

By Nigel Walker

29 September 2021

Canada: 2021 general election



Summary

- 1 Background
- 2 2021 election
- 3 Looking ahead

Image Credits

[Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau - Wikimedia Commons page](#) by [Justin Trudeau - Prime Minister of Canada - YouTube](#). Licensed by Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike Attribution 3.0 Unported ([CC BY 3.0](#)) / image cropped.

Disclaimer

The Commons Library does not intend the information in our research publications and briefings to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. We have published it to support the work of MPs. You should not rely upon it as legal or professional advice, or as a substitute for it. We do not accept any liability whatsoever for any errors, omissions or misstatements contained herein. You should consult a suitably qualified professional if you require specific advice or information. Read our briefing '[Legal help: where to go and how to pay](#)' for further information about sources of legal advice and help. This information is provided subject to the conditions of the Open Parliament Licence.

Feedback

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Please note that authors are not always able to engage in discussions with members of the public who express opinions about the content of our research, although we will carefully consider and correct any factual errors.

You can read our feedback and complaints policy and our editorial policy at commonslibrary.parliament.uk. If you have general questions about the work of the House of Commons email hcenquiries@parliament.uk.

Contents

Summary	4
1 Background	5
2 2021 election	7
2.1 Political parties	7
Bloc Québécois	7
Conservative	8
Liberal	8
NDP-New Democratic Party	9
2.2 Candidates	10
Erin O’Toole	10
Justin Trudeau	10
2.3 Election campaign	11
2.4 Election results	12
3 Looking ahead	13

Summary

On 15 August 2021, Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called a snap general election – to be held on 20 September – to elect the 338 Members of the Canadian House of Commons.

24 political parties contested the elections, although, as with previous elections, only the Conservatives or Liberals were likely to form a government.

The election campaign took place during Canada's fourth wave of the Covid-19 pandemic and this issue dominated much of the campaign. The two leading parties offered different approaches to tackling the health crisis and rebuilding the economy.

The chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in the first half of the campaign helped buoy the opposition Conservative party in the opinion polls, but the Liberals gained momentum in the latter stages as pandemic recovery plans became the focus and Trudeau was able to highlight his government's success in rolling out the vaccine.

Election results published by Elections Canada show the Liberal Party secured the most seats in the House of Commons – despite not winning the popular vote – taking 159 seats, with the Conservatives on 119.

The results were almost identical to those of the 2019 election and Justin Trudeau will serve a third term as Prime Minister, leading a minority government.

1 Background

Canada is federal parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy based on the British or “Westminster” tradition. Canada’s head of state is the UK’s reigning monarch – currently HM Queen Elizabeth II – known locally as the king or queen of Canada. Within Canada, HM the Queen is represented by the Governor-General.

Canada’s Parliament is bicameral: the Senate has 105 seats and there are 338 members of the House of Commons.

The Senate’s members are appointed on a provincial basis by the Governor-General, on the advice of the Prime Minister, and they may hold office until reaching the age of 75.

The House of Commons’ members are directly elected via the first-past-the-post system, under which the country is divided into constituencies (known in Canada as ridings) and the candidate securing the most votes in each constituency is declared the winner.

There are two main political parties in Canada: the centre-right Conservatives and the centre-left Liberals. Between them, they have formed all of Canada’s national governments.¹

By convention, the leader of the political party that gains the most seats is appointed Prime Minister by the Governor-General and asked to form a Government.

Minority government are not unusual for Canada: indeed, nearly half of the country’s elections since 1945 have resulted in hung parliaments, and coalitions have traditionally been eschewed.

Such minority governments have typically relied on support from opposition parties on an ad hoc basis – rather than a formal confidence and supply arrangement – which perpetually places government stability at the whim of opposition parties, and the threat of a vote of no confidence if their demands are not met.

Consequently, Canada is known for holding snap elections, with the average parliament fulfilling less than two-thirds of its permissible term.²

¹ [Canada: Government and society](#), Britannica.com [accessed 23 September 2021]

² [First Past the Post has failed to give the most popular Canadian party the most seats](#), Electoral Reform Society, 22 September 2021

Canada's constitution states that elections must be held at least once every five years. All Canadian citizens aged 18 or above are eligible to vote; this includes Canadians living abroad, who can vote via absentee ballots at overseas embassies and consulates, and even Canadians in prison.³

Incumbent Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called a snap election on 15 August 2021, after meeting with Governor-General Mary Simon to request she dissolve parliament – a request she approved.⁴

Election day was set for 20 September, just five weeks after the election was called. This is the shortest election period allowed under Canadian law.

³ [Elections in Canada](#), The Canada Guide [accessed 23 September 2021]

⁴ [Trudeau calls for snap election in hopes of winning back voters](#), the Guardian, 15 August 2021

2 2021 election

2.1 Political parties

Despite Canada being governed by just two political parties throughout its history, a total of 24 parties contested the 2021 election.

The parties listed in this section are those that have regularly won seats in the House of Commons. They are listed alphabetically.

Bloc Québécois

Bloc Québécois is a regional party in Canada that campaigns for the independence of predominantly French-speaking province of Quebec.

The party was formed in February 1991 by Lucien Bouchard – a Progressive Conservative minister and Canada’s former Ambassador to France – and eight other Canadian MPs who had left their parties soon after the defeat of the Meech Lake Accord.⁵

The Meech Lake Accord was a series of proposed amendments to the Canadian constitution, which would have formally recognised Quebec as a distinct society and given it veto power over most constitutional changes.⁶

Yves-Francois Blanchet was elected leader of the Bloc Québécois party in January 2019.

On 22 August 2021 the party unveiled its electoral platform, setting out a vision based on 30 measures that included plans to increase health funding and a “green equalisation” programme to reward provinces that effectively fight against climate change.⁷

Further campaign pledges in the 17-page manifesto⁸ centred on the party’s plans to advance Quebec’s identity.

⁵ [Bloc Quebecois](#), BBC Monitoring – Canada, 23 October 2019

⁶ [Bloc Québécois](#), Britannica.com [accessed 24 September 2021]

⁷ [The Bloc Québécois unveils its electoral platform, stressing Quebec identity, environment](#), CBC News, 23 August 2021

⁸ [Bloc Québécois: Plateforme Politique Bloc 2021](#), Bloc Québécois, 22 August 2021

Conservative

The centre-right Conservative Party of Canada was formed on 7 December 2003 by the merger of the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservative Party.⁹

This followed a decade in which support for the Progressive Conservatives declined and the Reform Party (later the Canadian Alliance) was unable to expand its national support beyond its base in western Canada. With the Liberals securing a third successive election victory in 2000, support for establishing a united conservative party increased.¹⁰

The Conservatives won nearly 30 per cent of the vote in their first election, in 2004, securing 99 seats in the House of Commons. At the next election, in January 2006, the Conservatives were elected to lead a minority government, with party leader Stephen Harper appointed Prime Minister. Harper's government remained in power until the October 2015 election, when Justin Trudeau's Liberal Party won a majority.

On 24 August 2020 Erin O'Toole, former Minister of Veterans Affairs, was elected leader of the Conservatives.

On 16 August 2021, the day after the 2021 election was called, O'Toole unveiled the party's 160-page manifesto¹¹.

The manifesto focused on Canada's economy and the party's plans to recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with pledges to invest in jobs and plans to protect Canadians' health.

The document called for an immediate public inquiry into "every aspect" of the Canadian Government's response to the pandemic, with all lessons learned being "publicly aired" and adopted into future pandemic prevention measures.

Liberal

The centre-left Liberal Party of Canada has been one of the two major parties in the country since the establishment of the Dominion of Canada in 1867, and has traditionally been described as a "brokerage" party in recognition of its ability to appeal to a range of people divided by region, language, ethnicity and social class.¹²

Several Liberal leaders have led governments, including the current Prime Minister's father – Pierre Trudeau – who, except for a brief period in 1979-80 was in office from April 1968 to June 1984.

⁹ [Conservative Party of Canada](#), BBC Monitoring – Canada, 27 August 2020

¹⁰ [Conservative Party of Canada](#), Britannica.com [accessed 24 September 2021]

¹¹ [Canada's Recovery Plan](#), Conservative Party of Canada, 16 August 2021

¹² [Liberal Party of Canada](#), Britannica.com [accessed 24 September 2021]

Trudeau's eldest son, Justin, was elected Liberal Party leader on 14 April 2013 and, in the subsequent general election on 19 October 2015, won a comfortable majority and was appointed Prime Minister.

Justin Trudeau was re-elected in 2019, leading a minority government, and stood for a third consecutive term in the 2021 election.

The Liberals published their election manifesto on 1 September 2021¹³, promising to spend \$78 billion in new money during the five-year term in office.

Further pledges included commitments to fight climate change, plans to provide better health care for all Canadians, and a vow to build more homes.

When launching the party's manifesto, Trudeau said: "This is the plan that is going to bring Canadians forward to end this pandemic, to invest in growth, as we fight climate change and create jobs."¹⁴

NDP-New Democratic Party

The progressive New Democratic Party (NDP) was founded in 1961, after Canada's labour groups united in the Canadian Labour Congress to form and support the party.¹⁵

The NDP enjoyed scattered success until the 2000s, when the party gained extra seats in the House of Commons.

Then, in the 2011 general election, the NDP beat the Liberals to become the official opposition party, taking over 30 per cent of the vote.

The party fell back to third place in the 2015 election.

On 1 October 2017 Jagmeet Singh was elected the new leader of the NDP.

On 12 August 2021, ahead of the election being called, the NDP published its 115-page manifesto¹⁶.

The NDP's manifesto included several pledges on housing, commitments on universal healthcare and dental care, lower mobile phone and internet costs, and a \$10-a-day promise for childcare.¹⁷

¹³ [Forward. For Everyone](#), Liberal Party of Canada, 1 September 2021

¹⁴ [Liberal election platform vows \\$78B in new spending, no plans to balance budget](#), Global News, 1 September 2021

¹⁵ [New Democratic Party of Canada](#), Britannica.com [accessed 24 September 2021]

¹⁶ [Ready for Better: New Democrats' commitments to you](#), New Democratic Party of Canada, 12 August 2021

¹⁷ [NDP releases party platform before possible election call](#), iPolitics Canada, 12 August 2021

2.2

Candidates

With only the Conservative and Liberal parties forming governments since the Dominion of Canada was founded in 1867, the party's leaders were the only likely candidates for Prime Minister. Opinion polls leading up to election day supported this¹⁸.

The two candidates, in alphabetical order, were Erin O'Toole and Justin Trudeau.

Erin O'Toole

Erin O'Toole is married with two children. He graduated from the Royal Military College of Canada in 1995 and was commissioned as an officer in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). Later, in 2003, he graduated in Law from Dalhousie University.¹⁹

O'Toole was first elected to the House of Commons in November 2012, in a by-election, and continues to represent the constituency (riding) of Durham, Ontario.

On 24 August 2020 he was appointed leader of the Conservative Party of Canada.

Justin Trudeau

Justin Trudeau was born on 25 December 1971 in Ottawa, Ontario and is the eldest son of former Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau.

He is married with three children and graduated with a BA in Literature from McGill University in 1994. He then studied at the University of British Columbia, graduating in 1998 with a Bachelor of Education degree, before studying Engineering at the University of Montreal from 2002-2004.²⁰

Before entering politics, Trudeau was a high school teacher for five years.

He was first elected to the House of Commons (for the Papineau constituency) in the 2008 election. Five years later, on 14 April 2013, Trudeau won the leadership of the Liberal Party of Canada.

In the subsequent election that took place on 19 October 2015, the Liberals won a majority – ending 10 years of Conservative government – and Trudeau was appointed Prime Minister.

¹⁸ [Poll Tracker](#), CBC News, 19 September 2021

¹⁹ [Erin O'Toole](#), BBC Monitoring – Canada, 22 September 2020

²⁰ [Justin Pierre James Trudeau](#), BBC Monitoring – Canada, 21 September 2021

His Cabinet became the first in Canadian history to have an equal number of male and female ministers. The Cabinet included two ministers with disabilities, two aboriginal ministers and Canada's first Muslim minister. Trudeau described his Cabinet as one "that looks like Canada".²¹

The Liberal Party won the next election in 2019, taking fewer seats and forming a minority government.

On 15 August 2021 Trudeau announced a snap election would be held on 20 September 2021, just halfway through the current term of office.

He had hoped to capitalise on his record on handling the Covid-19 pandemic and to regain the majority he lost in the 2019 election, when ethics scandals and photographs of him in blackface damaged his liberal image.²² However, many observers thought calling a snap election was an unwise gamble.²³

2.3

Election campaign

The five-week election campaign took place during Canada's fourth wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, with many Canadians expressing dismay at the timing of the election.²⁴

Prime Minister Trudeau said he needed a fresh mandate to finish tackling the pandemic and to implement his recovery plan. However, his opponents claimed the election was a selfish power grab.²⁵

In the early weeks of the campaign Trudeau struggled to convince the public that an early election was necessary,²⁶ as his support waned and his Conservative rivals were ahead in the opinion polls.²⁷

The withdrawal from Afghanistan overshadowed the first half of the election campaign, with Trudeau facing criticism for not acting quickly enough to get Canadian citizens and allies out of Afghanistan.²⁸

The Conservative Party's early lead was buoyed by the release of its detailed policy platform the day after the election was called. The Liberals' manifesto was not published until two weeks later.

²¹ Ibid.

²² [Canadian election gamble by Justin Trudeau backfires as Liberal Party's lead evaporates](#), The Times, 26 August 2021

²³ [Canada election 2021: full results](#), the Guardian, 21 September 2021

²⁴ [Canadians didn't ask for an election. But like the pandemic, here it is](#), The Globe and Mail, 15 August 2021

²⁵ [Canadian election gamble by Justin Trudeau backfires as Liberal Party's lead evaporates](#), The Times, 26 August 2021

²⁶ [Canada federal election: How much trouble is Trudeau in?](#), BBC News Online, 2 September 2021

²⁷ [Canadians turn on Justin Trudeau over early election](#), Financial Times, 3 September 2021

²⁸ [Canada ends Afghanistan evacuation mission](#), BBC News Online, 26 August 2021

However, early gains by the Conservatives were reversed in the latter stages of the election, as Trudeau stepped up attacks on his opponent Erin O'Toole's proposals to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. Trudeau favoured vaccine mandates, but O'Toole opposed these and preferred frequent testing to control the public health crisis.²⁹

2.4 Election results

With 99.98 per cent of polling stations having counted their ballots, figures from Elections Canada show the Liberal Party secured the most seats in the House of Commons, despite not winning the popular vote.

The Liberals took 159 seats in the new House of Commons, with the Conservatives second on 119 seats.

Table 1 2021 House of Commons election results			
Party	No. of valid votes	% of valid votes	Seats
Liberal	5,542,360	32.6	159
Conservative	5,730,515	33.7	119
Bloc Québécois	1,301,758	7.7	33
NDP-New Democratic Party	3,022,451	17.8	25
Green Party	394,740	2.3	2
Others	999,250	5.9	0
TOTAL	16,991,074	100.0	338

Source: [Elections Canada](#) [accessed 29 September 2021]

The results were almost identical to those of the 2019 election, with each party's total number of seats no more than two seats different to the previous election.

Having again failed to win a majority in the Commons, the Liberals will continue as a minority government under Justin Trudeau's premiership.

This was the fourth post-war election, and second in a row, in which the party winning the popular vote lost the election.³⁰

²⁹ [Explainer: The Canadian federal election - what has happened and what is at stake](#), Reuters, 19 September 2021

³⁰ [First Past the Post has failed to give the most popular Canadian party the most seats](#), Electoral Reform Society, 22 September 2021

3 Looking ahead

Justin Trudeau's failure to win a majority in the House of Commons could prove to be problematic.

Canada is currently experiencing a fourth wave of Covid-19, driven by the Delta variant, despite the country being one of the most fully vaccinated countries in the world.³¹

Responding to the ongoing pandemic is one of the major issues currently facing the Prime Minister, with an economic recovery plan vital to his support.

Like many countries, Canada has spent heavily to support individuals and businesses hard-hit by the lockdown,³² and further measures are required to manage the deficit and debt.³³

Other priorities for Trudeau include addressing climate change, housing affordability and opioid abuse.³⁴

In a survey of 1,500 Canadian adults from 13-18 July 2021, the top ten issues identified were³⁵:

- Cost of living
- Access to healthcare
- Climate change and the environment
- Post-pandemic recovery plan
- Economic plan for Canada's future
- Taxation
- Poverty and inequality
- Housing
- Government spending and deficits
- Cost and availability of medicines

³¹ [Trudeau criticized for calling Canadian election in 4th wave](#), Independent, 3 September 2021

³² [Canada federal election: A look at the key numbers driving the campaign](#), BBC News Online, 14 September 2021

³³ [Canada's status quo election: Trudeau returned with another minority, faces uncertain future](#), The Conversation, 21 September 2021

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ [Canada federal election: A look at the key numbers driving the campaign](#), BBC News Online, 14 September 2021

The next election must be held by October 2025³⁶, unless the government is defeated in a no confidence motion or Trudeau calls another snap election in the interim.

Some commentators have suggested that were the Liberals to call another early election it could devastate the party, perhaps in a manner similar to what happened in 1993 when the Progressive Conservative Party went from being the majority to holding two seats.³⁷

³⁶ [Canada](#), Europa World online. London, Routledge. [Retrieved 27 September 2021]

³⁷ [Canada's status quo election: Trudeau returned with another minority, faces uncertain future](#), The Conversation, 21 September 2021

The House of Commons Library is a research and information service based in the UK Parliament. Our impartial analysis, statistical research and resources help MPs and their staff scrutinise legislation, develop policy, and support constituents.

Our published material is available to everyone on commonslibrary.parliament.uk.

Get our latest research delivered straight to your inbox. Subscribe at commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe or scan the code below:



 commonslibrary.parliament.uk

 [@commonslibrary](https://twitter.com/commonslibrary)