

CANADA

Trudeau Wins Re-Election but Fails to Secure Majority

His Liberals will lead minority government, relying on support from other parties to pass legislation



Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his wife, Sophie Gregoire Trudeau, greeting supporters in Montreal early Tuesday.
PHOTO: VALERIE BLUM/SHUTTERSTOCK

By Paul Vieira and Kim Mackrael

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Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau won re-election, overcoming recent scandals that had damaged his reputation as a champion of clean governance and diversity to defeat his conservative rival.

But he emerges from Monday's election with a weakened hold on power that will force him to rely on support from other parties to pass legislation.

Preliminary results Tuesday indicate Mr. Trudeau's Liberals had won or were leading in races for 157 seats in the national legislature, short of the 170 required for a majority. The Conservative Party led by Andrew Scheer was in second place with 121 seats.

Nationally, the Conservatives won the popular vote, with 34% versus the Liberals' 33%—the lowest share for a victorious party in the country's history. But Canada's first-past-the-post

electoral system awards seats based on results in each of 338 individual electoral districts.

In Montreal, his hometown, Mr. Trudeau told supporters that voters had rejected the spending cuts proposed by the Conservatives in favor of a progressive agenda. “You’re sending our Liberal team back to work in Ottawa, with a clear mandate—we will make life more affordable, we will continue to fight climate change, we will get guns off our streets, and we will keep investing in Canadians,” Mr. Trudeau said.

“Regardless of how you cast your ballot, ours is a team that will fight for all Canadians,” he added.

Mr. Scheer said he had congratulated Mr. Trudeau on the victory.

Mr. Trudeau’s Liberal Party had 177 seats when Parliament dissolved at the start of the 40-day election campaign. The outcome, while short of a majority, represents a reprieve for the Canadian leader, whose father, Pierre, was himself a Liberal prime minister.

His re-election chances were thrown in doubt by a scandal earlier this year over allegations that he and his aides tried to interfere in the criminal prosecution of a Montreal engineering firm, SNC-Lavalin Group Inc. Canada’s ethics watchdog ruled in August that Mr. Trudeau’s actions on the firm’s behalf violated the country’s conflict-of-interest law.

Then last month, a week after Mr. Trudeau, 47 years old, had called a new election, Time magazine published an image of him in brown makeup at an “Arabian Nights”-themed costume party in 2001. Two more images emerged the following day of him wearing blackface. Mr. Trudeau apologized repeatedly in recent weeks, saying that he now recognizes it as racist but didn’t at the time.



Liberal Party supporters celebrate the Canadian election results in Montreal on Monday. PHOTO:STEPHANE MAHE/REUTERS

Some voters appeared willing to accept his apology for a mistake he had made years earlier. Larissa Kalins, a physical therapist voting in Toronto, said she didn't see the images as a major issue. "There was too much time spent on blackface, rather than on issues of importance like health care," she said. "People make mistakes, and we need to move beyond that."

Mr. Trudeau tried to shift the focus to other issues in the campaign to illustrate the stark differences between his government and the Conservatives. He promised to toughen Canada's gun-control laws, offered tax breaks, and pledged to improve environmental protections. On the latter, he argued a vote for the Conservative Party, which wants to repeal a carbon tax brought in by the Liberals, would represent a precarious "do-nothing approach" that threatened the planet.

Mr. Trudeau won the 2015 election with 40% of the vote, ousting the Conservative government with promises of a more active fiscal policy, stronger environmental policy, electoral reform, higher ethical standards, and more say by women and minorities in policy-making. Some of those promises went unfulfilled in the eyes of some voters, while the SNC-Lavalin scandal undermined his vows to run a transparent, clean government.

"Trudeau has become just another politician—and a flawed one at that," said Darrell Bricker, president of Ipsos Public Affairs, a polling firm. His polling in the final week of the campaign indicated that 57% of Canadians disapproved of Mr. Trudeau's job as prime minister.



Andrew Scheer, the Conservative Party challenger, promised to overturn the country's national carbon tax if elected. PHOTO: WARREN TODA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Branislav Miokovic, a 73-year-old Toronto voter, said he changed his vote this year from the Liberal Party to the Conservative Party. "Last time, everyone was so enthusiastic about Justin Trudeau, but he proved to be incompetent," said Mr. Miokovic. "This guy is just a showman."

Not since the 1990s, under then-Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, a Liberal, has a Canadian political party won back-to-back majority governments in Canada.

Despite voter misgivings over Mr. Trudeau, Mr. Scheer failed to gain traction; support for him remained largely stagnant throughout the 40-day campaign period. Mr. Scheer, 40, tailored his platform to address financial anxiety among households, promising tax relief and a return to balanced budgets within a half-decade.

This was his first attempt to become prime minister after winning the party leadership in 2017. He was relatively unknown to most Canadians, and political watchers say the Liberals were effective in portraying the Tory leader in a negative light by accentuating his socially conservative views on abortion and same-sex marriage. Further, he struggled to connect with voters outside the Conservative base.

“He’s not a natural retail politician,” said Cristine de Clercy, political-science professor at Western University in London, Ontario.

In his address to supporters in Regina, Saskatchewan, Mr. Scheer said the election results mean Mr. Trudeau “is now on notice. When your government falls, Conservatives will be ready and we will win.”

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