



# RESEARCH NOTE

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## Canadian Election 2000<sup>1</sup>

### Background

On 22 October 2000 Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien called an election for 27 November, three years and five months into a five year term. The Liberals had a comfortable lead over their main challengers, the economy was healthy, the surplus was large, and the opinion polls looked good. The loss of 6 ridings would push the Government into a minority position (see table), but this seemed unlikely. Many were caught unprepared: in British Columbia, for example, various major party candidates had not yet nominated for election.<sup>2</sup>

Some suggested that Chrétien wanted to capitalise on the emotion over the death of former Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, on 28 September. He was also accused of wanting to block the leadership ambitions of his Finance Minister, Paul Martin.<sup>3</sup>

### The contestants

The Liberals, the Bloc Québécois (BQ), the Progressive Conservatives (PC) and the New Democratic Party (NDP) were all re-contesting. Former Prime Minister, Joe Clark (1979-80), had returned to the Commons in September to lead the PC. In early 2000 the Reform Party had been re-born as the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance (CA), with the former Alberta Finance Minister, Stockwell Day, becoming leader in July. He was elected to the House of Commons in September, becoming Leader of the Opposition.

It was essential that the Government held most of its 101 Ontario ridings (of 103). In case the Alliance broke through here, it was also necessary for the Liberals to regain the bulk of the Atlantic ridings lost in 1997. To

	1997 Election	At Dissolution
<b>Lib</b>	155 (38.4 per cent)	157
<b>CA</b>	60 (12.4 per cent)	58
<b>BQ</b>	44 (10.7 per cent)	44
<b>NDP</b>	21 (11.0 per cent)	20
<b>PC</b>	20 (18.9 per cent)	18
<b>Ind</b>	1 (1.6 per cent)	5

that end, Newfoundland Premier, Brian Tobin, resigned in mid-October to become Industry Minister and hopefully attract Atlantic Canada voters.

The Alliance could not win without a major breakthrough in Ontario, and Day spent much campaign time introducing himself to eastern voters. The Alliance spoke of winning at least 40 Ontario ridings.

Of the other three parties, the Bloc seemed still to be healthy enough to dominate Quebec, especially as the party raised the sovereignty issue very firmly in the last days of the campaign. By contrast, polls suggested that the PC and the NDP would be struggling to win the 12 ridings that would give each formal party status in the Commons. The once-dominant PC, in power under Brian Mulroney between 1984 and 1993, spent most of its efforts in seeking to cling on to its few Atlantic Canada ridings.

### The campaign

From the outset Chrétien argued that the campaign was a two-horse race between his party and the Alliance, and he largely ignored the other parties. In fact, both major parties pointed out that a vote for a smaller party was a 'wasted' vote under the first-past-the-post system in use.

The Liberals portrayed the Alliance as a sinister, right-wing extremist group, reminding voters of Day's

radical policies, such as a flat-rate income tax, pursued when he served in Alberta. In addition, Day was said to have a 'hidden agenda' to withdraw, or seriously weaken, many liberal social policies, including abortion rights. Many changes would be achieved through citizen initiated referenda which the Alliance had promised to introduce. Day's creationist beliefs were mocked and held up as symptomatic of his extreme views. So effective was the criticism, that an Alliance candidate was stripped of party endorsement for criticising Asian immigration.<sup>4</sup> Essentially the election had the one major issue: whether or not voters could take a chance with the Alliance.

As the campaign developed, the Liberal opinion poll lead was reduced, possibly because of the manner in which the election also became a plebiscite on the standing of the Prime Minister. Chrétien had to withstand attacks upon his alleged arrogance, his government's methods in distributing federal funds to certain regions, and his representation of a building firm located in his riding in its efforts to gain a bank loan. There were also claims that the 66-year-old would not see out a new term.

Overall, the campaign vitriol produced much criticism about the generally low standard of argument. Observers were particularly critical about the two television debates, when most of the time was spent with the leaders attempting to shout each other down. All of which may have added to the poll finding that one voter in five was said to have been still undecided on the eve of voting.<sup>5</sup>

To a large degree, in fact, serious policy discussion was left to the NDP alone, as the major players belaboured each other. Even the debate that broke out over the health system focussed on Liberal claims that the Alliance was seeking to wreck it by introducing a 'two-tier' system to undermine the Canada Health Act. Chrétien claimed Day wanted to introduce a US-style system, and promised that he would fight to ensure that Canada did not become a 'carbon copy' of the USA.<sup>6</sup>

## The result

	Ridings	Vote	
Lib	172	40.8	(+2.3)
CA	66	25.5	(+6.1)
BQ	38	10.7	(0)
NDP	13	8.5	(-2.5)
PC	12	12.2	(-6.6)
Other	–	2.3	(+0.7)

- Jean Chrétien follows Sir John A. Macdonald and Sir Wilfred Laurier, as the third Liberal Prime Minister to win three majority governments in a row. Only Chrétien managed to increase his majority in the third contest
- the Liberals maintained their domination of Ontario, winning 100 ridings
- the Liberals also won back most of the 20 Atlantic ridings that were lost in 1997
- some believed the Alliance had not had long enough to mount a winning campaign.<sup>7</sup> However,

its failure to win ridings east of Manitoba (only 23.6 per cent and two ridings in Ontario) suggests a long-term problem in winning votes in the east.

- in Quebec the Bloc won 38 ridings, a loss of 7. The Liberals' victory in 36 ridings was a remarkable result following the near-defeat in the sovereignty referendum of 1995, and was their best since 1980
- the PC maintained their official status in the Parliament, but as little more than an Atlantic Canada rump, and
- the NDP also maintained official parliamentary status, though some observers wondered if a new party of the left ought to be formed and the NDP given its last rites.<sup>8</sup>

## The outcome

The main factors in this election may have been negative. Polls indicated a high level of public antagonism to the Government, but they also showed that the 'hidden agenda' attack on the Alliance had hit home.<sup>9</sup> The large number of undecided voters, combined with the lowest turnout (62.8 per cent) for 75 years, suggests a lot of voter uncertainty. While many voters may have been motivated by strong doubts over the Alliance, and thus voted Liberal, a great many chose to stay away, suggesting rejection of all parties by a substantial number. The Chrétien victory is probably not the ringing endorsement that the Prime Minister has claimed for it.

## A divided nation

Canadian politics is heavily regionalised, and the 2000 election confirmed the extent of this. The *Ottawa Citizen* lamented the continuing existence of regional estrangement, which it called 'the ever-present subtext of Canadian politics'.<sup>10</sup> While the Liberals won nearly half the vote east of the Manitoba-Ontario border, they could only gain 25 per cent west of that line. The Alliance dominated in the west, yet scored barely 15 per cent on

	East	West
<b>Lib</b>	47.3 (156)	25.2 (17)
<b>CA</b>	15.3 (2)	49.9 (64)

the other side of the country: it 'crashed against the Manitoba border', as Reform had done in 1997.<sup>11</sup> Such divisions are unlikely to disappear from Canadian society in the short-term.

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1. All figures from Elections Canada: [www.elections.ca](http://www.elections.ca).
2. *Vancouver Sun*, 24 October 2000.
3. *Toronto Star*, 23, 26 October 2000.
4. *Globe and Mail*, 18 November 2000.
5. *Montreal Gazette*, 28 November 2000.
6. *Toronto Star*, 26 October 2000.
7. *Toronto Star*, 28 November 2000.
8. *Ottawa Citizen*, 28 November 2000.
9. *Globe and Mail*, 13 November 2000.
10. *ibid.*
11. *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*, 28 November 2000.