has changed over the last four years. The issues of greatest importance to Ontarians today are not necessarily those on which the Ford government is seen to be most credible.

The Ford Government does have an advantage in the short term because of the resignation of the leaders of the two major opposition parties. The government needs to decide how to use this advantage. Will they focus on the priorities of Ontarians even though they didn't drive the election, or will they be derailed by hubris and let their pet projects and quixotic priorities guide their decision-making calculus? How they answer this question will determine if they become the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Big Blue Machine or be remembered in history as the Ford Interregnum.

## **The Past Is Prologue; the Future Will be Dynamic**

Key to the Progressive Conservative victory in 2018 is that they were dialed in on the issues that mattered most to voters. Ipsos' online Election Day polling of voters revealed that of the top five issues of the campaign – healthcare, the economy and jobs, lower energy costs, lower taxes and debt repayment/balancing the budget – Tory voters “over-indexed” on four of them. (The only exception was healthcare, which rarely drives election outcomes.)

Not only was the issue mandate clear in 2018, but the Tories were also acknowledged as best to lead on it. The priorities of the newly elected government were the priorities of the people. The Progressive Conservative brand in most Ontario elections has a built-in advantage, rightly or wrongly, on economic issues such as taxation, sound economic management, and fiscal restraint. The 2018 election was focused on these issues. Similarly, the NDP has a built-in brand advantage on compassion issues such as dealing with inequality or caring about the disadvantaged. These issues did not top the list in 2018.

The issues context has been transformed over the last four years. Previous prosperity is now turning into potential recession; record low interest rates are giving way to increases not seen since the 1980s; low inflation is giving way to rapidly increasing prices for life's necessities. Due to these hard realities, the issue agenda for Ontarians looks different today, and it's an agenda on which the re-elected Ford Government does not have immediate credibility.

Ipsos polling conducted prior to the 2022 campaign and then again mid-campaign provides a glimpse into the dynamic nature of today's priorities. The top five issues identified by Ontarians were healthcare, help with the cost of day-to-day needs like groceries and gas, lower taxes, making housing more affordable and the economy and jobs. Of lower salience but rounding out the top ten issues were climate change, lower energy costs, creation of more low-cost/affordable housing for the poor and homeless, the government's handling of COVID-19, and social assistance programs.

**Table 1: Top Issues Driving Vote Choice in 2022 Campaign as of May, 2022**

Issue	% Choosing as Top-Three Issue	Change since April, 2022
Healthcare	38%	+7
Help with cost of day-to-day needs (like groceries and gas)	32%	+10
Lower taxes	23%	-1
Help to make housing more affordable for the middle class and families	23%	+2
Economy and jobs	21%	+4
Tackling climate change	16%	+1
Lower energy costs	14%	-
Creation of more low-cost/affordable housing for the poor and homeless	14%	+1
Handling of COVID-19	13%	-12
Social assistance programs	11%	+2
Economic recovery from the pandemic	10%	+4
Education	10%	-
Debt repayment and balanced budget	9%	+2
Dealing with health backlogs from the pandemic	8%	-3
Crime and public safety	8%	+1
Integrity in government and its leaders	7%	-
Indigenous issues	6%	+1
Dealing with hate crimes and systemic racism	5%	-
Investing in public transit	4%	-1
Issues important to small-town and rural Ontario	4%	+1
Some other issue	4%	-3

As a reflection of the dynamic nature of the top campaign issues, help with day-to-day costs shot up to become the second most-important issue between mid-April and mid-May, and the importance of healthcare rose by seven points. Like a counterweight, the focus on government's performance on COVID-19 dropped 12 points and was just barely a top-ten issue, and, then, mostly for opposition voters.

### **The Progressive Conservatives are only Partially Aligned and Credible on Voter Priorities**

Ontarians said that **healthcare** was the most important issue determining their vote. While some of this may be driven by COVID-19 fallout, such as the seeming lack of preparedness for a pandemic of this scale in terms of surgery backlogs, bed shortages and the like, healthcare is almost always the top issue in any campaign, federal or provincial. But it wasn't a vote driver. Healthcare was a relative weakness for the Tories in this election but it was not a fatal vulnerability. For the Tories to move the needle here, they will need to be seen as making improvements to all aspects of the system, especially those services that most Ontarians have contact with, such as primary care and access to medical professionals. This will be tough to accomplish given the many challenges confronting a system that wasn't built for Ontario's size of population, especially the rapidly growing elderly population.

While **helping with the cost of day-to-day needs** like groceries and gas was the second most important issue for voters, had the campaign lasted into the summer it is likely that its meteoric rise would have continued as inflation grew. At the end of May, a majority (54%) of Ontarians agreed that it was hard for someone like them to get ahead in Ontario, including 70% of those with a household income below \$40,000. Further, 71% of Ontarians agreed that they would be voting for the party that had the best plan for helping make things more affordable for the middle class.

The Progressive Conservatives worked to establish their *bona fides* on affordability prior to the campaign. Despite criticisms from the chattering classes, the license plate sticker refunds – which sent a cheque to every household with an automobile in Ontario – were demonstrable proof that the Progressive Conservatives were putting money back into the pockets of average Ontarians – especially car commuters in the critical 905 region.

Even if many critics saw this as a cynical, meaningless, spendthrift gesture, it did reinforce the view among average voters that the incumbent government was trying to make it a little easier for them to pay their monthly bills. Among those who said that this issue was a driver of their vote, the Progressive Conservatives were identified as the party best able to help with the cost of necessities, ahead of the NDP and Liberals.

**Lowering taxes** is the *sine qua non* of any Tory agenda. With money matters a top concern for voters in general, it was no surprise to see this issue among the top-five drivers of vote. The Progressive Conservatives had a commanding lead among voters who prioritized this issue.

As noted, the PCs have a built-in advantage on taxes and were fortunate that Ontarians prioritized the issue. Now though, with Ontario registering high if declining deficits, the Government's room to cut taxes is limited. Once again, though, the Tories get a bit of a break. Fiscal prudence is not an immediate priority for Ontarians. Despite ranking as the fifth most important issue of the 2018 campaign, tackling the debt and balancing the budget was only the 13<sup>th</sup> most important issue of the 2022 general election. This suggests that the Tories can take some steps to lower taxes to assist with affordability without being hammered in the near term with concerns about the deficit and debt.

Regarding **help to make housing more affordable for the middle class and working families**, the government will be challenged to perform on this complicated, long-term issue. Policies which target the demand side of housing such as mortgage/financing regulations or savings vehicles are largely the bailiwick of the OSFI (Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions), a federal body. Controlling the flow of immigration also has an impact on demand and is mostly out of the hands of the provincial government. Other policies such as foreign-buyer taxes and vacant home taxes, which are meant to ease demand, are getting more attention from municipalities such as Toronto than this provincial government. Luckily for the government, demand appears to be cooling and prices moderating.

The supply side of the equation is where real progress can be made. But it takes a decade for housing developments to be planned, approved, and built. This means that any solution done now may not yield benefits until after this government has likely passed into the sunset. The government needs to be seen as active on this file, but it is unlikely that it will be able to build much political capital by doing so. In fact, many policies which could help to expedite development, such as a loosening of regulations or allowing development of the Greenbelt, could cost them political capital if detractors are incensed by these policy changes. Ipsos polling shows that the Progressive Conservatives do lack credibility here, placing well behind the NDP and only slightly ahead of the Liberals. This will be a challenging file for the PCs, who need to be seen as presenting solutions to one of the toughest issues facing governments today.

Rounding out the top-five issues is the **economy and jobs**. Once again, this is a traditional area of advantage for the Progressive Conservatives. Among Ontarians who said this was a key issue determining their vote, the Tories held a strong lead over the NDP and Liberals as the party best able to manage the economy. However, with a growing chance of a recession, even governments with an advantage on the economy will be challenged by what's likely ahead.

The PCs are starting from an advantageous position, but if inflationary pressures worsen and the economy begins to contract, Ontarians will be looking to take their frustrations out on someone, and that person could be Doug Ford. However, if inflation subsides and we dodge a recession, Doug Ford is well positioned to reap some of the rewards.

**Table 2: Which Party is Best to Deal with Top 5 Issues**

Issue	Liberals	NDP	PCs	Green	None of them – they're all the same
Healthcare	21% (-)	25% (-5)	19% (-6)	4% (+1)	31% (+10)
Help with cost of day-to-day needs (like groceries and gas)	13% (-2)	23% (+5)	27% (-4)	4% (+1)	33% (+2)
Lower taxes	16% (+3)	7% (-4)	39% (-)	5% (-)	33% (+1)
Help to make housing more affordable for the middle class and working families	16% (-6)	30% (+5)	18% (-)	2% (-)	34% (+1)
Economy and jobs	17% (-5)	19% (+7)	34% (-12)	5% (+3)	24% (+6)

*Results are based among those who chose each respective issue as driving their vote*

## Conclusion

In 2018, the newly elected government of Doug Ford had a clear advantage on four of the top five issues of the campaign. Following their re-election with an even larger majority government, they appear to be in a position of even greater strength. But that's actually not what the polling on issues shows. This time, they lead on only three of the top five issues that drove voter choice, and on two of those issues (tax cuts and economic management) their ability to do anything significant is considerably hampered by the hard reality of Ontario's fiscal situation and the looming prospects of a recession. Today's headwinds are stronger and the issues more complex than they were in the good old days of 2018.

To successfully navigate what's to come, the Tories will need to appreciate just how the issues have changed and how they will need to step up as a result. The Speech from the Throne, as the legislature resumes, may tell us much about whether they appreciate how much things have changed.

*Darrell Bricker, PhD, is CEO of Ipsos Public Affairs globally, a Senior Fellow at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, and a best selling author.*

*Sean Simpson is Senior Vice President of Ipsos Public Affairs in Canada, specializing in public opinion, electoral, and corporate reputation research.*