



CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

What Diplomats Need to Know about Canadian Elections

by Maureen Boyd and Colin Robertson
September 2019

CGAI PRIMER

WHAT DIPLOMATS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CANADIAN ELECTIONS

by Maureen Boyd, CGAI Fellow and Colin Robertson, CGAI Vice-President

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In response to increasing requests by foreign diplomats to explain our election process, we have written this primer. We are not partisans, although we consulted stakeholders from the different parties as well as experts on Canadian politics, polling and our elections in putting this piece together.



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The Mechanics of Elections

On Wednesday September 11, 2019, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau asked Governor General Julie Payette to dissolve Parliament, launching the campaign for Canada's 43rd general election to take place on Monday October 21, 2019. Since May 2007, the [Canada Elections Act](#) provides for a general election to be held on a fixed date: on the third Monday of October in the fourth calendar year following the previous general election. As the last election took place on Oct. 19, 2015, the next fixed election date for Canada's 43rd general election is **Oct. 21, 2019**. However, the act does not prevent a general election from being called at another date. Unlike the UK 'Mother of Parliaments' there is no need for a vote in parliament before it can be dissolved, prior to the four years, for an election. General elections can be called when the Governor General dissolves Parliament on the advice of the prime minister. Subsequently, the Governor in Council (i.e., the Governor General acting on the advice of cabinet) has to set the date for the election and the Prime Minister presents an Order in Council addressed to the Chief Electoral Officer requesting the issuance of writs of election. The Governor General issues a [Proclamation](#) for the issuance of writs of election. The writs are issued to the returning officers for each of the 338 constituencies. Three weeks before the election each candidate must file with the returning officer several documents, including the nomination paper.

The *Elections Modernization Act* (2018) specifies that the election period must last a minimum of 36 days and a maximum of 50 days (the 2015 election was [78 days](#)). Elections in Canada's 338 electoral districts (or constituencies) are decided by the first-past-the-post system, i.e., whoever gets the most votes wins the election, even though "most votes" rarely translates into the majority of votes.

The first-past-the-post system means that, based on previous elections, a party can win the majority of the seats in the House of Commons with approximately 38 per cent of the votes. Only two governments in recent history have won more than 50 per cent of the vote: John Diefenbaker's Progressive Conservatives in 1958 and Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservatives in 1984.

The smaller New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Green Party (the Greens) favour proportional representation, but it has not happened at either the national or provincial level. The proportional representation concept used by many European nations in its various forms has been defeated in provincial referendums in British Columbia (B.C.), Ontario and Prince Edward Island (P.E.I.).

The *Constitution Act* defines how many seats are accorded to each province. The formula is adjusted based on population after census by an independent non-partisan process, but because the Constitution guarantees provinces a minimum number of seats, there are major [discrepancies](#). For example, there are an average of 36,500 voters in each of the four constituencies in P.E.I., Canada's smallest province, while each of Alberta's 34 constituencies has 111,000 voters. The current [338](#) electoral districts break down by province as follows: Ontario 121; Quebec 78; B.C.



42; Alberta 34; Manitoba 14; Saskatchewan 14; Nova Scotia 11; New Brunswick 10; Newfoundland and Labrador 7, P.E.I. 4, Northwest Territories 1, Yukon 1 and Nunavut 1.

Unlike Australia, Canada does not have mandatory voting. Usually, voter turnout in national elections is around [60 per cent](#) of eligible voters – it was 68.5 per cent in 2015 and 61 per cent in 2011.

WRIT OF ELECTION

Deputy of the Governor General

ELIZABETH THE SECOND, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom, Canada and Her other Realms and Territories, QUEEN, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith

To
of

GREETING:

WHEREAS, by and with the advice of OUR PRIME MINISTER OF CANADA, We have ordered a PARLIAMENT TO BE HELD AT OTTAWA, on the day of next. (*Omit the foregoing preamble in case of a by-election*)

WE COMMAND YOU, that notice of the time and place of election being duly given,

YOU DO CAUSE election to be made according to law of a member to serve in the House of Commons of Canada for the said electoral district in the Province aforesaid (*in case of a by-election: in the place of.....*);

AND YOU DO CAUSE the nomination of candidates to be held on.....;

And if a poll becomes necessary, that the poll be held on

AND YOU DO CAUSE the name of such member when so elected, whether present or absent, to be certified to Our Chief Officer, as by law directed (*in case of a by-election, omit the following*) as soon as possible and not later than the day of 19.....

Witness:....., Deputy of Our Right Trusty and Well-beloved, Chancellor and Principal Companion of Our Order of Canada, Chancellor and Commander of Our Order of Military Merit upon whom We have conferred Our Canadian Forces' Decoration, GOVERNOR GENERAL AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF CANADA.

At Our City of Ottawa, on and in the year of Our Reign.

BY COMMAND,

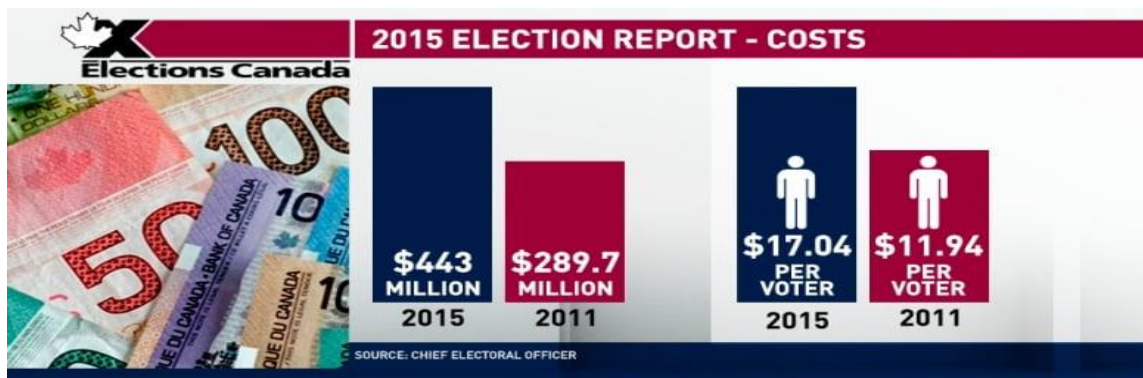
Chief Electoral Officer



Election Spending

By U.S. standards, Canadian elections are not simply shorter, but also much cheaper to administer. The price tag for the 2015 federal election was [\\$443 million](#), up 53 per cent from the \$290 million spent on the 2011 election. This increase was due to the addition of 30 new ridings and an unusually long campaign period of 78 days, almost double the length of the previous election.

The recent Election Modernization Act (2018) defines the length of federal election campaigns, restricts the amount of spending allowed in the period before a campaign, works to prevent foreign interference and introduces new rules to regulate third-party political activity. [Political parties](#) can now spend up to \$2,046,800 on advertising in the pre-writ period. With a fixed election date of October 21, that timeline starts June 30. After the writs are issued those spending limits are raised significantly. Interest groups can spend up to \$1,023,400 in the pre-election period and then \$511,700 during the election period with a maximum of \$10,234 in each constituency in the pre-election period and \$4,386 in each constituency during the election. Canadians can give up to [\\$1600](#) annually in total to all the registered associations, nomination contestants and candidates of each registered party. [Election expenses](#) for each candidate in a constituency are fixed and they vary between \$21,000 (Labrador and Nunavut) and \$114,000 (Calgary Shepherd) with the average around \$85,000. Depending on their vote, there is a degree of reimbursement from public funds.



Foreign Interference

Foreign interference in democratic elections is a reality. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), the Communications Security Establishment (CSE) and the RCMP are monitoring foreign threat activity in Canada. A [Cabinet Directive on the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol](#) sets out general directions and the principles to guide the process for informing the public during the writ period of an incident that threatens Canada's ability to have a free and fair election.



Volatile and Unpredictable

Elections in Canada are volatile and unpredictable in outcome. Unlike the U.S., where most voters are already committed, almost half of the Canadian electorate is prepared to change its mind based on the campaigns. The Conservatives have the most solid base – around 25 per cent. The Liberal base is lower, around 22 per cent, but they also have a higher potential ceiling. The NDP can count on around 13 per cent and the Greens, who won their first seat in Parliament in 2011, hold about six per cent – although this may be increasing, mostly at the expense of the NDP. The Liberals, NDP and Greens are centre/centre-left, while the NDP and the Greens potentially can coalesce around the Liberals if it looks like the Conservatives are going to win.

CHANGES IN SUPPORT WITH ABOUT 3 MONTHS TO GO

	CON	LIB	NDP
2004	+2.1	-0.4	-1.3
2006	+8.1	-5.5	+0.1
2008	+4.3	-4.3	+2.8
2011	+3.1	-8.0	+14.4
2015	+1.1	+13.5	-13.1

Difference between election result and average of polls taken 11-15 weeks from election day

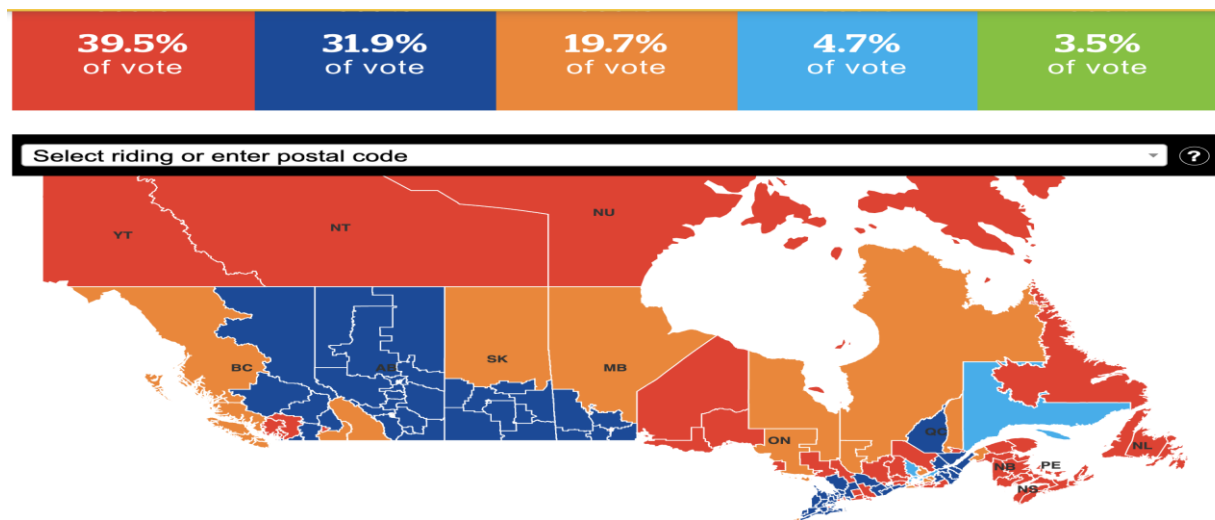
The separatist Bloc Québécois was founded in 1991 following the failed Meech Lake constitutional arrangements. For seven straight federal elections from 1993 to 2011, the Bloc was the largest party from Quebec, and either the second or third largest party in the House of Commons. The Bloc was reduced to four seats in 2011 and has failed to achieve official party status since.

Elections are usually fought on who can best lead the country to prosperity. Foreign policy was an issue in the 1988 election around freer trade with the U.S., with Mulroney's pro-free trade Progressive Conservatives winning re-election. In contrast, then-Liberal leader Stéphane Dion ran on climate and carbon pricing – the [“Green Shift”](#) – in 2008, but lost.

The 2015 election was different. Two-thirds of Canadians going to the polls were comfortable with the country's direction and optimistic about the economy, but two-thirds also wanted change. As a result, Justin Trudeau, who went into the election in third place, captured the zeitgeist. However, the fact that Stephen Harper, after a decade in office, could still win 31.9 per cent of the vote to 39.5 per cent for the Liberals and 19.7 per cent for the NDP is a testament to the strength of the Conservatives' base.



After dumping its leader and initial front-runner Thomas Mulcair following the 2015 election, the NDP moved left by selecting Jagmeet Singh, a former Ontario legislator who now represents a B.C. riding. He has not impressed either his caucus or the public so far. As a result, the NDP risks losing its third place to the Green Party led by Elizabeth May, whose relentless cheeriness for the Green cause makes her an appealingly authentic personality.



Election 2015 results summary

Voters' Considerations in 2019

Going into the election, voters will consider:

Referendum on leadership, i.e., who do they want to spend the next few years listening to and watching on their screens?

Consciously or unconsciously, most voters, especially the large group who are still making up their minds, assess the party leaders, and more so the incumbent. A prime minister may be unpopular, but when compared to the alternative, voters are inclined to go with the “devil they know”, unless they strongly want change. Therefore, polling that assesses voters’ desire for change and voter satisfaction with the direction of the country is important.

Management of the economy, i.e., who can keep the country prosperous or at least out of a recession?

Deficits are part of the equation: since 1993, when the International Monetary Fund (IMF) almost had to intervene to prop up the economy, Canadians have been chary of running deficits. This attitude seems to be changing, as long as voters believe the investments that a deficit is funding to be worthwhile – e.g., public infrastructure (roads, subways, airports, sewers), health care and education.



Response to world events

Among the electorate, there is a growing sense that the world is a messier and meaner place, and concerns such as climate change and the large-scale movement of peoples require global action.

The U.S.

The U.S.'s 2020 presidential election campaign is under way, and it is a popular spectator sport for the Canadian media and political cognoscenti. Some issues such as climate and abortion inevitably seep across the border. Most Canadians detest Donald Trump, and to many Canadians, Trudeau continues to be an attractive leader, compared to what is happening in the U.S.

Influencers

Support – real or perceived – from influencers, who include financial and industrial elite, media, premiers, mayors and the thinking class does have an impact on the election. And this is despite the current populist times during which elites are increasingly derided and deference has given way to defiance. Strict election spending laws also mean that money is not a deciding factor in elections, unlike in the U.S.

Public Mood

It is an axiom that governments defeat themselves, particularly when there is an overwhelming desire for change. Leaders who misgauge the country's mood risk alienation from their party and the public.

The Debates

Debates play a role. We saw this with Mulroney's 1984 line: "You had an option, sir", on Liberal John Turner's appointment of Liberal warhorses to patronage posts. We also saw it when Jack Layton mocked then-Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff's attendance record in 2011.

The Trudeau government has established a Debates Commission in order to ensure debates are a "predictable, reliable and stable element(s) of future election campaigns". This has created a new partnership of news organizations that will produce [two leaders' debates](#) on Monday, October 7 (English) and Thursday, October 10 (French) broadcast from the Museum of Canadian History in Gatineau. They will be free to broadcast, stream or share, as the goal is to get the debate out to as many people as possible. The new group includes the TV broadcasters CBC News/Radio-Canada, Global and CTV; the newspapers *Toronto Star*, *Le Devoir* and the magazine *L'actualité*; and the online outlets *La Presse*, *HuffPost Canada* and *HuffPost Québec*.

The new media partnership will determine the themes and questions of the official debates. Parties must meet at least two of three criteria for their leaders to participate in the debates: the party must have at least one Member of Parliament (MP) who was elected under the party banner; it must have candidates in at least 90 per cent of ridings; and it must have obtained at least four per cent of the vote in the previous election or have a "legitimate chance" of winning seats. Green



Party Leader May and Bloc Québécois Leader Yves-François Blanchet will likely meet the first two criteria and be allowed to participate. It seems unlikely that People's Party (PPC) Leader Maxime Bernier will meet the standard of having a "legitimate chance" of winning seats to fulfil the requirements for the debate.

There will be other debates:

- September 12 in Toronto: Maclean's will host Andrew Scheer, Elizabeth May and Jagmeet Singh
- October 1 in Toronto: The [Munk Debates](#) will focus on foreign policy with Andrew Scheer, Jagmeet Singh and Elizabeth May but Justin Trudeau has declined to participate.
- October 2 in Montreal: [TVA](#) will host leaders but for now without Elizabeth May and Maxime Bernier).

Turnout

Voting is not compulsory so turnout is critical. Canadians abroad can vote as can those in jail. Increasingly, parties are encouraging their supporters to take advantage of advance polling. The Conservatives are generally acknowledged to be best at getting out their vote. Voter turnout is usually around 60 per cent although it was 68 per cent in the 2015 election, a tribute to Trudeau and the enthusiasm he generated. It likely made the difference in the Liberals securing a majority. Will there be the same enthusiasm for any leader this election?

The Issues

The attention is usually focused on the economy, but there are regionally specific issues – like [gun control](#) in Toronto. Other concerns, such as the environment, can assume national importance as well.

Project, But Be Careful about Predicting

There will be lots of polling during the election campaign. Take it all with a grain of salt. Voters do shift. There are now many different polling firms, each using a different methodology; yet some media report them as if they are equal in terms of quality, when they are clearly not. So, when asked for a forecast, you can project based on current polling. But to predict or confidently forecast is always treacherous.

Pay particular attention to polls:

- After Labour Day (the first Monday in September) for a sense of where the electorate is at. This is a good baseline of initial voter sentiment. Most will have paid no attention during the summer but this will give you a sense of where their leanings are going into the campaign.



- After Thanksgiving (the second Monday in October) as families and friends will have gathered over the weekend and there will likely be some discussion of the election. This will give you a sense of how opinions are developing as the campaign heads into the final stretch. The most influential voices are families and friends – people you trust – and this set of polls will give you a sense of how voters are assessing the now lively campaign.
- The weekend before the election: the last polls before the Monday election. Look for a trend – is one party moving ahead? Voters can still change their minds (and a significant minority do).

The national polls are interesting and may indicate a trend but they do not usually accurately reflect what is happening regionally. Canada is a country of regions: B.C.; the Prairie Provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba; Ontario; Quebec; the Atlantic Provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, P.E.I. and Newfoundland and Labrador; and the North, consisting of Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut.

There are national issues, but there are also important local and regional issues. There are also splits between rural and urban/suburban voters on a range of issues. Regions have their own breakdowns: the Toronto suburbs – also known as the 905 after their area code; Quebec-outside-Montreal (meaning Quebec usually divides between Montreal and the rest); and B.C.'s Lower Mainland.

Canadians are also quite ready to vote one way provincially and then balance it by voting for a different party federally. The Trudeau Liberals will be using [unpopular](#) Ontario Conservative Premier Doug Ford as a surrogate for what an Andrew Scheer government would do if elected.

When Trudeau took office after the Liberals had spent a decade in the wilderness, most provincial governments were Liberal. Today, the provinces are mostly led by conservative-leaning governments. The Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) is centre-right. The Liberals govern provincially in Nova Scotia and lead a minority government in Newfoundland and Labrador. The NDP, supported by the Greens, governs in our third largest province, B.C., and this has had nation-wide implications for energy and environmental policy discussions.

While provincial and federal parties may bear the same name, they are distinct and different entities. It would be wrong to assume close support and collaboration during elections, although this time the Tory premiers in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and New Brunswick will either actively campaign or tacitly support their federal counterparts.

Only four times since Confederation (1867) has a government been defeated after one term: Joe Clark in 1980; R.B. Bennett in 1935 after five years of the Depression; the Union government in 1921 after the end of the First World War; and Alexander Mackenzie in 1878 by Sir John A. Macdonald.



Even more interesting, the only Liberal defeated after one term was Alexander Mackenzie, who won in 1873 thanks to the Pacific Scandal.¹ In recent times, majority governments have gone to minorities in three instances: Diefenbaker in 1962, Pierre Trudeau in 1972 and Paul Martin (who succeeded Jean Chrétien) in 2004.

The 2019 Election



This election will be a nasty affair with the focus on the Justin Trudeau-led Liberals and the Andrew Scheer-led Conservatives. The NDP under Jagmeet Singh is struggling to stay alive, while May's Greens want to achieve official party status ([12 members](#) in the House of Commons). Maxime Bernier's People's Party is not currently seen as viable.

The Liberals are trying to portray Mr. Scheer as the protégé of former prime minister Stephen Harper, who would govern like the unpopular Doug Ford in Ontario. The Liberals say 'Stay the Course' and continue to trust their management of the economy on behalf of the middle class. The Conservatives want to portray Mr. Trudeau as exotic and out of touch with mainstream Canadian values.

Positioning for the Monday, Oct. 21 election started early. [Commercials](#) during the Toronto Raptors' National Basketball Association finals in June aired Conservative messages arguing that Trudeau is incompetent. The Tories and their provincial allies condemn the Trudeau government's carbon tax. [Saskatchewan](#), [Alberta](#), [Manitoba](#) and [Ontario](#) have launched court challenges to have it repealed. The federal court in Ontario [ruled](#) against Premier Ford in June saying the federal government's carbon pricing scheme is constitutionally sound and is designed to combat climate change.

The Liberals believe they are strong on the environment and the economy while the Tories will put more emphasis on law and order, which includes increasing regulations on immigration. The NDP will run on extending social benefits, e.g., pharmacare, while the Greens will focus on



¹ Political scandal involving allegations that the prime minister of the time, Sir John A. Macdonald, and members of his government had accepted election funds from Sir Hugh Allan in exchange for the contract to build the Canadian Pacific Railway. The scandal led to Macdonald's resignation in 1873. See <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/pacific-scandal>

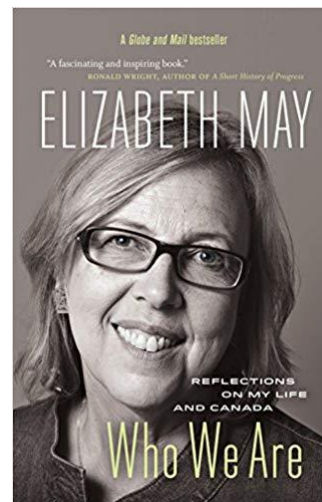


climate change. The Liberals will push climate change very hard to try to drive Green and NDP backers of government action on climate change to the Liberals, in order to prevent a Conservative government.

In a country of regions, there will be regional issues – language and culture in Quebec; economic support in the Atlantic; pipelines in B.C.; resource policy in the Prairies. Climate may become an overriding national issue along with who is best able to lead Canada.



As a new prime minister in 2015, Trudeau promised “sunny ways”, and he started governing with broad support. His cabinet was half women (“it’s 2015”, as he told reporters) and it looked like the contemporary face of Canada in its diversity. He caught international attention. In Astana, Kazakhstan shortly after his election, a clerk said: “Canadian ... ahh Trudeau ... he looks like Canada!” You could not do better for international branding, and Trudeau made use of it. One thing he did not



do was to become the anti-Trump, despite considerable pressure to do so from within his cabinet, caucus and from then-vice-president [Joe Biden](#). Instead, he has managed the relationship with the U.S. president as well as possible, given Trump’s unpredictability and provocations, especially [after](#) the Charlevoix G7 summit.

Until earlier this year, polls indicated that Trudeau would easily win a second term. But the past six months have seen his popularity plummet from self-inflicted, internecine party squabbles that have cost him two cabinet ministers (damaging his feminist and Indigenous credentials), his principal secretary and alter ego, and the head of the public service.

However, Trudeau is a formidable campaigner. Some would argue that he has never stopped campaigning since his election. In the 2015 election, about 11 million votes were cast for centre-left parties and only about six million for those on the right. Turnout, particularly among young people, and the Liberals’ ability to scare the voters into thinking the Conservatives might win, are potentially key determinants of the outcome.

To get a sense of Trudeau’s 2015 vision, read first the [throne speech](#) and then the [mandate letters](#) that spell out in detail the deliverables for each minister. He has made climate, reconciliation with



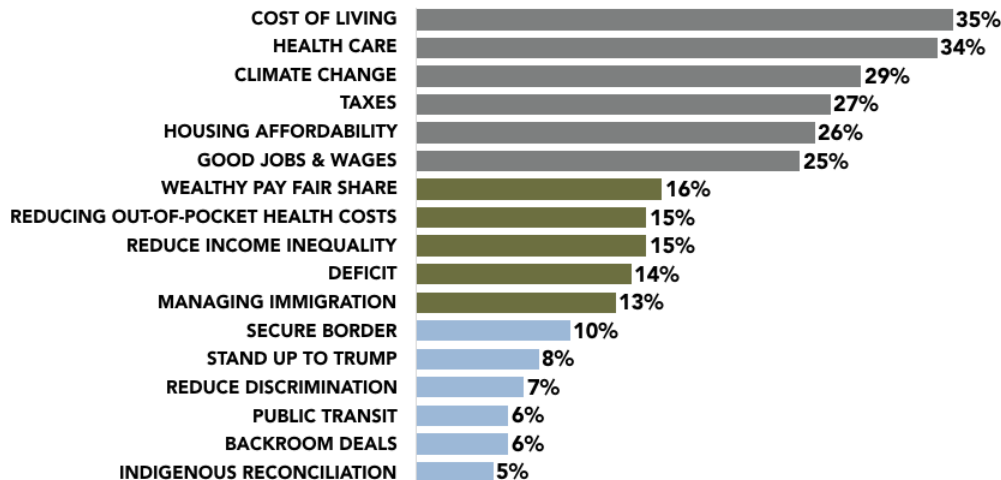


Indigenous peoples, women's empowerment and gender equality his signature issues at home and abroad.

Scheer has given a series of policy speeches outlining his [vision](#) on foreign policy, the economy, immigration and the environment.

A recent ABACUS survey assessed voters' top issues as follows:

TOP 3 ISSUES IMPACTING YOUR VOTE



Thinking to the next election, which THREE issues are most likely to impact how you will vote?

ABACUS DATA

Foreign Policy

On foreign policy, watch Trudeau's [Montreal speech](#) (August 2019). While marred by partisan shots at the Conservatives, it is the most thorough self-examination of his foreign policy as prime minister. Unabashedly internationalist, he re-commits to multilateralism – UN, NATO, G7, G20 – but acknowledges that we operate in a “more unpredictable and unstable world, where some have chosen to step away from the mantle of global leadership, even as others challenge the institutions and principles that have shaped the international order.” He reaffirms the importance of the U.S.'s relationship with Canada: “To say that the U.S. is our closest ally is an understatement. Canada has long benefited from this relationship, and from American leadership in the world. We are friends and partners more than mere allies. We share more than just a border – we share culture, food, music, business. We share a rich history, and we share many of the same core values.”

Without explicitly identifying Trump, Trudeau places responsibility for the current conditions on Trump's decision to embrace America First. Trudeau points out that “protectionism is on the rise, and trade has become weaponized. Authoritarian leaders have been emboldened, leading to new forms of oppression. Calls for democratic reform, from Moscow to Caracas, are being suppressed. Crises that were once met with a firm international response are festering, becoming regional



emergencies with global implications. And all of this is making it more difficult to solve the problems that demand urgent global action. Climate change is an existential threat to humanity, with science telling us we have just over a decade to find a solution for our planet. And technological change is happening at an unprecedented rate, transcending borders, re-shaping our societies, and leaving many people more anxious than ever.”

He makes the case for “free and fair trade” pointing to the renegotiated NAFTA, CPTPP and CETA. He argues for responsible reform of the WTO. He argues that in our “more unstable world, Canada must also be prepared to both defend ourselves and step up when called upon” and points to investment in defence and security, especially sea power and new fighter jets saying “we make the greatest contribution to global stability when we match what Canada does best to what the world needs most.” He recognizes the growing power of China, “but make no mistake: we will always defend Canadians and Canadian interests. We have a long history of dealing directly and successfully with larger partners. We do not escalate, but we also don’t back down.”

Acknowledging other challenges, he says: “White supremacy, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism are an increasing scourge around the world and at home. Gender equality is backsliding. Human rights are increasingly under threat. This is the world we’re in. And so we cannot lose sight of our core values. That means being prepared to speak up, and knowing that sometimes, doing so comes at a cost. But when the courage of our convictions demands it, so be it.” Looking forward, he says: “Canada should place democracy, human rights, international law and environmental protection at the very heart of foreign policy ... As some step back from global leadership, we should work with others to mobilize international efforts, particularly by ensuring the most vulnerable and marginalized have access to the health and education they need. Canadians have found strength in diversity and benefited from openness. Financial strain should never hold Canadians back from exploring the world or building positive connections abroad ...”

Look also at Trudeau’s earlier [Davos Speech](#) on Canadian resourcefulness (January 2016) and his speech while he was still in opposition on [North American](#) relations (June 2015). Trudeau embraces multilateralism and a progressive agenda on trade and the environment. His signature themes are climate, feminism and gender equality, and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. His UN General Assembly speeches were essentially one-plate affairs addressing [migration](#) (2016), then [reconciliation](#) (2017), with climate as a side dish for both. The [Charlevoix G7 summit](#) (2018) reflected his signature issues with specific focus on issues like plastics in the ocean. He embraced the [Christchurch Call to Action](#) (May 2019) to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online.

Read also Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland’s elegant [speech](#) to the House of Commons in June 2017. Erudite in her defence of liberal internationalism, the rules-based system and robust collective security, Freeland pulled no punches. Describing the United States as the indispensable nation, she recognized that it was tired of carrying the burden. Canada and its allies had to step up to deter aggressors like Russia. The speech sparked, but Canada has yet to deliver on defence and development promises. Freeland’s speech set the stage for the release the next day of the



government's new defence policy, [Strong, Secure, Engaged](#) and its [feminist international assistance policy](#).

Despite the explicit commitment to multilateralism, Canada still falls short ([1.23 per cent of GDP](#)) of the NATO target of two per cent of GDP on defence spending. Our international development assistance of [0.26 per cent GDP](#) remains well short of the [0.7 per cent](#) endorsed by the G7.

Scheer's un-costed [foreign policy](#) promises include new jets, new submarines, ballistic missile defence and a robust cyber-command. There will be work for all of our shipyards and more attention to the Arctic. He pledges that all-party involvement will take the politics out of procurement. He gave a Churchillian defence of democracies. He would establish closer relations with India and Japan, do a reset with China, stand up to terrorists and Russian aggression, do more for Arctic security, and move our Israeli embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

The Green Party policy on [global affairs](#) is thin, but would have consequences. It proposes to withdraw from NATO and turn our military into peacekeepers and relief workers. The NDP [policies](#) are similar to those of the Greens and, like their leadership, still in development.



Speech from the Throne 2015

Forming a Government and Governing

The leader of the government, prior to the dissolution of Parliament, has the right to try to form a new government. But if they cannot or they fail to win a confidence motion when they meet the new legislature, they must tender their resignation to the Governor General or, in the case of the provinces, the Lieutenant-Governor. The vice-regal representative almost always asks the party with the most seats to form government. In the event of a minority, the vice-regal representative will usually ask the party with the most seats to meet the House and present its Speech from the Throne outlining its plans and policy priorities. The vote on the Speech from the Throne is considered a vote of confidence. If it passes, the new government will then present a budget. Past minority governments have usually lasted 18 to 24 months, based on an understanding with the third party and on a vote-to-vote basis. Coalitions are not the norm in minority situations, as they are in Europe.



Once elected, the first job of the prime minister or provincial premier is to form a cabinet. Unlike the U.S. where cabinet ministers are not members of the legislature (and must resign if they join the administration), forming a cabinet is a Canadian balancing act of geography, gender, ethnicity and ideology. However, compared to elsewhere, the principal parties are not terribly riven by ideological splits.

Cabinet ministers are relatively independent as long as they follow their mandate letters and do not cross the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). The PMO and the Privy Council Office (PCO) – the control system for the public service and government – have most of the power. Lobbyists in Canada know that it is the bureaucrats, especially the senior mandarins, who make the recommendations upon which most ministers will act. In comparison to the U.S. system where power resides in Congress, power in Canada is concentrated among the senior bureaucrats and cabinet ministers.

In recent years, there have been efforts to give more power to Parliament through, for example, the creation of the Parliamentary Budget Office to give independent assessments of financial issues, including spending.

MEMBERS' WORK

42nd Parliament, 1st Session (December 3, 2015 - Present)

333 MEMBERS
IN OFFICE

Liberal : 177 ; Conservative : 95 ; NDP : 39 ;
Bloc Québécois : 10 ; Independent : 8 ;
Green Party : 2 ; Co-operative
Commonwealth Federation : 1 ; People's
Party : 1 .

441 BILLS
PRESENTED

An idea to make a new law or change an
existing law starts out as a bill.

1379 VOTES
RECORDED

Compilation of recorded votes, where the
names of those voting for and against a
motion are registered.

4863 PETITIONS
PRESENTED

E-petitions allow you to view, sign or create
an online petition.

30 COMMITTEES
ESTABLISHED

Committees are small groups of
parliamentarians created to perform key
tasks.

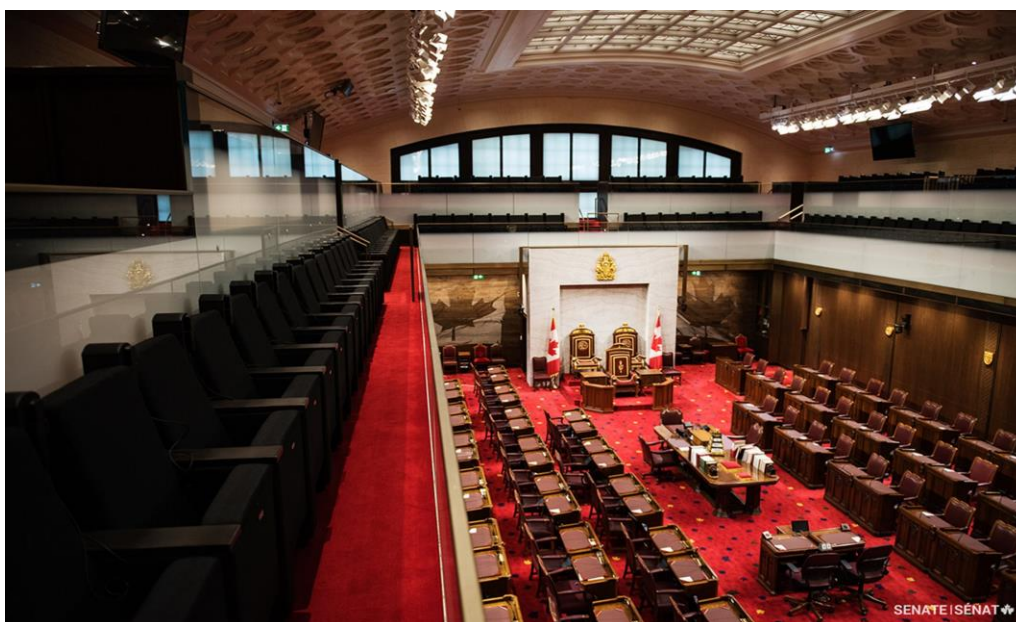
Source [House of Commons](#). There are 338 MPs but this reflects vacancies at end of session



In the House of Commons, retiring private backbench [member Bill Casey](#) described our system this way:

I do not know if Canadians know this, but this place works. It really works well. We have a government, which could be one party or another, and we have opposition parties. The opposition parties have a job to do and the government has a job to do. Between them, they keep Canada between the rails of a highway, as I like to think of it. If the government goes too far to the left and hits the guardrail, the opposition brings it back. If it goes too far to the right and hits the guardrail, it will come back. This keeps Canada on the straight and narrow, and we never vary too much. We are very fortunate to have this system.

We are also really fortunate to have this system because, as a backbencher, I know that every single day the ministers are going to be here. I can walk across the floor and talk to them if I have an urgent issue from a constituent. I actually do this. The same thing goes for opposition members. I do not know of another system on the planet that has that availability of ministers to backbenchers and other members of Parliament. It is a good system and it works.



The Senate is going through an evolution as well as a change in venue (as is the House of Commons) while Centre Bloc is renovated. Mr. Trudeau divorced himself from this unelected body and has stuck to his promise to make appointments based not on party loyalty but on the stature of the individuals recommended by an independent commission. Prior to the 2015 election, then-prime minister Harper refused to make any new Senate appointments and was considering its abolition. This means that Trudeau has now appointed half of the current 105-member Senate. Though they now sit as independents, the new senators mostly support the Trudeau government. Critics suggest that the people appointed to the Senate are actually in many



ways a lot like the Liberals – few farmers, fishermen or evangelical Christians. Most appointments tend to look like members of the Order of Canada – virtuous high-achievers – who just conveniently seem to think along the same lines as Liberals.

Is it working? The jury is still out. The unelected “virtuous” new senators do not always appreciate that, while they are the chamber of “sober second thought”, their second thoughts are not appreciated nor acted on by the elected House of Commons. Opposition Leader Scheer has said he would revert to the old system of making his own appointments.

Further Reading

On the election, look to CBC [Canada Votes](#) for a weekly breakdown of analysis and polling. All of the major media outlets will have ongoing coverage. Both the [Hill Times](#) and [iPolitics](#) will also have in-depth reporting.

On polling: Nik Nanos does a weekly running [tracking poll](#). Abacus’s David Coletto and Bruce Anderson have regular [surveys](#). Other pollsters of note include Darrell Bricker of [IPSOS](#) and Frank Graves of [EKOS](#), as well as [Mainstreet](#) and [Angus Reid](#) and, for Quebec, [Leger](#).

On contemporary politics: Read *National Post* columnist John Ivison’s *Trudeau: The Education of a Prime Minister* as well as *Promise and Peril: Justin Trudeau in Power* by the CBC’s Aaron Wherry.

Nik Nanos looks at populism in his *The Age of Voter Rage: Trump, Trudeau, Farage, Corbyn & Macron – The Tyranny of Small Numbers*. Bricker and John Ibbitson wrote in *The Big Shift: The Seismic Change in Canadian Politics, Business, and Culture and What It Means for Our Future* that Canadian politics, once dominated by the liberal Laurentian elite, is shifting to a conservative Western base. Their analysis is good, although not a convincing conclusion. Their new book, *Empty Planet*, argues that Canada will rise as global population declines.

The leaders also have autobiographical tomes: Justin Trudeau’s *Common Ground*, Jagmeet Singh’s *Love and Courage: My Story of Family, Resilience, and Overcoming the Unexpected*; and Elizabeth May’s *Who We Are: Reflections on My Life and Canada* (she has also co-authored the very readable *Global Warming for Dummies*).

For a critical look at Justin Trudeau’s foreign policy by a Liberal insider, read Jocelyn Coulon’s *Canada is Not Back: How Justin Trudeau is in Over His Head on Foreign Policy*. For a counterpart, see Doug Saunders’ very good essay in the *Globe and Mail* on Trudeau’s foreign policy: [Justin Trudeau vs. the World](#). For a view of global issues, read Stephen Harper’s *Right Here, Right Now: Politics and Leadership in the Age of Disruption*.

Terry Fallis has written a clever novel, *The Best Laid Plans*, on a Canadian election, that is informative and funny.

About the Authors

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Canadian Global Affairs Institute

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