

CANADA

Canada Vote Forces Trudeau to Join With Rival to Govern

Liberal Party, short of majority, has options on the left to form minority government



Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau greets commuters in Montréal on Tuesday morning after his election victory, PHOTO: STEPHANE MAHE/REUTERS

By Paul Vieira and Kim Mackrael

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OTTAWA—Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, fresh off an election win Monday night that left him with a weakened mandate, must quickly turn his focus to finding common ground among rivals to maintain his grip on power.

Mr. Trudeau's Liberal Party emerged short of a majority of seats in the Canadian Parliament, and his share of the popular vote fell to 33% from a 40% showing in 2015. The result partly reflected the hits Mr. Trudeau took from recent scandals—allegations that he and his aides interfered in a criminal prosecution, and images of the Canadian leader wearing blackface—that damaged his reputation as a champion of clean governance and diversity.

The task of managing a minority government should be made slightly easier by the distribution of votes. Results as of Tuesday morning showed the Liberals won or were leading in 157 seats, or 13 seats short of a majority. That means Mr. Trudeau would need the support of just one other party to get legislation passed.



One possible partner for Mr. Trudeau is the New Democratic Party led by Jagmeet Singh, who with his wife Gurkiran Kaur was cheered by supporters on election night in Burnaby, British Columbia. PHOTO: DON MACKINNON/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The Liberals should be able to find agreement with other parties, particularly on the left, said Lori Williams, a political analyst at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta. “He should be able to put together some kind of agenda where he can get the support he needs on an issue-by-issue basis,” she said.

Minority governments aren’t unusual in Canada. Former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper ruled in a minority situation between 2006 and 2011. The last time a political party won back-to-back majority governments was in the 1990s.

“You have asked us to invest in Canadians, to continue the process of reconciliation with indigenous peoples and make it a priority, and to show more vision and ambition as we tackle the greatest challenge of this era, climate change,” Mr. Trudeau said early Tuesday. “That is exactly what we will do.”

A spokeswoman for Mr. Trudeau declined to comment about his next moves in leading a minority parliament. Mr. Trudeau is scheduled to speak to reporters in Ottawa on Wednesday, she said.

During the 40-day campaign, Mr. Trudeau promised that the Liberals would continue to run deficits to invest in infrastructure and offer tax breaks, whereas the Conservatives said they would balance the budget in five years. The Liberals also promised to ban military-style assault rifles and vowed to meet aggressive carbon-reduction targets.

The New Democratic Party is one possible partner for Mr. Trudeau. The left-wing party helped prop up a Liberal minority government in 2005, helping stave off defeat by the Conservatives.

From 1972 to 1974, a slim Liberal minority government led by Mr. Trudeau's father, Pierre, also ruled because of a deal reached with the party. The NDP won or was leading in 24 seats on Tuesday—enough when combined with the Liberals to constitute a majority.

NDP leader Jagmeet Singh said the hung parliament gives his party “a chance to fight for the things that we have laid out during this campaign. We understand the responsibility given to us.”

Mr. Singh addressed some of his priority items in a speech Tuesday morning before supporters in suburban Vancouver, including a national plan to offer universal drug and dental coverage, price caps on cellphone services and waiving interest payments on student debt.

He also pushed for more urgent action on climate change. The party has advocated halting further oil pipeline construction and bolder targets for reducing carbon emissions.

However, the NDP would likely be willing to move closer to the center in a compromise with the Liberals to avoid another election soon. The party lost a third of its seats in Monday's election, and its fundraising has lagged behind other parties.

“I don't think Trudeau will want to go to the NDP with cap in hand,” said Lori Turnbull, political-science professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. “Trudeau has a strong plurality of seats. He will have to negotiate, and make concessions, but he should be able to make this minority government work for a while.”

Daniel Beland, political-science professor at McGill University, said the Liberal government would be wise to avoid being pulled further to the left by the NDP. “The Liberals are a centrist party and policies that could lead to large deficits and major tax hikes could embolden the Conservatives,” Mr. Beland said. The Tories have the second-most seats in the legislature, having won or leading in 121 seats.

Canadian market watchers said they expected net government spending would rise more than anticipated to satisfy some NDP demands. The Liberal election platform anticipated new spending of nearly 57 billion Canadian dollars (\$43.5 billion) over the next four years, leading to the addition of over C\$90 billion to the federal government's debt.

“The bottom line here is that the already-wider deficits laid out in the Liberal platform only mark the starting point, and will likely be shaded even wider,” said BMO Capital Markets.

Bloc Québécois leader Yves-François Blanchet, whose party was on track to win 32 seats in the French-speaking province, said Tuesday that his party would also be open to working with the Liberals, as long as proposed legislation benefits Québec.

If not, he added, “we will have quite a bit of leverage” in forcing the government's hand.

The bloc is in step with the Liberals' environmental agenda, including maintaining a carbon tax. However, Mr. Blanchet has clashed with Mr. Trudeau over provincial legislation passed earlier this year banning some public servants from wearing religious symbols.

Canada's constitution doesn't require Mr. Trudeau to immediately reconvene the legislature, and he could decide to take his time to figure out the best way forward in a minority government, Ms. Turnbull said. Unlike in the U.S., there are mechanisms in the Canadian system to finance day-to-day government operations even if Parliament isn't sitting.

Conservative Party leader Andrew Scheer said the election results "put Mr. Trudeau on notice. When your government falls, Conservatives will be ready and we will win."

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