



POLICY BRIEF

May 2022

ONTARIO ELECTION

INTRODUCTION

On June 2nd Ontario voters will chose their next government. As we sat down to prepare an Ontario election forecast we realized that not only is Ontario in unusual election conditions (Covid-19 pandemic, war, etc. – see our previous [March 2022 policy brief\(er\)](#)), but with the election writ period upon us, voters seem as though they could not be less engaged. We offer the following as our own perspective on the state of the province and the conditions under which this election will be fought. Take it all with a grain of salt because, well, things are weird (and possibly getting weirder).

SETTING THE CONTEXT: THE PANDEMIC HANG-OVER; SOCIAL TENSIONS AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES ARE OFF THE HOOK..

The disease that used to be an affliction of political partisanship — that is the factional disdain for fellow citizens who don't share the same affiliation, policy ideas or philosophical ideology — seems to be spreading to a broader cross-section of society at large.

While this growing percentage of opposing political factionalism doesn't represent the majority, it is certainly affecting and influencing political and policy calculations from fundraising strategies to voter ID and persuasion tactics. On top of that, the social media universe has radically restructured

traditional news media and the way that politics and public policy is understood and reported.

The pandemic has similarly added fuel to the factionalist fire — literally everyone has been impacted by the pandemic in some way: from challenging individuals' resilience and mental health, to various other health challenges from the virus itself or impacts to personal and professional well-being. Not inconsequentially, the world's first pandemic in the era of social media has also created divides on the spectrum of individual and collective rights and responsibilities and a newfound focus on freedoms once taken for granted. It is an interesting, once in a generation re-stirring of the public interest.

The result? A dizzying collection of public policy challenges (see below); less social cohesion; growing distrust of public institutions, fellow citizens and neighbours; and, more pessimism about the future by a growing number of people (especially youth).

History would suggest that such conditions can make for dangerous times. Such times call for greater attention and participation from a greater number of people; and yet many are being driven to do the exact opposite.

SETTING THE CONTEXT: POLLS AND MOMENTUM - WHAT'S THE DATA TELLING US?

The conventional wisdom suggests a majority for the current PC government with a race for 2nd place between the OLP and NDP. All things being equal, the conventional wisdom seems a reasonable estimation of the election. Yet, similar conventional wisdom in advance of last year's federal election failed to materialize. In other words, elections matter and the current context is anything but conducive to predictability.

ONTARIO PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVE PARTY (PC)

The global pandemic created an extraordinary political climate that led to large swings in popular support for political leaders as they navigated the public health crisis for over two years. For Doug Ford the net effect of Ontario's pandemic response has been positive.

Prior to the pandemic, the Ford government was suffering in public opinion polls, largely the result of stumbles in the first year of the government. The performance of the government during the pandemic, (while often drawing criticism from those arguing for either more or less public health measures) helped the PCs to gain the public's trust, based largely on Ford's ability to demonstrate empathy.

The PCs are in relatively good shape pre-writ. The party clearly leads in the important category of fundraising. Doug Ford is entering his second provincial election with considerably more experience than he had in his successful 2018 debut. The PC's won a majority in that election (76 of 124 seats) but have subsequently lost members and currently hold 67 seats. Incumbency helps in attracting donors and candidates and the PC's are well positioned on both fronts.

The PC's have significant advantages in public trust, campaign resources and incumbent members. Absent campaign stumbles, that advantage should equate to a second majority government.

ONTARIO LIBERAL PARTY (OLP)

The Ontario Liberal Party lost the 2018 election badly, losing official party status and finishing with 7 seats. The party leader, Steven Del Duca, has never contested an election as leader and is unknown to most voters.

So, there is no way to go but up, right? Maybe.

The polls suggest that while the OLP has the greatest, best-case scenario seat potential, they also have in the worst-case scenarios, the smallest seat potential (figure 1).

Recent momentum suggests the OLP could be moving ahead as the alternative choice to those voters who want to defeat the incumbent party. However, as the old cliché goes – elections matter. This will be OLP leader Steven Del Duca's first provincial campaign at the helm and decades of evidence suggests that such an endeavour is actually quite hard. NDP leader Andrea Horwath is taking a fourth run as leader of her party in a general election with the hope that experience will be an asset (as opposed to a liability) in attracting a pan-provincial anti-Ford voter coalition.

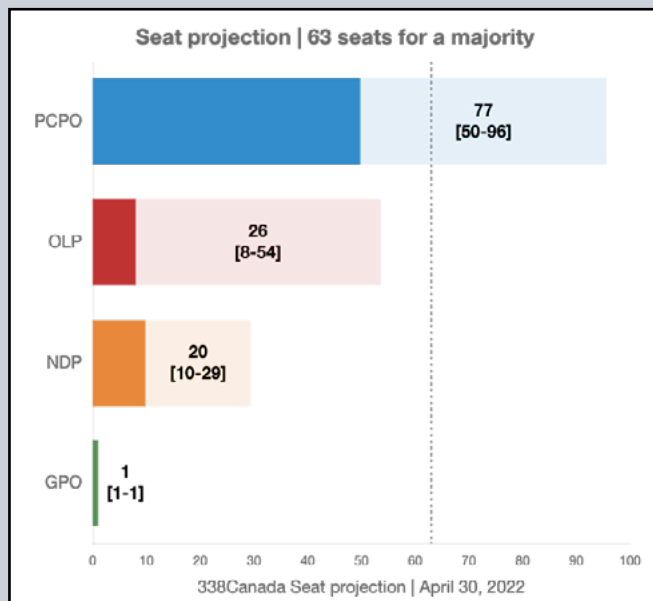


Figure 1

ONTARIO NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY (NDP)

Meanwhile, the NDP as the official opposition has the stronger base on which to build a challenge to the government's incumbency – but struggle with a seemingly structural ceiling on voter and more importantly seat growth. The NDP made significant gains in the 2018 election, winning official opposition status and holding 38 seats heading into the election. This will be Andrea Horwath's fourth election as leader of the NDP (she was elected leader in 2009). As of this writing the NDP have not translated official opposition and experienced leadership into pre-election advantage (Figure 2).

GREEN PARTY OF ONTARIO (GPO)

It seems fair, at this point, to separate GPO from the "other parties". Leader Mike Schreiner was elected in 2018 as the first provincial green MPP.

However, both the upstart Ontario Party (Rick Nicholls) and the New Blue Party (Belinda Karahalios) have sitting MPPs – though neither MPP was elected under their current party banner having both been elected under the PC brand in 2018.

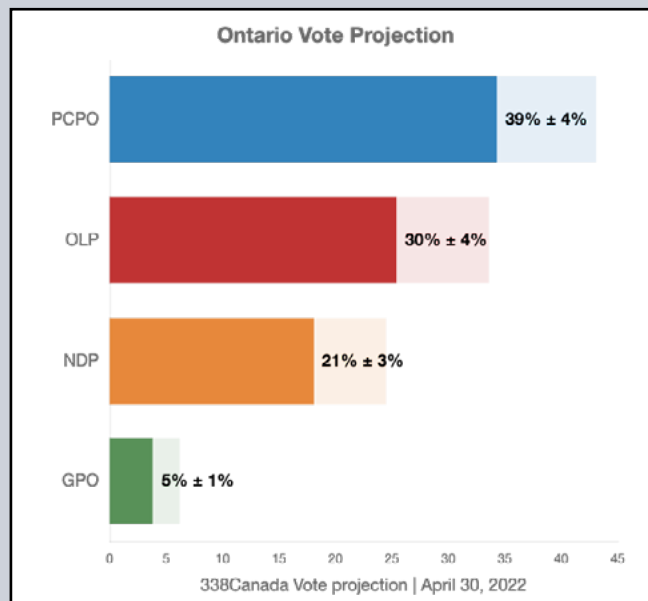


Figure 2

GPO then stands apart but is polling at significantly lower levels than the three main parties. GPO will no doubt continue to pour significant resources into the leader's Guelph riding to maintain their electoral beachhead while at the same time putting time, effort and resources into the candidacy of Dianne Saxe – the former Environment Commissioner axed by the Ford government – running in the Toronto riding of University-Rosedale¹.

OTHER PARTIES

The rise of a number of right-wing "other parties" is of particular note and highly related to the political and social tensions heightened through the pandemic and popularized with the "trucker movement" earlier this year. Data on the other parties' polling (not including the GPO) is unreliable but their numbers are not zero. With the People's Party of Canada polling at just shy of 5% in last year's federal election as an indication of the potential support, it is not inconceivable that these parties could have an impact on the PC vote in some key ridings.

1. Someone should check the water at the former Commissioner's office as Saxe builds on a tradition of former Environmental Commissioners running for the GPO – see [Gord Miller](#).

SETTING THE CONTEXT: WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

Darrell Bricker, CEO of Ipsos Public Affairs, has said... “Overall, health care is leading the pack as the most important issue for people going into this election campaign, followed by the handling of COVID-19... But after that, everything else is really about affordability and the cost of living, particularly, for example, the day-to-day cost of groceries and gas, lowering taxes and interestingly, making housing more affordable for middle-class families... Talking about big things for the economy (is) not as important as talking to people about helping them with the day-to-day, (the) managing of their finances, making sure that they’re able to actually afford the cost of living in the province of Ontario.”

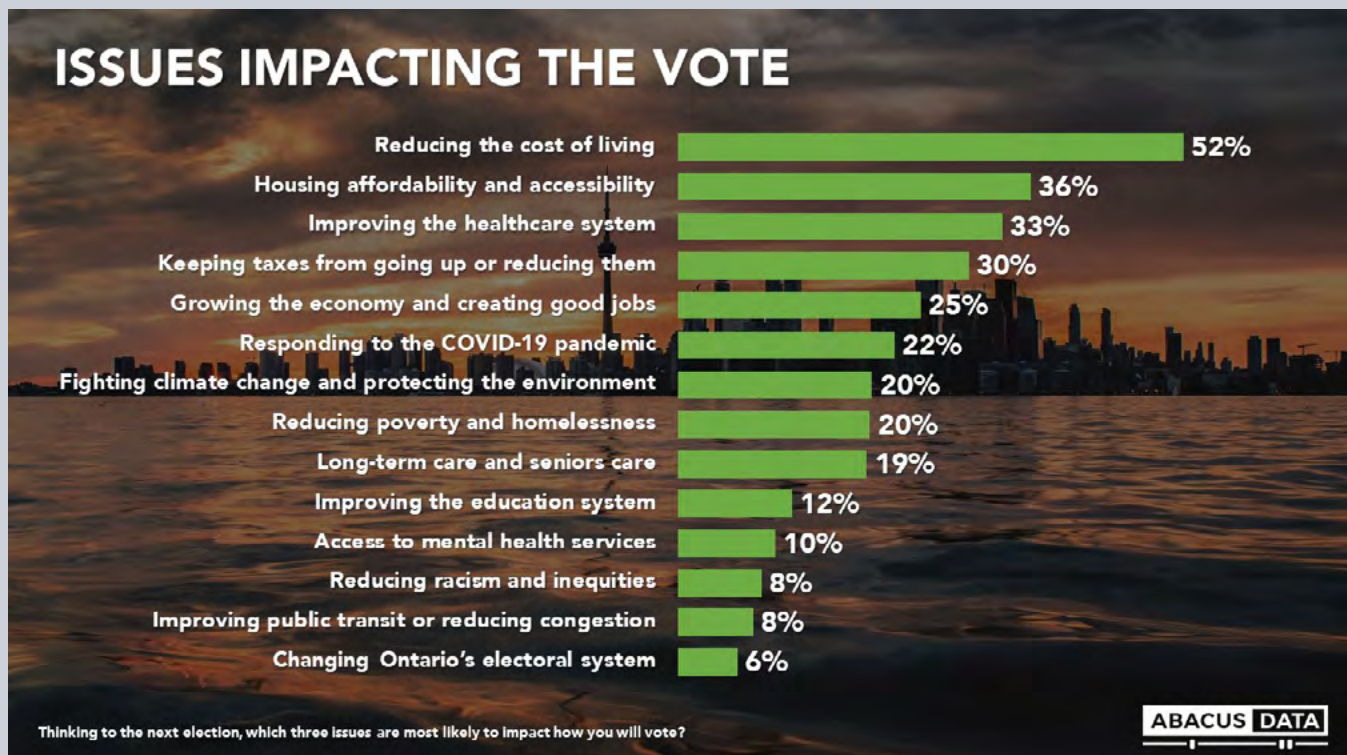
Public data from [Abacus polling](#) confirm these trends with the cost of living, housing, healthcare and costs/tax increases as core issues impacting voter considerations.

There are interesting takeaways from the research. COVID is still a concern, but with the successful introduction of vaccines, and more effective treatments, the early pandemic fear has retreated. Overtaking that concern is a new and robust concern for short-term financial security in a time of extraordinary (at least for younger Ontarians) inflation.

The research indicates that longer term concerns, climate change for example, will take a back seat to tangible economic benefits over the writ period. Expect parties to appeal for the voter’s trust to navigate the uncertain fiscal waters ahead.

TWO FACTORS THAT WILL IMPACT THIS ELECTION ARE TRUST BIASES AND FATIGUE.

Pre-election voter research must be considered through several filters: the degree to which voters are motivated is an important consideration, as are the historic voting patterns in a riding.



Traditionally voters have placed the major parties on a spectrum of trust across the policy spectrum. PC policy generally rates higher in trust on economic issues and lower on social initiatives. The reverse is true for the NDP and OLP. While this traditional trust index is not impenetrable, OLP can earn trust on financial issues and PC can be convincing on social policy; the lift required to convince voters is higher if the party's "brand" is weak in an important policy area.

Issue fatigue is another factor that can distort the importance of issues to voters. If voters have little confidence in government on a specific policy front (the post office is the post office no matter who is in government), they are not motivated to choose a party based on that issue.

Similarly, if a policy area has been the subject of attention for a long period without resolution, voters will tend not to trust any party to resolve it.

What do these trends mean and how do they impact voter intent in this election?

Health care is a concern and the OLP and NDP could benefit from voter attention to health care policy. But that benefit is mitigated by the degree to which voters believe any party can influence health care performance in the near term.

The PC's recognized that healthcare is a concern and used their trust strength in fiscal policy to overcome the trust deficit on social policy by promising strong investment in the bricks-and-mortar health care needs. Building more hospitals fits the PC brand.

Last week's pre-election "budget" was a masterclass in framing the key issues within the Government's strengths.

More interesting is the overwhelming immediate concerns over the day-to-day realities of paying higher prices for consumables. Escalating gas and food costs are a daily reminder that things are getting harder and the future looks somewhere between concerning and downright frightening. Absent some other issue emerging over the writ period, this concern over inflation – or perhaps more tangibly, day-to-day costs – and its impact to their future, will be the overarching concern on voters' minds as they enter the polls.

Of all the research indicators that point to a PC victory in June, the focus of attention on the fiscal issues is the strongest and most likely to endure the writ period. Simply stated, the PC's get to play to their strength when voters are consumed by economic worries.

RESPONDING TO THE CONTEXT – ELECTION STRATEGIES AND PARTY PLATFORMS

If politics is about selling ideas, then telling stories to motivate and connect with voters is the art and science of campaigns.

Campaign strategies are quite simple in their concept – identify those voters who are going to vote for your party, the candidates and/or the leader, and motivate them to go out and actually vote (while simultaneously attempting to demotivate those who aren't supporters). This is done through a sophisticated machinery of voter ID strategies and tools, but ultimately revolves around a potent mix of targeted emotional appeals that seeks to tap into voters' core motivations.

PLATFORMS

PC “BUDGET” – FRAMING THE ELECTION NARRATIVE

The PC “budget” delivered on April 28th (with zero chance of being passed) is effectively the party’s campaign platform. From a political perspective, it is very effective in framing the core issues (affordability, healthcare, and pandemic recovery) as they relate to core PC strengths – building stuff, focusing on the bottom line, and prioritizing action over deliberation.

Their narrative will be that things are getting better because of this Government’s action. Now is no time to hand over control of the province to other parties with a poor record (OLP) or poor capacity (NDP). It reminds us of the 2011 pitch from the Harper campaign for a strong, stable majority government to continue to effectively navigate the country through the wake of the 2008 financial crisis fallout.

NDP – WORKING FOR CREDIBILITY AND CHANGE

The NDP platform seeks to frame the core issues as complex social problems – positioning the NDP as the only credible party to address these issues given its core social strengths. At the same time, the platform offers a substantive prescription to all that ails the province – but importantly ascribes the cause of Ontario’s ailments to the Ford government. The NDP response to the budget is telling: this government cannot be trusted. In other words, the only credible fix to the province’s ills is the election of an NDP government.

OLP – COMMUNICATIONS DRIVEN AND MAKING THE CASE FOR CHANGE

The OLP platform – announced as separate elements over the past several weeks and counting – is simultaneously looking to get needed attention for the party and the leader while attempting to frame the core issues around core

Liberal strengths – ie., trusted stewards of public services especially in healthcare and education. The OLP response to the “budget” emphasized a lack of vision and highlighted a failure to address core public services like public education. At the same time, the OLP has to make a case for change and confirm their status as THE party to effectively defeat the Ford government.

THE FIGHT OVER THE BALLOT QUESTION

It will all come down to the ballot question – the predominant question on voters’ minds as they step into the ballot box.

Voters are people and people are motivated by how they feel as much or more than by what they think.

How they feel – the likelihood that they will vote for a particular party, leader or candidate – is a combination of their overarching concerns of the day. In this election, that concern will be focused on affordability and cost of living, but also less tangible but equally important considerations:

- How do they feel (relate to) about the leader/candidate?
- Does the leader/candidate care about them and their family/community?
- Does the leader/candidate share and/or reflect their core values?
- What does voting for a leader/candidate say about them (can they feel good about whom they have voted for)?

Add to that list of considerations the immovable rock of historic voting patterns - how have I, my family and people like me traditionally voted?

Campaigns win or fail by reaching voters at the intersection of feelings at the point of most

concern. In this cycle, that means convincing people that you care about their immediate and real concerns about the family budget. While some campaigns begin with a battle over possible ballot questions – trying to drive voters to concerns that best match your parties platform/trust index – this election is different. Absent thermonuclear war, the ballot question is established pre-writ.

For the PC's this is good news. Doug Ford has largely overcome the initial policy stumbles and has emerged through the pandemic as a leader in touch and empathetic to the concerns and struggles of many voters. His brand strength matches the ballot question.

Interestingly, the pre-election budget confirms the transformation of the PC's and Ford from ideologues (smaller government and balanced budgets at any cost) to pragmatists. There is no species more endangered in Ontario than the Fiscal Hawk.

This leaves the OLP and NDP in the position of driving doubt about Ford and his motivations as their overriding campaign objective. When voters show up at the polls, the NDP and OLP want them to be concerned about Ford's motives, commitment and ability to deliver. This is the emotional foundation for secret agendas, hidden biases and other common critiques of conservative politics.

This path to victory for those seeking to dethrone the incumbent is much more narrow.

Third-party ads that helped the OLP derail previous PC campaigns have been declawed through spending limits and other restrictions. The traditional public sector union spending aimed at damaging PC credibility has been absent or ineffective in the pre-writ cycle.

The OLP and NDP face another challenge this cycle – driving policy positions on issues that are important but off target on the overarching affordability issue can leave voters with doubts that the parties connect with their primary, immediate concerns. Which is a long way of saying that in 2022 spending a lot of time on less immediately tangible discussions on climate change and education curriculum could be counterproductive.

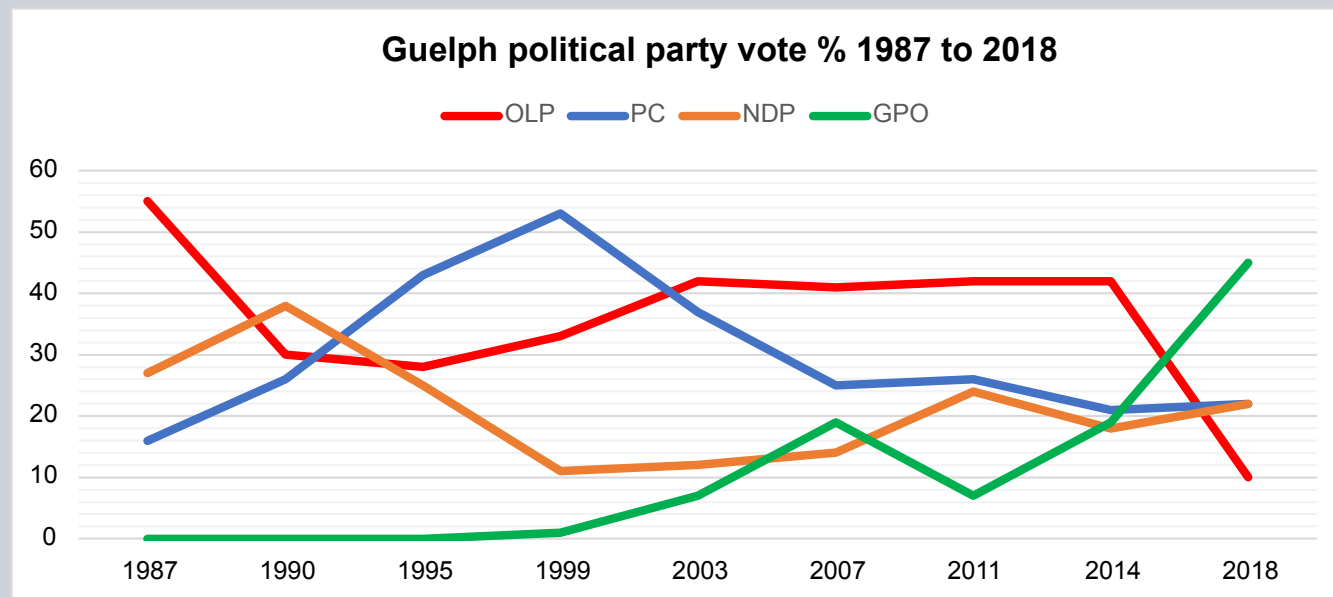
The bottom line is a race to June 2nd with the PC's aiming to build on voter connection and credibility, while the NDP and OLP attempt to undermine Ford's credibility and stay-the-course stability.

Can the NDP and/or the OLP do sufficient damage to Ford's credibility and trust to defeat the PC government? They will need help from Ford doing things that drive doubt into the minds of voters. Once again, campaigns matter and this campaign boils down to the ability of the PC's to buttress public trust and, conversely, the NDP and OLP campaigns ability to lever any and every PC misstep into doubts over Ford's motives, ability and credibility.

THE RIDING OF GUELPH

How then might these dynamics play out in Guelph?

WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US?



We developed the line graph above from [Elections Ontario](#) data to take quick look at the past 30 years of voting in Guelph and arrived at the following insights:

1. 2018 stands out as the only example of the riding not voting in an MPP from the governing party.
2. Both the NDP and PC vote has remained consistently low outside of their governing years in the 1990's and early 2000's – in contrast to a much more robust OLP historical baseline (outside of the 2018 drubbing of course).
3. There is a significant bloc of voters without party loyalty – these swing voters have determined the winner in all provincial elections in the riding for the past several decades. Those swing voters moved from the PC's in the late 90's to the OLP through the 2000's and swung decisively for the GPO in 2018.

Guelph, then, is heading into this election with unique circumstances: GPO leader Mike Schreiner holds the riding and is the only Green MPP in the province. Some of the assumed benefits that come from having a provincial party leader double as the local MPP are limited. At the same time, the high public profile of Schreiner does elevate Guelph in provincial discourse.

Will those swing voters stay with the incumbent, swing to an alternative anti-Ford vote, or return to the pattern of electing an MPP from the ruling party?

Not leaving such things to chance we can anticipate a concerted strategy from each of the local candidate's campaigns. Here is our take on their strategies heading into the writ period.

Green Party of Ontario (GPO) – people in Guelph like Mike. He has garnered significant media attention and navigated Queen’s Park quite effectively for a one-person rookie party. Name recognition alone is a significant advantage and the GPO leader’s re-election is certainly seen to be the odds-on betting favorite at this point. The challenge for the incumbent is to keep those swing voters who came over in 2018 and make the case that a party-of-one at Queen’s Park can be an effective representative for the people of Guelph in the longer-term.

Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario (PC) – labour lawyer Peter McSherry is an interesting echo of the surprisingly effective outreach to working Ontarians headed by Labour Minister Monte McNaughton. Guelph is not adverse historically to electing PC MPPs – but the cards do seem stacked against the ruling party in more recent times in the riding. That said, a three-way split amongst the GPO, NDP and OLP could see the PC candidate emerge victorious through the middle. Similarly, the more subdued profile of Premier Ford and the desire for a return to more traditional voting patterns — that is to say, electing MPPs from the ruling party — could bode well for the local PCs.

Ontario Liberal Party (OLP) – the local provincial Liberals must be chuffed with the nomination of Raechelle Devereaux. The fact that a strong community leader is willing and able to pick up

the pieces of the 2018 drubbing and carry the OLP brand for 2022 is testament to the enduring strength of the party in the community. The challenge for the local Libs is to make the case to traditional Lib voters to return to the fold and woo back the swing voters that went to the GPO in 2018. The central campaign will have a significant impact on the strength of this pitch – if current trends hold for a strong OLP vs NDP as the anti-Ford party, it could be a compelling sales pitch.

New Democratic Party (NDP) – With a lower profile for rookie candidate James Parr and the historically low base-line for NDP support in the riding, the local NDP campaign will similarly need to rely on the central campaign to bolster the argument to Guelph voters. The anti-Ford vote needs to coalesce around the provincial NDP for the local campaign to have reasonable shot at taking the riding.

INSIGHTS

1. GPO is going to do everything they can to maintain their electoral beachhead in Guelph.
2. The OLP and NDP are going to need to rely on their central campaigns to bolster their local prospects and emerge as the primary major party for the anti-Ford demographic.
3. The PC campaign will be looking to shore up and motivate the city’s core conservative support and attract a significant sliver of the swing voter bloc to return to historic voting patterns.

PARTY	CANDIDATE
Green Party of Ontario (GPO) (incumbent)	Mike Schreiner
Ontario Liberal Party (OLP)	Raechelle Devereaux
Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario (PC)	Peter McSherry
Ontario New Democratic Party (NDP)	James Parr
None of the Above Party (NOTA)	Paul Taylor
New Blue Party of Ontario (NBP)	Will Lomker