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WORLD | CANADA

## Canada's Liberals Gain Edge as Vote Near

Party leader Justin Trudeau parries attacks on his youth and inexperience from incumbent Conservatives



Canada's Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau shakes hands with schoolchildren during a campaign stop Wednesday in Welland, Ontario. PHOTO: THE CANADIAN PRESS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By PAUL VIEIRA

Oct. 14, 2015 7:06 p.m. ET

OTTAWA—Canada's centrist Liberal Party is gaining ground in the final days of a tight race before Monday's national election, as voter fatigue with the incumbent Conservative government is fueling support for a Liberal leader whose biggest political obstacle has been his inexperience.

In his bid to become Canada's next prime minister, Liberal Party leader Justin Trudeau, the 43-year-old son of long-serving Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, has constantly battled his rivals' charge that he is a novice. Prime Minister Stephen Harper has made it a campaign refrain to say Mr. Trudeau is "not ready" to govern, highlighting his government's 10-year track record of economic stewardship.

But with Canada's resource-heavy economy slumping, voters appear less convinced by Mr. Harper's message and more willing to embrace change. Most polls now give Mr. Trudeau a big enough lead over the incumbent Conservatives that he looks closer than Mr. Harper to leading a minority government.

Such a result would have seemed far-fetched just weeks ago. If it comes to pass, it would bring to an end almost a decade of Mr. Harper's rule.

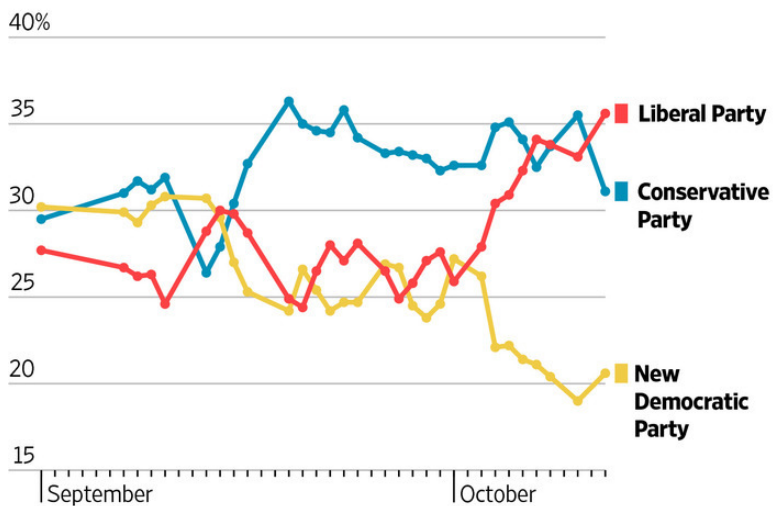
A potential Liberal minority government's survival would rely on some kind of coalition or tacit agreement with another party to remain in power. That party would most likely be the left-leaning New Democratic Party, which at one point had the lead but has now slipped to third.

The Liberals would likely shift some foreign policy, as Mr. Trudeau has said he would withdraw Canada's military from a combat role in the U.S.-led mission against Islamic State in the Middle East. Mr. Trudeau said the country's military contribution would instead focus on training local forces in Iraq and Syria.

Mr. Trudeau's platform has focused on helping middle-income households with a tax cut partly financed by higher taxes on the country's wealthy. Unlike his rivals, he is also prepared to run a budget deficit for three years to help finance infrastructure spending, which he argues would mark an investment in the future and a way to boost lackluster economic activity. Canada recorded declines in gross domestic product in the first two quarters of 2015, although data suggest a pickup in activity in June and July.

## Change of Fortunes

Voting intentions ahead of Canada's Oct. 19 election



Source: Ekos Research polls, most recent of 1,115 Canadian adults conducted Oct. 10-12; margin of error +/- 2.9 percentage points

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Early in the campaign, the Liberals held third place in public-opinion polls, and longtime political analysts reckoned Mr. Trudeau had little chance of improving his fortunes under an onslaught of negative Conservative advertising. Some pollsters credit the Liberals' gains since then in part to a television ad set against the backdrop of Parliament Hill in which Mr. Trudeau contradicted Mr.

Harper's "not ready" mantra, saying, "I am ready to bring real change to Ottawa."

"The fact that there he was, delivering a message calmly and confidently to the camera with Parliament behind him, made him look like he was ready to be prime minister," said pollster Greg Lyle, president of Toronto firm Innovative Research.

Mr. Trudeau was also boosted by his performance at five separate party leaders' debates, where pundits said he held his own and exceeded expectations.

His opponents set those expectations low for Mr. Trudeau. Mr. Harper's spokesman said before the first party leaders' debate in August that the Liberal leader would score points if he arrived "on stage with his pants on."

That approach may have backfired for the incumbent. "It was terribly arrogant to demonstrate contempt for Trudeau and underestimate him. So they set low expectations for him, and he overperformed," said Eddie Goldenberg, chief adviser to former Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien. He also credits Mr. Trudeau's policy platform, which he said tapped into voters' desire for change as opposed to Mr. Harper's pledge to offer more of the same.



Liberal leader Justin Trudeau holds a baby during a campaign stop at a restaurant in Welland, Ontario, on Wednesday. *PHOTO: CHRIS WATTIE/REUTERS*

Mr. Trudeau is no stranger to the public stage. Born on Christmas Day in 1971 while his father was in office, he spent his early years in the prime minister's official residence in Ottawa, 24 Sussex Drive. With the exception of a nine-month period, his father was prime minister from his birth up until mid-1984.

After he earned degrees at Montreal's McGill University and Vancouver's University of British Columbia, Mr. Trudeau went on to teach drama and snowboarding. He re-emerged on the national stage in 1998 after his younger brother Michel died in an avalanche in the Canadian Rockies. In 2000, at the age of 28, he delivered a stirring and nationally televised eulogy at his father's funeral, leading some to speculate about his political aspirations. He was first elected to Parliament in 2008 as a candidate in an ethnically diverse part of Montreal.

When Mr. Trudeau won the Liberal Party leadership in 2012, the party was coming off its worst showing ever in 2011 election. Its organization was in need of rebuilding, as a bitter feud pitting former leaders Mr. Chretien and Paul Martin left party members divided and disenchanted.

André Albinati, a former policy adviser to the Liberal government under Mr. Chretien, said Mr. Trudeau has brought to the job "youth, energy and a fighting spirit" that the party sorely needed after a rough spell.

In recent years, "Liberals had trouble getting their supporters to vote, let alone volunteer," said Mr. Albinati, now a lobbyist and principal of Ottawa-based Earncliffe Strategy Group. "Now, the party has a good ground team in place. That's the biggest change this time around under Trudeau."

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