

Canada's 2025 Election: The End of Progressive Party Politics?

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The breaking news on Canada's recent federal election tended to focus on the stunning Liberal comeback as well as the much-improved results for the Conservatives. But commentary also highlighted that the contest had witnessed a striking return to two-party polarization. Not since 1958 had the two main parties captured so much of the total vote – 85% between them. Pundits were quick to declare that Canadians were embracing an American-style two party system. If true, what would that mean for supporters of progressive, labour-friendly politics in Canada?

The assumption in the Canadian press seemed to be that everything would be fine as voters could choose between the Conservatives on the right and the Liberals on the left. However, this ignores that something gets lost when the party choices available to voters shrink. After all, two-party politics in the United States has contributed to both a weak labour movement and meagre welfare state. The reason is obvious: the American Democrats are not a 'left' party with the kind of links to unions or social movements that real left parties typically have. And much the same could be said about Canada's Liberal party. However, a bit of attention to Canada's electoral past suggests that our current trend toward two-party dominance may be more temporary than these pundits realize.

Canada was once a two-party system. But you have to go back to the 1911 contest to see just Liberals and Conservatives winning nearly all the seats. In fact, since 1921 every election has seen three or more parties win federal seats. There have been a few elections where there was a decided shift back in the direction of a two-party contest. In 1930 the two main parties won 92% of the total votes. Still, 14 candidates representing three other parties managed to elect MPs that time out. And in the next election the two main parties saw their vote total shrink back to 75% amidst a serious five party contest.

In 1958 the two main parties shared 88% of the votes and nearly all the seats. What had been a four-party system in 1957 was reduced to just barely a three-party one in 1958 (with the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation or CCF hanging on to just 8 seats). But, again, multi-partyism rebounded in the 1960s when a number of four-party minority parliaments enacted some of the country's historic progressive legislation (like Medicare). So, the fact that our recent election appears to have squeezed out third parties is no guarantee they won't return, if history is anything to go by.

What do the 2025 results say about the health of our third parties? The Greens didn't decline that much in this outing but that was partly because they had already fallen so far in 2021 when their highly public leadership meltdown during the campaign turned off voters. The big third-party disaster in 2025 was undoubtedly the New Democratic Party (NDP), which sank from 18% of the popular vote to 6% and dropped from a 24-seat caucus to seven. Does this spell the end? Again, it is instructive to recall that the party and its predecessor has seen hard times before. From winning just 8 seats in 1958 as the CCF, the party revived as the NDP to win 9 seats in 1962, 17 in 1963, and 21 in 1965. And in 1993 the party slumped to just 9 seats but came back to win 21 seats in 1997.

There are two things to keep in mind when assessing the 2025 election results. The first is the Canada's archaic and [undemocratic first-past-the-post](#) voting system tends to distort vote swings, turning mild shifts in voter choices into dramatic changes in the seat count. Sure, the election results make clear that a lot of voters decided to abandon their support for the NDP and vote strategically for the Liberals, motivated by fear of a possible majority government victory for [Pierre Pollièvre's](#) radical right Conservative party as well as threats to Canadian sovereignty from Donald Trump. But with a proportional voting system even the NDP's paltry 6% of the popular vote would have translated into 22 seats, not just 7. So that's not nothing.



Leaders for the main five political parties, 2025 Elections. *La Presse Canadienne*.

And, of course, if the election had been held under some form of proportional representation people wouldn't have felt they had to vote strategically in the first place because they wouldn't have had to worry about: a) 'wasting' or 'splitting' votes, or b) electing a phony majority government (i.e. a government that wins a majority of seats with just a minority of the votes). The second is that the differences between Canada's parties are significant and represent real differences of opinion amongst Canadians. The [NDP](#) is a party historically linked to socialism, organized labour, and a host of social movements. The Liberal party is at best a centrist or centre-right coalition with a progressive minority that occasionally has influence, usually in a minority government situation where NDP pressure matters (as we saw recently with both Denticare and Pharmacare).

A future of Canadian elections populated by just two parties seems highly unlikely. Multiple parties have emerged historically in Canada precisely because our two main parties routinely fail to represent our regional, cultural, language, and class differences. And there seems little likelihood of those differences going away anytime soon. □

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