

Sault Ste. Marie to vote in provincial byelection, a litmus test for...

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Sault Ste. Marie to vote in provincial byelection, a litmus test for Liberals (Ont-Sault-Byelection)
By Jessica Smith Cross

THE CANADIAN PRESS

TORONTO _ A provincial byelection in Sault Ste. Marie on Thursday will give voters a chance to weigh in on Ontario's Liberal government a year ahead of the general election.

The riding has been held by the Ontario Liberals since the 2003 election, which also saw the Liberals form government.

But now victory in the Sault appears within reach of all three parties, all of which have campaigned hard and recruited locally respected candidates, according to Trevor Tchir, a political science professor at Sault Ste. Marie's Algoma University.

"A lot of people in the Sault, and those interested in Ontario politics outside of the Sault, see this as a litmus test for public sentiment going into next year's general election," said Tchir.

Observers are interested to see if the Liberals can hold on to the riding, despite recent low poll numbers for the party and Premier **>Kathleen Wynne<**, Tchir said. They'll face tough opposition from the Progressive Conservative Party, which is polling well across the province, and the NDP, which has a strong northern caucus.

PC Candidate Ross Romano, a city councillor, got a head start in the race, Tchir said. He was nominated in early November to represent his party in the June 2018 general election _ before Liberal cabinet minister David Orazietti announced he would step down in December, prompting the byelection.

Romano has been telling voters it's time to take the government to task on high electricity rates and Liberal scandals, a message the PCs would like to see resonate in Sault Ste. Marie and across the province next year, said Tchir.

The NDP recruited another city councillor, Joe Krmpotich, in January. Since then, party leader Andrea Horwath has been up to Sault Ste. Marie at least half a dozen times campaigning on his behalf, she said. The trips have shown her the people of Sault Ste. Marie aren't happy with being ignored by the Liberal government and want someone to fight for them, Horwath said.

The Liberals were the last to find a candidate. Former Mayor Debbie Amaroso was nominated in late April, less than a week before the writ dropped. Her message to voters is that an MPP from the

governing party is in a better position to get things done than one in opposition.

Deputy Premier Deb Matthews said she hopes voters in Sault Ste. Marie will respond positively to Amaro and to the government's major recent announcements, including the Fair Hydro Plan, which lowers hydro rates in the short term through debt that ratepayers will have to pay off over the long term.

However, Matthews cautioned against reading too much into what a Liberal loss in Sault Ste. Marie would mean for the government's chances in 2018.

"Byelections are always tough for government, that's a well-known fact," Matthews said. "But we've got a great candidate and we're working hard."

Major local issues include electricity prices and jobs, said Tchir. Sault Ste. Marie is one of several northern cities hoping to be home to a chromite smelter that would provide a boost to local employment and economic growth, and all three candidates have vowed to advocate for it to be built in the area.

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