

Democratic Lessons

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In an election like none this country has ever seen before, there were lessons aplenty to draw for those who cared to learn them.

First and foremost, voters in last month’s federal election learned that showing up matters. Turnout was higher than in recent elections, estimated by Elections Canada at 68.65%, the highest it’s been since 1993.

Moreover, every vote mattered in closely contested ridings, with two results actually flipping during the routine vote validation process that happens each election. In that process, Elections Canada’s returning officers double check everyone’s math, to ensure the right voting totals are reached.

In such a large human enterprise as this, errors inevitably occur, so double checking is a crucial way Elections Canada maintains the integrity of the vote. Three ridings are so close that they have triggered automatic recounts by law: Milton East-Halton Hills South and Terrebonne, the two that flipped during validation, along with Terra Nova-The Peninsulas. An automatic judicial recount happens any time the margin of the vote is within 0.1% of the total votes. It’s another way our electoral officials ensure the result is not only legitimate, but seen by all to be so.

The lessons were there for

politicians as well, as voters had a message for every party contesting the election. How each party responds to the voters’ message will do much to shape politics in the country in coming years.

Politicians often compete over what the “ballot box question” is—the thing that voters are thinking about as they cast a ballot. Opposition parties often try to frame the vote as a referendum on the governing party, while parties in power try to frame it as a choice on a key issue favourable to them.

This time around, there was a crystal clear division between two distinct questions in voters’ minds, and the election result hinged on which question they were answering as they voted.

Simply put, voters who were looking forward with anxiety to Donald Trump were most likely to vote for the Liberals. Those who were looking back with frustration on the years of Liberal government under Justin Trudeau voted Conservative.

Abacus Polling found a stark difference in their last polls before the election: among those who focused on Trump as the defining issue, the Liberals dominated, with 58% support, compared to just 21% for the Conservatives. In contrast, among those who really want to see a change, the result was a mirror image, with the Conservatives dominating 55% to just

23% for the Liberals. The NDP, for its part, failed to be the answer on either question, with just 11% and 10% support among voters thinking about each question, respectively. Simply put, with such high stakes, voters across the country shied away from voting for any other party, seeking to vote for one of the two parties with a chance at forming government. Ultimately 85% of Canadians voted either Liberal or Conservative, and the two parties control nearly 91% of seats in the coming Parliament.

Canada, for one election at least, was effectively a polarized two party system. So what does this all mean? Each party has its own lesson to learn. The Liberals, for their part, got the political equivalent of a “get out of jail free” card with the advent of Trump’s threats—and the Conservatives’ slow response to them. In a normal election, they would have been heading for a significant defeat. The frustrations that saw them languishing in the polls in

2024, losing byelections in normally reliable Liberal ridings in Toronto and Montreal, are still there.

Canadians clearly preferred the Liberals as the party most able to stand up to Trump’s bullying, but as the President faded from the discussion in the election’s closing weeks, the Conservatives nearly closed the gap.

The frustration that ultimately drove Justin Trudeau from office is still there, smouldering, as Canadians continue to worry about affordability, healthcare, cost of living and housing, and access to work opportunities. Prime Minister Mark Carney and the Liberals have bought

ary, the polling aggregator 338Canada.com — more on them in a column next week! — had the party projected to win a majority, but the conversation was already changing then, with the departure of Trudeau and the arrival of tariffs as a reality and not just an idle threat, along with the suddenly more plausible threat of worse to come from the US President.

The Conservatives were bafflingly slow to respond to this new threat, and paid a heavy price for it on 28 April. While most Canadians worried about the threat of Trump, Poilievre continued to campaign against the carbon tax. Even after Mark Carney eliminated the consumer component of the tax. The party tried in vain to recapture the 2024 magic with a focus on the industrial version of the tax, to much less effect. The night before the election, the party was still putting out carbon tax themed videos.

The consummate partisan attack dog couldn’t bring himself to stop attacking Trudeau and Carney, and stand up for Canadians until it was too late. In no small part, that is undoubtedly because many of his core policies—notably a war on “woke”—and core supporters align with the political agenda of Donald Trump, and see the correct response for the country to be a realignment in ways that bring the country back into harmony with the country’s

powerful neighbour to the south, including enlisting in the war on the fictional border fentanyl trafficking crisis. Unless the party and its leader can find a way to bridge the gap between voters enamoured of Trumpian populist right wing politics, and those looking for someone to stand up for the country against the American bully, there’s no guarantee the next election will end differently.

Finally, the election spells a period of prolonged reflection for both the NDP and the Greens. Combined, the two parties captured just 7.5% of the popular vote, winning just 8 seats between them. On the issues people cared most about this election, hardly anyone saw either party as providing the answer they trusted most. While future elections are unlikely to be quite so polarized as this one, nonetheless, both parties have some hard questions ahead about what each party contributes to the national discussion, and how they can continue to compete effectively in the new and more uncertain world confronting Canadians, within an electoral system so unforgiving of third- and fourth-place parties.

While no one can predict the future, it’s clear that the winner of the next federal election, whenever it comes, will be the one that can apply lessons of the past to the challenges of the future. Dr. Prest teaches political science as a lecturer with the Department of Political Science.



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themselves a little time to address those concerns, but they cannot count on another election like this one to save them. For the Conservatives, the lessons are that much more painful. For much of 2024, Pierre Poilievre appeared to be the Prime Minister in waiting, with the election to come little more than a formality. As recently as 23 Febru-

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