

Canadian Elections Bring Back Liberals - Justin Trudeau re-elected, minority government

Thursday 31 October 2019, by [GEROLAMI Giselle](#) (Date first published: 31 October 2019).

On October 21, 2019, Justin Trudeau's Liberal Party was re-elected in Canada, but this time with a minority government.

Contents

- [Election Results](#)
- [No Clear Issues](#)
- [Justin Trudeau](#)
- [Environmental Record](#)
- [Immigration](#)
- [Labor](#)
- [Electoral Reform](#)
- [The NDP](#)
- [Pharmacare](#)
- [Into the Streets!](#)



The elections failed to address Canada's real issues (Photo: Mark Klotz)

In Canada's parliamentary system, the Prime Minister is not elected directly, as the President is in the U.S. The party with a majority of seats in the House of Commons forms the government, and the head of that party becomes Prime Minister. If a majority is not achieved, the Prime Minister's party is given the opportunity to form a minority government. They would need to work with other parties to pass legislation. This can be done on an issue-by-issue basis, or a formal alliance or coalition can be forged.

Historically, the only third party in Canada of any size was the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) but more recently the other viable party has been the Bloc Quebecois (BQ) which only runs candidates in the province of Quebec. Trudeau has said that he is not looking for a coalition government with the NDP, but he will need NDP parliamentary support from outside the government. Many on the left hoped for a minority Liberal government this time as the best chance to push Liberals to the left through pressure from the NDP.

Election Results

Out of a total of 338 seats, the Liberals won 157 seats, down from 184 in 2015; the Conservatives 121 seats, up from 99; the Bloc Quebecois 32 seats, up from 10; the NDP 24 seats, down from 39; and the Green Party 3 seats, up from 1. The most reassuring result may be that Maxime Bernier's far-right People's Party did not get a single seat; in fact, he lost his own seat, having been previously elected as a Conservative. A former Liberal Cabinet minister, Jody Wilson-Raybould, who stood up to Trudeau in an ethics scandal, was elected as an independent.

The Conservatives won the popular vote with 34% vs. the Liberals' 33%. This is the lowest percentage of popular vote a governing party has had in Canadian history, although Stephen Harper's Conservatives came close with 36% in 2006. This result may renew calls for electoral reform as the undemocratic nature of first-past-the-post voting becomes even clearer. The NDP won 15.9% of the popular vote, the BQ won 7.7%, the Greens 6.5% and the People's Party 1.6%.

Voter turnout was 65.95%, down slightly from 68.3% in 2015 but still high compared to 55.5% in the U.S. election of 2016. The U.S. has not had voter turnout above 60% since the 1960s.

No Clear Issues

There were no clear issues in the election. Trudeau was running largely on his record. The politician who had formerly promised "sunny ways" managed to snag a last-minute endorsement from the "Hope" and "Change" former U.S. president Barack Obama. The prospect of a Conservative win had raised concerns during the campaign that settled matters such as abortion, gay marriage and legalized marijuana might become issues again.

The Liberals and the Conservatives were polling equally going into the election, and polls predicted either a Liberal minority government or a Conservative minority government. Unhappiness with Conservative Doug Ford's government in Ontario may have hurt Andrew Scheer's Conservatives there, but the Conservatives completely dominated in Alberta and Saskatchewan, with two of Trudeau's cabinet ministers losing their seats. The BQ, which was almost obliterated in 2015, won big in Quebec this time mostly at the expense of the NDP. The BQ had put independence on the back burner, and its leader, Yves-Francois Blanchet, is seeking to advance Quebec's interests on a case-by-case basis.

Justin Trudeau

Trudeau, attractive and youthful, son of former P.M. Pierre Elliott Trudeau, was first elected in 2015 after galvanizing hatred of Conservative P.M. Stephen Harper's government which had been in office for nine years. Trudeau was said to have campaigned to the left of the NDP, and many on the left chose to vote for him strategically to ensure that Harper would not be reelected.

Trudeau billed himself as feminist, anti-racist, pro-immigrant and a supporter of Native and LGBTQIA rights. He became something of an international sensation. He made appearances at Pride parades and other demonstrations, most recently at the climate rally, making some wonder if he was demonstrating against himself.

On Native issues, Trudeau began a process of reconciliation, apologizing for the lasting trauma of residential schools, renaming streets and other locations, removing statues and launching a new

tradition that official meetings and ceremonies would start with recognizing the Native land on which they were taking place. These changes are significant but do not begin to address the extreme poverty in Native communities, the high rates of suicide, the prevalence of substance abuse, and the murder and disappearance of Native women.

Trudeau's progressive veneer was recently tarnished by ethics scandals and the recent discovery of a photo of him in brownface.

Environmental Record

Cameos at climate demonstrations and photo ops with Greta Thunberg aside, Trudeau's record on environmental issues is mixed at best. He supports the expansion of the Trans Mountain pipeline, which carries oil from Alberta to British Columbia, in spite of opposition from Native groups, environmentalists and the B.C. government. He supports other pipelines as well, including the Keystone XL Pipeline, in addition to a couple of controversial hydroelectric projects which are predicted to cause flooding and mercury contamination.

He did introduce a carbon tax (the Greenhouse Gas Pollution Pricing Act - GHGPPA) in 2018, which is aiming to reduce emissions by 12% by 2022, but much more will be needed to meet the targets of the Paris Climate Change accord.

Immigration

At a time when the Trump administration introduced the Muslim ban, promoted the building of a wall along the border with Mexico and incarcerated asylum seekers from Central America, including children who were separated from their parents, the Trudeau government scored many points on the left for its generous policy of welcoming Syrian refugees. Since 2015, close to 60,000 Syrian refugees have settled in Canada vs. 12,000 in the U.S., and these figures are more dramatic if you consider Canada's much smaller population.

What isn't often mentioned is that Canada's immigration policy has always favored educated or skilled immigrants. Both political parties have supported a long-standing point system for admitting immigrants. Also, in response to pressure from the Trump administration and to anti-immigrant rhetoric from the People's Party, Trudeau agreed to crack down on "illegal" border crossings, that is, migrants from Latin America crossing into Canada from the U.S. Canada has a "Safe Third Country" agreement with the U.S., which allows it to deny these types of asylum claims. The NDP has said it will seek to suspend this agreement.

Labor

Trudeau is no friend of labor, having used back-to-work legislation against CUPW (Canadian Union of Postal Workers) rotating strikes in late 2018 in spite of the fact that Canada Post had seen increased profits. It was not the first time that the Trudeau government used back-to-work legislation. Since the 1970s, governments have used economic factors to justify temporary intervention in public sector bargaining rights. The temporary measures then became permanent, something that has been referred to as "permanent exceptionalism."

The main means of intervention has been back-to-work legislation, which public sector unions have

challenged in court. All parties, even the NDP, which routinely gets the support of organized labor, have used such legislation. It's clear that neither the courts nor the NDP can be relied upon. There is no substitute for a fighting labor movement.

Electoral Reform

In 2015, Trudeau promised electoral reform but by 2017 had backed away from that promise. He was concerned in particular that proportional representation would be divisive but claimed that he would still be interested in exploring the preferential ballot (a form of ranked voting) after the election.

The fact that two referenda on proportional representation, one in British Columbia and one in Prince Edward Island, both failed may have played a role in Trudeau's decision, but polls indicate high levels of support for electoral reform among Canadians. There is no question that proportional representation would hurt the Liberal Party and benefit smaller parties like the NDP and the Greens.

The NDP

Jagmeet Singh, leader of the NDP, was the only person of color among the candidates. A practicing Sikh, he wears a turban and experienced racism on the campaign trail. He was asked to remove his turban to appear "more Canadian".

There has been speculation about the extent to which racism played a role in NDP losses in Quebec. Quebec recently enacted Law 21, which bans public servants from wearing religious symbols. In theory, it reinforces secularism and the separation of church and state, but in practice, it smacks of thinly veiled Islamophobia reminiscent of similar laws and practices in France. All party leaders opposed Law 21 with the unsurprising exception of BQ's Blanchet, but it is seen as a provincial matter and federal leaders are reluctant to get involved.

What would a minority Liberal government backed by the NDP look like? It is hard to know but Singh has indicated that the NDP would push six priorities in exchange for its support: "pharmacare" (including prescription drugs in Canada's single-payer health-insurance system), affordable housing, waiving interest on student loans, bold action on climate change, which includes reducing emissions, ending fossil fuel subsidies and transitioning workers out of those jobs, a super-wealth tax and lowering cell phone bills.

Pharmacare

Currently, Canada's health care system provides medical care for all Canadians but does not include drugs, dental or vision coverage. Although drugs in Canada are considerably cheaper than in the U.S., the cost is relatively high by world standards. Lack of universal coverage places a burden on lower-income Canadians who do not have insurance with their employer, and many of those who are insured are actually underinsured and forced to pay out of pocket.

Pharmacare is supported by 90% of Canadians and by many academic and healthcare experts. The NDP and the Greens were on the record as supporting pharmacare. The NDP also had a plan for dental care for those earning less than \$70,000.00 a year. The Liberals have indicated that they would take steps in the direction of pharmacare, and now they will be getting a push from the NDP.

Achievement of pharmacare would be a significant reform that would make a meaningful difference in the lives of the Canadian working class.

Singh's other priorities are laudable but could go much further. His super-wealth tax of one percent on fortunes over \$20 million would raise \$5.6 billion a year and be reinvested in affordable housing. This tax, better than nothing, hardly seems to touch at the vast income inequality that exists in Canada, as it does elsewhere. With a Global News poll in September showing 67% of Canadians believe the economy is rigged to advantage the rich and powerful, surely more can be done.

Into the Streets!

What can be achieved with a Liberal-NDP block, formal or otherwise, remains to be seen. It would be a mistake however for movements in Canada to put all their eggs in that basket. Action in the streets is the type of pressure that matters most. May the demonstrations be rowdy and confrontational enough that Trudeau will be hesitant to make his opportunistic appearances!

Giselle Gerolami

October 31, 2019

P.S.

<https://solidarity-us.org/canadian-elections-bring-back-liberals/>