



# PRESS RELEASE

## ONTARIO PROVINCIAL ELECTION

### FROM “BLACKOUT BOUNCE” TO “TURN OUT THE LIGHTS”

September 26, 2003

Ottawa, ONTARIO. A new EKOS/Toronto Star poll points to a majority government for Dalton McGuinty's Liberals.

#### Voting Intentions:

Following the Leader's debate, the Liberals now enjoy the support of 48% of decided voters, with the Conservatives trailing well behind at 31% and the NDP up somewhat at 17%. Premier Eves and the PCs have squandered the initial positive evaluation secured from their handling of the blackout, reverting to the large disadvantage they suffered leading up to the election call. “We have gone from the ‘blackout bounce’ for Eves to ‘turn out the lights’ for the Ontario PCs,” said EKOS President Frank Graves. “In hindsight, the Tory attack strategy appears to have generated more heat than light, and was judged deficient by the public”.

Voting intentions have also solidified. While 21% of decided voters feel it is at least somewhat likely that they will change their mind before next Thursday, this is down from 35% in our earlier sounding immediately following the election call. There appears to be nothing on the horizon capable of disrupting current patterns.

While we feel it unlikely that a great deal of this switching in voting intention will occur, the NDP appears to have improved its outlook somewhat. In early September the NDP were the second choice of just 16% of those who felt they might switch, and this has risen to 20%. The Liberals remain the top second choice party at 30%, down 1 point from early September. The PCs trail at 19%, down 1 point.

We have also seen a dramatic change in voters' predictions on the outcome of the election. In early September, 42% saw the Liberals as likely to win, a slight margin over the Tories at 39%. We now see a three to one advantage for the Liberals, with 63% of voters feeling they will win versus just 20% who feel the PCs will remain in power. Even PC voters lean towards predicting a Liberal victory, with 47% anticipating a Liberal win and 40% thinking the Tories will hold on to power. We concur with the public; the Liberals under Dalton McGuinty are headed for a decisive victory.

**OTTAWA OFFICE**  
99 Metcalfe Street, Suite 1100  
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 6L7  
T: 613.235.7215  
F: 613.235.8498

**TORONTO OFFICE**  
480 University Avenue, Suite 1006  
Toronto, Ontario M5G 1V2  
T: 416.598.8002  
F: 416.598.2543

**EDMONTON OFFICE**  
9925 109th St. NW, Suite 606  
Edmonton, Alberta T5K 2J8  
T: 780.408.5225  
F: 780.408.5233

### Interest in Campaign and the Debate:

While voter interest in the election has been high, slightly fewer voters report having watched the debate than was the case in 1999 (42%, down from 48%). "The irony in terms of the debate viewership is that it was highest among those who are firmest in their voting intentions, as opposed to those who are more uncertain and presumably still looking for more information to help them make up their minds," said Graves.

There was no clear winner of the debate in voters' minds, with Hampton, Eves and McGuinty in a dead heat (23%, 23% and 22%). In fact the most frequent choice as winner was the ever popular "don't know". Ernie Eves, however, was most frequently cited as having lost. "A tie was good enough for a win as far as McGuinty was concerned, and he did better than that" said Graves, "but Eves needed to score a knockout, or at least a clear decision, and he failed in that regard. Hampton performed well and has elevated his party's status somewhat, but they remain fairly irrelevant in terms of their share of the popular vote".

"Premier Eves misfired on the appeal to Paul Martin during the debate" said Graves. Ontario voters, by a huge margin (54%: 22%) see McGuinty as best able to work with a Paul Martin-led Liberal government in Ottawa".

Dalton McGuinty now enjoys a lead over Ernie Eves in terms of the critical question of whom voters see as making the best Premier for Ontario. McGuinty is the choice for 37% of Ontarians (up 8 percentage points since early September), Eves is the choice for 33% (a 7-point drop from early September) and Howard Hampton is up 2 points to 14%. "McGuinty has gone from an 11-point deficit to a 4 point advantage" said Graves. "It was clear at the start of this race that one of the key challenges for McGuinty and the Liberals was to establish his credentials as a leader with voters and he's succeeded in that regard".

As voters look back more broadly over the campaign to date, Premier Eves holds an advantage over the two other major candidates in terms of having displayed the best leadership (36%, versus 28% for McGuinty and 12% for Hampton). Eves and McGuinty are basically tied in terms of offering the best ideas and solutions for the province (29% Eves, 27% McGuinty and 20 Hampton). McGuinty holds a slight edge on being the most believable (27% versus 25% for Eves and 22% for Hampton) but pulls ahead of the pack on being the most likeable (34% versus 24% for Eves and 21% for Hampton)

### The "Change Factor":

Close to six in ten Ontario voters agree that "after so many years of Conservative government" the province needs a change in leadership. There is also a broader desire for change in the province across a host of areas, with just 13% feeling that "little change" is required in Ontario (this desire for change is ubiquitous in contemporary Western democracies). The public will measure the new government's success on a complex and demanding set of core issues, with no single focus (*à la* tax cuts, jobs or health care) seen as acceptable. Cities, public institutions, accountability and modernizing the economy, health care and education are mandatory yardsticks for success.

Graves points to three main factors leading to the success of the Liberals:

- The very strong desire for change, which is based on both dissatisfaction with the Tory record itself as well as broad public impulse for change.
- The policy and platform advantage of the Liberals, particularly on health and education. Ontarians are rejecting tax cuts at this time, in favour of reinvestments in core social areas. Voters see platform and policies as eclipsing leadership (in terms of influencing voting intentions) by a huge and widening margin.
- McGuinty's solid performance, beginning with the initial wave of election advertising through to the debate, which has elevated him to the most likeable candidate and best Premier in the minds of voters.

Methodology:

These data are based on a random sample of 1,023 telephone interviews conducted September 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> with Ontario residents eligible to vote in the October 2, 2003 provincial election. A sample of this size provides a margin of error of +/- 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

The margin of error increases when the results are sub-divided (i.e., error margins for sub-groups such as regions within Ontario are larger). It should also be noted that the refusal rate and other measurement errors could also increase the margin of error.

All the data were statistically weighted to ensure the sample's regional, gender and age composition reflects that of the actual population of Ontario according to Census data.