

Trudeau and his Liberals scrape back into office with another minority in Canada's federal election

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Canada's Liberals retain power after Monday's federal election. But Prime Minister Justin Trudeau failed to secure a parliamentary majority—his primary objective in calling a snap election.

With mail-in ballots still being counted, the Liberals have won or are leading in 158 constituencies or seats, the Conservatives have 119 seats, the Bloc Québécois 34, the New Democrats 25, and the Greens two. A party needs to hold at least 170 seats to command a majority in Canada's 338-seat House of Commons.

For the second election running, the Liberals have won less votes than the Conservatives, Canadian big business' other traditional party of national government. At the time of writing, the Liberals had won less than a third of all tabulated votes (32.2 percent) and the Conservatives a shade more (34 percent). Yet, as in 2019, due to the vagaries of the first-past-the-post election system, the Liberals hold a more than two-dozen seat advantage over their Conservative rivals.

There are two principal reasons the Liberals retain power. They won a plurality of votes in the two most populous provinces, Ontario and Quebec, were competitive in the third, British Columbia, and did especially well in the Greater Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver urban agglomerations. By contrast, the Conservatives have only pockets of support in Quebec, and their vote comes disproportionately from their strongholds of Alberta and Saskatchewan and in the more rural parts of the country.

Second, and closely related to the first reason, the social-democratic politicians of the New Democratic Party (NDP) and their trade union allies have for years promoted the lie that the Liberals represent a “progressive” alternative to the Conservatives. The NDP provided the Trudeau Liberal government with the votes it needed to survive in office throughout the last minority parliament. Both immediately prior and after Monday's election, NDP leader Jagmeet Singh served notice that the NDP will continue to partner with and sustain the Trudeau government in office. For its part, Unifor, the country's largest industrial union, has responded to the election results by calling for the NDP to formally enter a Liberal-led coalition government.

The election campaign was overshadowed by a deadly Delta-variant driven fourth wave of the pandemic. Yet there was no substantive election debate about why Canada has been ravaged by recurring waves of mass infection that have killed more than 27,400 people. Similarly, the ongoing rapid increase in infections and deaths barely registered in the official campaign. This only testifies to the common support from all the parties, stretching from the Conservatives to the NDP, for the ruling class' systematic prioritization of profits over lives throughout the pandemic and for the current cross-country reopening of schools for in-class instruction and lifting of all remaining COVID restrictions.

In the dying days of the campaign, Trudeau, for his own electoral gain,

did refer to the horrendous situation in Alberta, where hospitals have activated emergency plans and cancelled elective surgeries but are still overwhelmed by a crush of COVID-19 patients. He lambasted the ruinous decision of Alberta's United Conservative Party premier, Jason Kenney—a close ally of federal Conservative leader Erin O'Toole—to lift all pandemic-related restrictions earlier this summer, while conveniently ignoring that his government did nothing to oppose it at the time.

The election results are in distorted form a rebuke of the entire political establishment. All of the major parties emerge diminished.

If current trends hold, the Liberals will have won a grand total of one more seat than in 2019, while seeing their share of the popular vote shrink. Three cabinet ministers went down to personal defeat. All this is a far cry from the Liberals' expectations of winning a parliamentary majority when Trudeau irresponsibly triggered the election in mid-August as the pandemic's fourth wave began to surge.

The Conservatives, with 119 seats, now hold two less than they did after the 2019 election, a result that was viewed as so disappointing that it led to the quick forced exit of Andrew Scheer, who had taken over the party leadership in 2017.

The party did pick up a handful of seats in Atlantic Canada at the Liberals' expense, but also lost a smattering of seats in Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta.

O'Toole's effort, supported by highly favourable media coverage, to portray himself as the leader of a “new look,” “centrist” Conservative Party failed spectacularly. His calibrated appeals for more to be done on climate change, claims to support gay rights and the right to abortion, and advocacy of a reactionary “pro-worker” agenda cribbed from the likes of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Donald Trump could not disguise the fact that he and his party are the most strident advocates of capitalist austerity and beholden to the religious right. The Liberals succeeded to considerable effect in exposing the dog-whistle appeals that O'Toole made to far-right-spearheaded anti-vaxx, anti-mask forces and gun activists.

It is questionable how long O'Toole will survive as Conservative Party leader. Much of the Conservative Party parliamentary caucus bitterly opposes O'Toole's attempts, no matter how fraudulent, to move the party away from the record of the decade-long Stephen Harper government and its Reform Party/Canadian Alliance roots.

The “Quebec First” Bloc Québécois managed to gain two seats, increasing its parliamentary representation to 34. But it failed to make substantial inroads into Liberal representation in Quebec, despite the efforts of the province's right-wing populist CAQ Premier François Legault to promote it and the Conservatives as opponents of the “centralist” Liberals, NDP and Greens. The Bloc's campaign was dominated by reactionary nationalist appeals that portrayed it as the only

legitimate advocate of “Quebec values” and the protector (*chien de garde*) of the chauvinist laws the CAQ government has passed targeting immigrants and religious minorities.

However, it is the trade union-backed NDP that arguably suffered the worst result of all the major parties. Under conditions in which social inequality has skyrocketed during the pandemic—due to the Liberals’ bailout of the super-rich and corporations and their placing of the millions who lost their jobs on makeshift poverty-level emergency benefits—Canada’s social democrats managed to pick up a single seat, for a total of 25. This is little more than half of the seats they won in 2015 at the conclusion of the right-wing campaign they waged under former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister and Thatcherite enthusiast Thomas Mulcair. On Monday, they captured 17.7 percent of the popular vote, a meagre 1.7 percentage point increase from 2019. This is still less than they won in 2015, let alone 2011, when for the first time ever they became the second largest party in parliament.

No doubt some NDP supporters—in keeping with the unions’ “Anybody but Conservative” campaign and the social democrats’ own longstanding promotion of the Liberals, the Canadian ruling class’ traditional party of national government, as fellow “progressives”—were persuaded to change their vote to the Liberals as voting day neared, to keep the Conservatives out.

But the principal reason the NDP campaign found so little traction under conditions of the gravest crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression is because of their role in suppressing the class struggle and propping up the minority Liberal government. The NDP supported the massive pandemic bailout of the super-rich, the Liberals’ 70 percent ten-year military spending increase and purchase of new fleets of warships and fighter planes, and the further integration of Canada and the Canadian Armed Forces into Washington’s military-strategic offensives around the world. Meanwhile, the NDP’s union allies have enforced big business’ murderous back-to-work/back-to-school pandemic policy. As a result, virtually no worker could take Singh’s sudden election campaign conversion into a fierce critic of the wealthy, bank profits, and the Trudeau Liberals’ calls for minimal tax increases seriously.

Even prior to the vote, Singh followed the same playbook he used during the 2019 campaign by making clear that his party would serve as Trudeau’s loyal junior partner going forward. “We’re not in parliament to make it not work,” Singh asserted, under conditions where polls were making clear that a Liberal minority was the most likely election outcome. “I’m looking to make government work for you. That’s our goal.” In light of the NDP’s key role in enabling the massive redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top of society implemented by the Trudeau government during the pandemic, Singh’s election night pledge that the NDP will “continue fighting for you, just the same way we fought for you in the pandemic” appears more like a menacing threat to workers than anything else.

The NDP’s leverage will be limited, since it alone does not hold the “balance of power” in parliament. While Trudeau will be able to rely, as he has since 2019, on NDP support on crucial votes like the Liberals’ throne speech and budget, he also has the option of securing a majority by partnering with the BQ. And when the “national interest” of the ruling class demands it, as in ramming through last April’s law criminalizing the Port of Montreal longshore workers’ strike, the Liberals can and will join forces with the Tories.

These variable alliances are not merely the product of the arithmetic in a minority parliament. They arise from the interchangeable character of the official parties, which are all right-wing tools of the corporate elite and imperialism. This political reality was acknowledged in the days prior to the election by Bank of Nova Scotia economist Rebekah Young, who told Bloomberg, “The Liberals, Conservatives, and NDP are relatively aligned on most issues so we aren’t flagging big concerns on policy difference.”

The virtually unchanged distribution of seats in parliament conceals the fact that the election outcome amounts to a vote of no confidence in the entire political establishment. The initial illusions in the “progressive” character of Trudeau and the Liberals in 2015, which were and continue to be assiduously promoted by the unions and New Democrats, have largely evaporated. The Conservatives are justly reviled among wide layers of working people as the representative of ruthless austerity, religious bigotry, and reaction. As for the NDP, its deceitful attempt to repackage itself as a fighting force against the “super-rich” and a “rigged economy” fell flat. None of these parties managed to generate any popular enthusiasm for their campaigns, and emerge from Monday’s vote politically weakened.

Indeed, the only party that can claim to have substantially increased its support is the far-right People’s Party of Canada (PPC) led by O’Toole’s ex-colleague in the Harper Conservative cabinet, Maxime Bernier. Although the PPC failed to win a parliamentary seat, it won over 800,000 votes and more than tripled its share of the vote from 2019 to 5.1 percent.

The PPC’s campaign was boosted by a minority faction of the ruling elite. They are intent on legitimizing and normalizing the PPC’s far-right positions, using it to push politics still further right, and to cultivate fascist forces to deploy against the working class under conditions of mounting social crisis. Thus long-time *Globe and Mail* columnist John Ibbotson, in a reference to forces like the neo-Nazi AfD in Germany, Italy’s Fratelli d’Italia, and France’s Rassemblement National, argued last week that Bernier and other PPC candidates should be elected to parliament, since “[i]n other countries, populist right-wing parties are prominently represented in legislatures.”

Despite its failure to pick up a single seat, the growing PPC presence in official politics must serve as a warning as to the type of forces the bourgeoisie will increasingly turn to in order to enforce its class war agenda if the working class fails to intervene with its own independent political program to resolve the health and social crisis at the expense of big business. This has been the experience in other major capitalist countries, above all the United States, where Trump sought to lead a fascist coup to hold onto power in January and continues to build a far-right, extra-parliamentary movement.

The incoming Trudeau government will not be a mere continuation of the previous one. The ruling elite has made clear during the campaign that it wants an end to pandemic-related social support, the ratcheting up of austerity, and for the government to focus on a “growth agenda,” i.e., increasing profits. The corporations and banks are demanding a wave of deregulation, attacks on worker rights, and further tax exemptions and subsidies for big business to make Canadian capitalism “globally competitive.” At the same time, the military-security establishment is impatient to press ahead with an even more aggressive rearmament agenda, including through the “modernization” of NORAD, the joint US-Canada aerospace and maritime defense command, so it can play a more important role in Washington’s incendiary “strategic competition” with China and Russia.

Workers need their own party to oppose these reactionary class war policies. As the Socialist Equality Party wrote in its election statement, “This party must fight to politically unify working people across all racial, regional, linguistic and other artificial divisions promoted by the ruling elite by advancing a socialist and internationalist program. It must implacably reject all forms of identity politics, which express the interests of a small privileged layer of the middle class, and Canadian and Quebec nationalism, the twin ideologies of Canada’s ruling elite. That party is the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Canadian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.”



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