

The 2006 Canadian General Election

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On 23 January 2006, the Liberal Party of Canada was defeated at the polls ending a run of more than 12 years in government. The new Conservative Party, lead by Stephen Harper, elected 124 members compared with 103 for the Liberals, 51 for the Bloc Québécois, 29 New Democrats and one Independent. After six consecutive majority governments (four Liberal and two Progressive Conservative), this was the second straight minority result.

Precipitated by the three opposition parties (the Conservatives, Bloc Québécois and New Democrats) joining forces in expressing no-confidence in the Liberal government, this was the second federal election in just 19 months. At 55 days in length, the campaign was one of the longest in recent decades. Prime Minister Paul Martin argued this was necessary because of the parties' reluctance to campaign over the Christmas holidays.

The Conservative party's victory ended a long period in the political wilderness for the Canadian Right. In the decade following the demise of the Progressive Conservative (PC) party in the 1993 campaign, in which the party was reduced from government to just two seats in the House of Commons, the right-of-centre vote was fractured among several parties. First the western-based Reform and then its successor, the Canadian Alliance, shared this vote with the PCs. This vote splitting ended in 2004 when Mr Harper, then leader of the Alliance, forged a merger with the old PCs and became leader of the new Conservative Party. In the election of that year, held within months of the forming of the new party, the Liberals were reduced to minority status and the Conservatives emerged as a plausible governing alternative.

The Martin government's short term in office was dominated by a judicial inquiry into what is

commonly known as the ‘sponsorship scandal.’ This refers to a government program launched after the nearly successful 1995 sovereignty referendum in Quebec. The purpose of the sponsorship program was to increase the visibility of the federal government in Quebec through support of community and cultural events. The ‘scandal’ resulted from accusations, later proven, that considerable amounts of funds were siphoned off by Liberal party supporters and some of the funds were routed to support the political work of the party. Though the Gomery Commission would exonerate Mr Martin, he was tainted by the fact that he was Minister of Finance during much of the program’s tenure and his party was deeply wounded.

Mr Harper repeatedly talked about corruption in the Liberal Party. He was assisted in this effort when the Royal Canadian Mounted Police announced mid campaign that they were launching an investigation around a decision by the Department of Finance relating to taxation of income trusts. The RCMP were investigating allegations that details of the decision were leaked to select investors prior to the public announcement, resulting in market trading with ‘insider’ information. Though the Finance Minister quickly denied all allegations, the investigation continues and added to the perception that the party and government were ethically challenged.

The 2006 results again highlighted the varying degrees of regional support enjoyed by the parties. Western Canada had been the stronghold of the Reform and Canadian Alliance parties and most of their support has moved to the new Conservative Party allowing them to win five times as many seats in the four western provinces than did the Liberals or New Democrats. The Conservatives gained strength in Ontario from 2004 but still trailed the Liberals 54 to 40 in seats. The Bloc Québécois won two-thirds of Quebec seats but fell far short of its goal of winning half the popular vote as the Conservatives cut into the BQ’s support with new strength among Francophone voters. The Liberals fared very poorly in Quebec, trailing even the Conservatives in popular vote share. The Conservative’s Quebec surge, resulting in 10 seats, allayed fears that the party would come to power with no representation from the province.

A sharp rural-urban cleavage also emerged. The Liberals dominated the large urban centres of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver while the Conservatives were shut out in these cities. The result is that the Liberal caucus is primarily urban while the Conservative caucus is disproportionately rural. This is likely the result of differing positions taken by the parties on social issues such as legal recognition of same-sex marriages. The entrenched strength that each of the parties has in some regions, and among particular groups of voters, may, in the short term, make it hard for any party to win broad enough support to form a majority government.

Voter turnout increased in this election. After declining in every election since 1988, it rebounded to approximately 65 per cent from 61 per cent in 2004. One contributing factor was an increase of more than five percentage points in Ontario where many constituencies had highly competitive races. While the evidence remains to be considered fully, a preliminary look at voting patterns indicates some support for the thesis that voters are more likely to be attracted to the polls where there is real uncertainty as to who the winner will be. The Chief Electoral Officer suggested after the campaign that the increase was likely due to a rise in voting among 18 - 24 year olds. He estimates this cohort's 2004 participation rate at just 37 per cent.

The first-past-the-post electoral system continues to be the subject of criticism from some corners. After this campaign, critics focused on the treatment of minor parties and the exaggeration of regional voting patterns. The left-of-centre New Democrats are the leading voice in favour of electoral reform at the national level. Their 18 per cent of the popular vote resulted in fewer than 10 per cent of the seats in the Commons. The Green Party was again shut out despite winning close to 5 per cent of the popular vote. Others argue that electoral reform is necessary to ensure that the major parties have nationally representative caucuses. They point to evidence such as the Liberal Party's winning 15 per cent of the vote in the province of Alberta, and no seats, while the Conservatives were shut out in the major cities, despite winning close to

one-quarter of the vote in Toronto. For the first time since the beginning of the 1970s there was also a drop in the number of women in the House of Commons. The number has fallen from 65 (21.1 per cent) to 64 (20.8 per cent). The New Democrats have promised to continue to push for electoral reform in the coming Parliament but to date none of the major parties has expressed any interest.

The Conservatives begin their term in office with both the smallest proportion of seats in the Commons of any recent governing party and with no obvious partners among the other parties. The New Democrats hold too few seats to prop up the government, so the support of either the Liberals or Bloc Québécois will be necessary. The government has indicated that it will not seek a formal coalition agreement with either party but rather will attempt to find support on an issue-by-issue basis. It remains to be seen whether this strategy will result in any greater parliamentary stability than the Liberals enjoyed under similar circumstances, or whether a third federal election is only months away.