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Trudeau's election gamble

The Canadian snap election is meant to consolidate the power of the Liberals, yet it seems the Social Democrats could be victorious

Election speculation has been rife in Canada for months, but now it is certain - Canadians are heading to the polls for a snap election on September 20th, 2021.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who has led Canada's minority centrist Liberal government since 2019, is rolling the dice by returning to voters two years early to seek a majority mandate, though that outcome is by no means certain. His bet may turn out to be a politically risky one.

Trudeau has faced criticism for calling an unnecessary election campaign just as COVID-19 numbers are rising in Canada, despite relatively high vaccination rates. It is by no means clear that voters will reward him for dragging them to the polls in the midst of a national emergency, with no clear imperative other than the Liberal's desire to consolidate power.

A lack of inspiration

This awkward election timing is in part the result of earlier indecision by Trudeau's party. While tempted to capitalize on high approval ratings early in the pandemic, the Liberals hesitated to call an election during the worst of the second and third waves of COVID-19 in Canada the past fall and spring. This has given them a narrow window to hold an election before a potential fourth wave of the pandemic in late September. Consequently, the election will be shoehorned into a tight 36-day campaign, the legal minimum in Canada.

Most observers are predicting a Liberal return to power, either with a slim majority or an increased minority. If they are successful, this would be Justin Trudeau's third term as Prime Minister, since Canada does not have term limits.

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campaign is struggling to tell a compelling story about why he so urgently needs a third. Had the COVID-19 pandemic not occurred, it would have been difficult to imagine what his second term would have focused on. And so far, he has not presented a strong argument that underlines the need to return him to power. The main policy proposal of his campaign, a necessary but politically uninspiring offer, is a universal child care program that has been a Liberal promise for almost 30 years.

Strong opponents

Another key factor animating the Liberal's early election call is the low polling numbers of Canada's second largest party, the Conservative party. Although they were the only other party to ever hold power federally, the Conservatives face little chance of forming a government in the upcoming election and may be headed for a historically poor result largely due to its infamously unpopular leader. While the Conservatives generally hold an electoral advantage in Canada as the most trusted party when it comes to the economy, they have struggled to make a real impact over the past year and were focused on managing internal divisions. From the start, their campaign suffered when the party opposed mandatory vaccination for public sector workers and travelers, a policy that is popular with Canadian voters weary of pandemic lockdowns and increasingly worried about the Delta variant.

Canada's social democrats, the New Democratic Party (NDP), are currently the fourth largest party in Parliament. They face considerably brighter prospects, led by a young and charismatic Sikh lawyer, Jagmeet Singh, the party has been able to effectively leverage its status in the minority parliament to secure gains for working class Canadians during the COVID-19 crisis – including a generous wage subsidy and emergency income support.

This record may well appeal to Canadian voters worried about a growing affordability crisis in Canada, on top of proposals in the party's platform that would introduce public prescription drug coverage, make homes more affordable, and cut monthly cell phone and internet bills.

Singh's personal popularity has seen a strong uptick over the summer, particularly among younger and female voters, now having the highest personal approval ratings among the candidates for Prime Minister. Trudeau may have rolled the dice, but early days suggest Singh is best

positioned to make important strategic gains.

The effects of COVID-19

On an operational level, COVID-19 may end up being the wildcard in this election, and the very real threat of a Delta-driven fourth wave mid-campaign adds to Trudeau's gamble. Canada's Chief Electoral Officer has warned that the final outcome of the election could take a few days to report due to an anticipated increase in mail-in ballots. These ballots – which will potentially number as many as five million- will not be counted until the day after the election.

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So far, all parties have indicated that they will hold traditional campaign events including a full leader's tour and rallies where local health authorities permit gatherings. This may change if Canada's fourth wave takes hold in a big way during the campaign period.

The vaccination status of candidates and campaign staffers has been a media focus, with parties divided on the issue. The Liberals and NDP have declared that candidates must be fully vaccinated in order to run. In contrast, the Conservatives, separatist Bloc Québécois, and the Green party are recommending but not requiring the shots. For a public that has become less sympathetic to those who are unvaccinated by choice, these early decisions could have heavy electoral impacts.

Like most countries, in addition to the health crisis Canada has been hit hard by a recession during the pandemic. 2020 was the worst year on record for economic growth, and COVID-19 has deepened existing social and economic inequalities in Canada. Many Canadians, struggling with job losses, an increasing cost of living, and are tired of seemingly endless cycles of shut-down and reopening, will be looking for a version of recovery that puts them first in concrete ways.

It may turn out that Canadians will have little tolerance for an unnecessary election in the midst of a resurgence of COVID-19, especially if they feel that the election has no purpose other than putting the Liberals back in power. Trudeau still has time to find a narrative that's more focused on affordability and the real-life concerns of Canadians.



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