

CANADA

# Canada's Justin Trudeau Kicks Off Re-Election Bid in Dead Heat

Trudeau's Liberal Party is tied in polls with its main rival, the Conservative Party



Canada has a fixed-election date system, and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was required by law to trigger the start of the election campaign no later than Sunday to allow for a minimum number of campaigning days by political leaders. PHOTO: CHRIS WATTIE/REUTERS

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OTTAWA—Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau triggered the start of his campaign toward an Oct. 21 election, in which he will try to overcome damage from an ethics scandal and persuade voters to give the Liberal government another term based on the strength of its economic and environmental record.

Mr. Trudeau's Liberal Party enters the campaign in a dead heat with its main rival, the Conservative Party, with support in the low-to-mid 30% range. The Liberal Party won its mandate in 2015 parliamentary elections with 40% of votes cast. At this juncture, neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives appear to have the support required to win a majority of the seats in Canada's Parliament.

Canada has a fixed-election date system, and Mr. Trudeau was required by law to trigger the start of the election campaign no later than Sept. 15 to allow for a minimum number of campaigning

days by political leaders.

Mr. Trudeau's popularity has declined markedly this year under the weight of allegations that he and his senior aides tried to interfere in the criminal prosecution of a Montreal engineering company. A probe by Canada's ethics watchdog ruled last month Mr. Trudeau broke rules in trying to steer his then-attorney general away from proceeding with a trial against SNC-Lavalin Group Inc.

Speaking to reporters Wednesday in Ottawa, Mr. Trudeau, 47 years old, said the election would be a choice between inclusive politics and economic progress under the Liberals and austerity measures under a Conservative government.

"We spent the last four years making things better, and we have the record to prove it," Mr. Trudeau said.

Conservative Party leader Andrew Scheer said Wednesday the SNC-Lavalin scandal shows Mr. Trudeau has lost the moral authority to govern. The Conservatives want to make cost-of-living issues the centerpiece of the campaign and portray the Liberals as spendthrifts who are out of touch with Canadian households.

"We are going to be outlining our vision for the country to put more money back in the pockets of Canadians and let them get ahead," the 40-year-old Mr. Scheer said.

Despite Mr. Trudeau's lackluster showing in the polls and his high disapproval rating—over 60%—public support has yet to galvanize behind either Mr. Scheer or New Democratic Party leader Jagmeet Singh, whose social-democratic party stands in third place in the polls.

"I have not seen such a confused mess ahead of an election in a long time," said Darrell Bricker, chief executive of polling firm Ipsos Public Affairs. "As long as the current mood persists to election day, what the structure of the next government looks like is anyone's guess."

Mr. Trudeau's Liberals have tried in recent weeks to portray Mr. Scheer as a social conservative who could pose a threat to the environment, citing his Conservative Party's pledge to roll back Liberal measures to fight climate change.

"The Liberals are trying to plant the seed that Mr. Scheer is not the progressive prime minister Canada wants," said Lori Turnbull, a politics professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. According to Ms. Turnbull and other political watchers, that portrayal of Mr. Scheer is partly responsible for a Liberal recovery in the polls since the SNC-Lavalin scandal emerged in February.

Still, the SNC-Lavalin affair threatens to continue haunting Mr. Trudeau as the formal campaign gets under way. A report Wednesday in Toronto's Globe and Mail newspaper said Canada's national police force has been looking into possible obstruction of justice allegations. The report said senior government officials weren't fully cooperating, citing rules requiring cabinet discussions to be kept secret.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police declined to comment on the matter Wednesday. A spokesman for Canada's justice department said the head of the public service decided to provide the same, partial waiver of cabinet confidence to police as was provided earlier this year to lawmakers who examined the SNC-Lavalin affair in committee. Mr. Trudeau said Wednesday he respected that decision.

Several polls indicate the top issues among voters heading into the election include a deteriorating standard of living, health care, climate change, and taxes. Ethics and the SNC-Lavalin affair don't figure prominently, according to polls.

With the election call, certain election-financing rules kick in that limit the amount political parties and candidates can spend during the campaign. Canada's parliament is suspended until a new government is sworn in.

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