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 ONTARIO VOTES

OPINION

Doug Ford's dismal record on the environment and climate change

The Ford government has largely operated on the assumption anyone concerned about climate change and the environment wouldn't vote for them anyway.

By **Mark Winfield** ContributorThu., May 12, 2022 |  3 min. read

In the face of increasingly dire predictions from the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#), Ontarians will want to reflect on the choices around the environment and climate change when they [vote on June 2](#).

The major features of the [Progressive Conservative Leader Doug Ford's](#) performance on the environment are well known: The [dismantling](#) of the previous government's climate change strategy; a battle with the federal government over carbon pricing, ultimately ending in a decisive [loss](#) before the Supreme Court; the cancellation of more than 700 [renewable energy projects](#), at the cost of hundreds of millions of dollars; the rewriting of [planning rules](#) at the provincial and [local](#) levels in favour of developers; and aggressively pushing proposals for [sprawl-inducing highways](#) through the Greenbelt.

There's more. The Ford government has also undermined [conservation authorities](#) with respect to areas prone to flooding, weakened protections for [endangered species](#) and [dismantled](#) the regulatory framework for controlling industrial water pollution.

This agenda continued, and in many ways accelerated, under the cover of "pandemic recovery." The province's [environmental assessment](#) process was effectively dismantled. Broad powers have been given to provincial agencies, most notably [Metrolinx](#). The province's most recent [moves](#) have sought to [marginalize](#) the roles of local governments in planning matters, and to eliminate public consultation requirements as "red tape."

The province did release a "Made-in-Ontario Environment Plan" at the end of 2018, but has done [virtually nothing](#) to implement it since then. Ontario is now on track to see major increases in emissions, particularly from the [electricity sector](#).

In the process, the province has [moved away](#) from rules- and evidence-based decision-making to approaches based on access, [connections](#) and [political whim](#). The resulting governance model is one more rooted in the political norms of the 19th century than the 21st. The [big winners](#) so far have been clear: developers, the mining and aggregate industries, and nuclear and natural gas-based incumbents in the energy sector.

For the most part, the Ford government has operated on an assumption that anyone concerned about climate change and the environment wouldn't be voting for them anyway.

Barring a climate-related extreme weather event or Walkerton-type disaster during the campaign period, the highest environment-related political risk facing the government is probably the growing backlash against the government's increasingly authoritarian approach to planning and development issues. The ongoing threats to the [Greenbelt](#) — and most recently, the aggressive use of [Ministerial Zoning Orders](#) in Richmond Hill and Markham to support hyper-intensive development for purposes that seem to do

nothing but serve the interests of the development industry — are already causing [unrest](#) in the crucial 905 region around Toronto that forms part of the base of the “Ford nation.”

For Ontarians looking for alternatives to the current government around climate change and environmental issues, the province's Green Party has, perhaps unsurprisingly, provided the most comprehensive [response](#) so far. The party's [polling](#) numbers are down, likely collateral damage from the federal party's [meltdown](#) in the 2021 federal election. But the potential role of the Greens in the election should not be underestimated. In a highly fractured vote, the Greens could end up holding the balance of power in a minority legislature, as happened in [B.C.](#) in 2017.

By comparison, the environmental [dimensions](#) of the NDP's platform are disappointingly thin on content and details. The party proposes a net-zero plan for 2050, to reintroduce a cap-and-trade system for greenhouse gases, and to re-engage around renewable energy development. The Liberal platform commits to cutting greenhouse gases in half by 2030, and proposes action on transit, electric vehicles, buildings and electricity — but also relies heavily on federal initiatives to achieve emission reductions.

The 2022 election looms as the most important for Ontario's environment of the modern era, and its impact may echo for generations to come.

Mark Winfield is a professor of environmental and urban change at York University. He has written extensively on environmental issues and is the author of “Blue-Green Province: The Environment and Political Economy of Ontario” (UBC Press). A version of this article originally appeared in [the Conversation](#).

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