

What the federal election results mean for Doug Ford and Ontario politics ^[1]

Now that the vote is over, provincial parties stepping up preparations for next spring's campaign

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EXCERPTS

The failure of Erin O'Toole's Conservative Party to make its hoped-for breakthrough in Ontario in the federal election is by no means any guarantee that voters will reject Premier Doug Ford and his Progressive Conservatives in the provincial election that's just eight months away.

The provincial parties are analyzing the results of the federal vote and trying to figure out the implications for Ontario politics. CBC News granted anonymity for this story to senior officials from the PCs, the Ontario NDP and provincial Liberals so they could speak freely about strategy.

While top strategists from all the main provincial parties insist it would be unwise to draw straightforward conclusions about the Ontario vote from the federal vote, they do say there are lessons to be learned.

One thing is clear for all the parties: a key element in their path to victory next June will be wooing a significant chunk of those people who voted Liberal on Monday.

Just as none of the federal parties got what they really wanted out of election night, none of the Ontario parties should be dancing in the streets over the results.

The opposition parties see the results as evidence that Ford was unable to help O'Toole in Ontario because he is personally unpopular.

The Ontario PCs reject that notion, saying Ford's polling numbers have actually improved over the summer and that he stayed out of the federal campaign to concentrate on the job of governing the province.

If history is the key indication, it's Steven Del Duca and the Ontario Liberals who should be the least excited about last night's result.

In the past 57 years, there has only been one occasion where an Ontario party formed government in the next election after a win by their federal political counterparts.

The sole exception was 2003, when Dalton McGuinty's Liberals won the provincial election that followed Jean Chretien's federal Liberal victory in 2000.

Despite that long-running Ontario political paradox, provincial Liberals argue the federal results are a good sign for their party. They say it shows the strength of the Liberal brand in the province and they say a team of 70-plus Liberal MPs means on-the-ground organizational support for the provincial campaign in many target ridings.

The New Democrats and Progressive Conservatives see that as wishful thinking on the part of the Liberals.

For Ford's incumbent PCs, the result is another piece of evidence (along with last month's Nova Scotia election) that voters are not simply going to hand whatever government happens to be in power a majority just because of the pandemic.

One could also see the results in the ring of seats around Toronto, referred to as the 905, where Ontario elections are won and lost, as bad news for the PCs. The Liberals took nearly 47 per cent of the popular vote in those ridings and O'Toole's party failed to gain ground there even though he represents the 905 riding of Durham.

Yet a senior PC strategist I spoke with Tuesday claims not to be worried at all.

The strategist says O'Toole's Conservatives were hurt in the 905 by his positions on COVID-19 vaccinations. The strategist argues that Ford's recent COVID-19 policies — bringing in a proof-of-vaccination program, requiring all his candidates to get vaccinated, and booting the one MPP who refused — have greater appeal to those voters.

As for Andrea Horwath and her Ontario NDP, seeing their federal counterparts win just five seats in the province has to be demoralizing.

Despite that, a senior provincial New Democrat insists Ontario voters view the federal and provincial parties differently and ventures that Horwath is well positioned to take a run at Ford next June.

The NDP is going into the race with more incumbents to build on, a stronger pool of candidates, and the accomplishment of having persuaded nearly 2 million Ontarians to vote for them last time, the official says.

The senior New Democrat also claims the PCs are "hoping that the pandemic will be far enough in the rearview mirror that people will forget about how badly Ford screwed things up."

The provincial NDP will be engaged in a pitched battle with the Liberals to convince anti-Ford voters that their leader has the skills to steer Ontario through the post-pandemic future, trying to pitch themselves as the competent and responsible alternative.

Ford all but disappeared from public view for the past eight weeks. He has held just one news conference since the end of July.

Although the opposition parties pounced on that and the prorogation of the Legislature until Oct. 4 as evidence that Ford was hiding, it doesn't mean he was not at work. Don't be surprised if the premier holds a news conference on Wednesday, as Ontario's proof of vaccination program kicks in.

One issue that requires quick attention from Ford now that Justin Trudeau has been re-elected is child care. Ontario is one of only two provinces (along with Alberta) that have not yet signed on to the federal Liberals' child-care program.

Provincial government officials say they believe a deal can be reached with the federal government on child care that will be good for Ontario.

Ford issued a statement Tuesday that congratulated Trudeau and aimed to strike a conciliatory tone.

"For many, this has been an extremely difficult and divisive election and I would like to take this opportunity to urge unity," Ford said.

On election day next June 2, Ontario parties will need 63 seats to win a majority. In 2018, the PCs won 76 seats, but through a mix of ejecting people from caucus and a defection, their current tally in the Legislature is 70.

The NDP believes it can build on its 40-seat showing in 2018 and gain enough new seats to win power, although the other parties question how the New Democrats can improve over an election in which the Liberals delivered their worst performance in Ontario history.

With just seven sitting MPPs, there's no overstating the size of the task facing the Liberals. They take heart from the way the federal Liberals roared back from 2011, when some pundits wrote off the party as dead, to win power in 2015 under Justin Trudeau.

But that would be trying to draw another parallel between the federal and provincial political scene, when the differences between the two in many ways outweigh the similarities.

As leadership styles go, Del Duca is not like Trudeau, Ford is no clone of O'Toole and the persona that Horwath projects is different from Jagmeet Singh's.

And that's just one reason why the results of the 2022 Ontario election campaign are highly unlikely to be a carbon copy of the 2021 federal results in the province.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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