

# McGuinty support slips to minority status, poll finds

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TORONTO — The Ontario Liberals are losing support to both the New Democrats and the Green Party, according to a new poll that shows Premier Dalton McGuinty forming a minority government with less than 60 days to go before the election.

The survey, conducted for The Globe and Mail, shows the Liberals with the backing of 40 per cent of the electorate, giving them a modest five-point lead over the Progressive Conservatives. The gap between the two parties has narrowed considerably since the 2003 election, when the Liberals swept to power with 47 per cent of the votes.

"Clearly, some of its support has bled to the left," said Tim Woolstencroft of the Strategic Counsel, which conducted the survey.

The Liberal Party has lost ground in all regions of the province, with its biggest decline outside the Greater Toronto Area, according to the survey. The numbers are most dramatic in northern and eastern Ontario, where support for the Liberals has dropped 10 percentage points to 38 per cent, leaving them trailing the Tories in these regions.

Overall support for the Tories has remained unchanged at 35 per cent since the last election, revealing that the party under leader John Tory has yet to catch on fire with voters, the survey says. In the 905 region – former Conservative premier Mike Harris's political stronghold – support for the party dipped two percentage points to 41 per cent.

However, Mr. Tory, a former business executive who became leader in 2004, has successfully wooed one-time Liberal supporters in northern and eastern Ontario. Support for the Conservatives has climbed to 40 per cent from 34 per cent in 2003.

Ontario's Liberals can blame their waning fortunes on a notable shift to the second-tier parties. Support for the NDP has risen to 18 per cent from 15 per cent in 2003, the survey shows. The NDP under Howard Hampton is making its biggest gains in the Toronto area, where its support has climbed to 25 per cent from 18 per cent.

The Green Party is also emerging as a player for the first time in the province as Ontarians become increasingly concerned about global warming and climate change. The party enjoys support from 8 per cent of the voters, up from just 3 per cent in the last election. Support for the party is particularly strong in southwest Ontario, where it has jumped to 11 per cent from 3 per cent. However, Mr. Woolstencroft cautioned that about half of the support for the Green Party could vanish by election day because many undecided Ontarians tend to initially "park" their votes with the party.

The poll of 750 Ontarians was conducted from Aug. 9 to Aug. 14 and is considered accurate to within 3.6 percentage points, 95 per cent of the time.

Mark Winfield, assistant professor of environmental studies at York University, said the Liberals are vulnerable to losing support to both the Greens and the NDP over their handling of the province's electricity system.

Mr. McGuinty promised in 2003 to close the province's pollution-spewing, coal-fired electricity plants by 2007, but he has backtracked twice on that pledge and pushed the date back to 2014. He has also said the province will spend billions of dollars building new nuclear plants, which both the NDP and Green Party oppose.

"The environmental file is a real area of vulnerability for the government," Prof. Winfield said. "There is the question of coal phase-out and the question of the overall direction, including nuclear."

The campaign for the Oct. 10 election does not officially kick off until the writ is dropped on Sept. 10. But it is already under way, with Mr. Tory and Mr. Hampton both attacking the Liberals' track record of broken promises. The Liberals swept into office in 2003 on a pledge of no new taxes, only to have Mr. McGuinty go back on his word by imposing a \$2.4-billion health tax.

For his part, Mr. McGuinty is campaigning on his record. His website boasts about the fact that his government has reduced class sizes, created more jobs, improved benefits for children living in poverty and put more police on the streets.