

Support growing for electoral reform: Poll

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There's broad public support for government plans to review and possibly overhaul Ontario's 215-year-old electoral system, shows an SES Research/Osprey Media poll.

Six out of every 10 voters surveyed in this province think it's time to look at changing the way MPPs are elected at Queen's Park. "It's a huge number," said SES president Nik Nanos. "It's almost twice as many as who are happy with the status quo."

"That suggests there's a pretty significant appetite among Ontarians to see what can be done to make the system they use to elect politicians better," Nanos said.

The poll showed 61 per cent of voters are open to electoral change, while just 34 per cent believe the system is fine the way it is. Another six per cent were unsure or didn't favour either option - change or the status quo.

Women were more likely than men, by seven percentage points, to support change to the electoral system. The appetite for change has compelling implications. Ontario's voting system has been in place for more than 200 years. In provincial election campaigns to elect MPPs, voters cast ballots in ridings across the province for the candidate of their choice.

The candidate who wins the most votes wins the seat. The party that wins the most seats forms the government, certainly at least when a majority of seats are captured in the provincial Legislature. That "first past the post system" is run much like a horse race.

During the last provincial election campaign, Premier Dalton McGuinty promised a review of Ontario's electoral system. His government created an independent Citizens Assembly last year to review this province's system and possibly to recommend change.

That Assembly is scheduled to reach a decision within two months and to issue a report to the Legislature by mid-May. Indications from recent public meetings suggest the assembly - made up of 103 Ontario voters (one from each riding in the province) and a chairman - is poised to recommend change.

Nanos said the poll numbers suggest the public may be ripe. "I think what this means is that the McGuinty government is actually on the right track with this citizen's assembly," he said. British Columbia has already made changes to its electoral system and Ontario's Citizen's Assembly is considering a range of alternatives to this province's current voting system.

Some options would see political parties fill some of the seats in the Legislature with both locally-elected MPPs and candidates drawn from party lists. Others would see voters rank candidates by order of preference - systems that could see more fringe parties win seats.

Although the public is currently open to the notion of change, that "tentative green light" could turn quickly once the public sees the details of the proposed change, Nanos said. "The numbers show there's potential but I think they should also be exercising some caution because any kind of harebrained ideas would turn these numbers rather quickly," he said.

"The devil is in the detail," Nanos said. "It's kind of like Senate reform," he added. "Canadians in general are pretty supportive of Senate reform, but when you get into the details of how it will work, that's when there's trouble." "Although the numbers are positive (for electoral reform), the government should still be fairly cautious because depending on what the assembly recommends, it may not be in sync with what Ontarians want," he said.

Nanos also cautioned the strong appetite for change could reflect broader voter dissatisfaction with the political process in general. "This is also a bit of a verdict of people's satisfaction with our system writ large," he said. "Not necessarily a specific government but politicians and government in general."

If Ontario's Citizen's Assembly reaches its verdict as anticipated by mid-April, a final, official report and recommendation will follow a month later. At that point, the government is expected to launch a massive public education program followed by a referendum during this October's provincial election campaign to give every Ontarian a chance to vote on the Assembly's recommendations.

The telephone survey of 502 Ontarians was conducted on March 3 and 4. Details of the poll are available at www.sesresearch.com. It is considered accurate to within 4.4 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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