

Socialist, Chaotic or Stable: How Canada's Vote Could Turn Out

Photographer: Scott Eells/Bloomberg

Chris Fournier

August 26, 2015 — 9:01 PM PDT

- ▶ Polls show Conservatives, NDP and Liberals clustered near 30%
- ▶ Tight race suggests eventful aftermath to Oct. 19 election

Prime Minister Stephen Harper won re-election in 2011 with a pitch for a “strong, stable Conservative majority government” to end Canada’s run of three minority parliaments over seven years. Now, the country is heading toward its most precarious election outcome in decades as polls show an unprecedented three-way race for power -- a recipe for minority government.

Here are five potential outcomes from the Oct. 19 vote that could make the aftermath more eventful than the election itself.

1. Harper Redux

With Harper’s Conservatives clustered around 30 percent support alongside Tom Mulcair’s left-leaning New Democratic Party and Justin Trudeau’s centrist Liberals, pollsters such as Nik Nanos and Frank Graves are assigning about an 80 percent chance that no party will win the 170 seats required for a majority in Canada’s 338-seat House of Commons. If the Conservatives hold on to a plurality, they’ll be given first crack at forming government.



Prime Minister Stephen Harper is seeking a fourth term in office.

Photographer: Sean Kilpatrick/The Canadian Press via AP Photo

They're well-financed and strong coming out of the starting blocks. In 2011, the Conservatives won 102 seats by more than 25 percent of the vote. On average, the Conservative edge declined to about 15 percent in those districts, but "they're still winning and no one else is really close," according to Greg Lyle, managing director of Innovative Research Group.

The strength of the minority would be critical in terms of implementing an agenda and even surviving beyond a few months. The closer they are to the 170-seat mark, the harder politically for other parties to band together to defeat them in the House of Commons. The weaker the minority, the less likely Harper is to continue.

According to [seat projections](#) tabulated Monday by polling aggregator ThreeHundredEight.com, the Conservatives are on track to win between 108 and 146 seats.

2. Socialist Breakthrough

The labor-friendly New Democrats, with a strong base in Quebec, are also well positioned to form a minority government. The NDP -- a party with socialist roots now led by Mulcair, a former provincial Liberal -- has never been this strong in the midst of a campaign. Until 2011, it hadn't fared better than third in national elections. This year, it has a legitimate chance at taking power for the first time in history.



Tom Mulcair's New Democrats have momentum from their win in Alberta.

Photographer: Cole Burston/Toronto Star via Getty Images

An Abacus Data poll last week showed 76 percent of voters seeking a [change in government](#). The NDP, by definition, represent the greatest change and have momentum after their surprise victory in oil-rich Alberta's provincial election this spring. Along with this strong appetite for change comes a higher tolerance for some form of co-operation between the Liberals and the NDP, according to Graves.

“Ask all Canadians to write their preferred outcome on a piece of paper -- a coalition of some kind would probably be the most popular,” the founder of Ekos Research Associates said. Graves dubs this anti-Harper cohort “promiscuous progressives” and predicts many of them could coalesce around either the NDP or the Liberals, depending on which looks more likely to get the job done.

ThreeHundredEight.com predicts the NDP will win between 122 and 153 seats.

3. Trudeau Turnaround

For the Liberals to win, Trudeau would need to leap-frog his two rivals after faltering badly in the months before the election. So far he's exceeded low expectations, but to become the leading alternative to Harper he needs doubts to creep in about Mulcair's economic capabilities and NDP inexperience.



Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau is exceeding expectations so far.

Photographer: Steve Russell/Toronto Star via Getty Images

As a left-leaning centrist (more Barack Obama than Bill Clinton) Trudeau needs to draw support from both flanks, including soft Conservative supporters disaffected with Harper's 10-year-old government and fearful of the NDP's perceived anti-business stand.

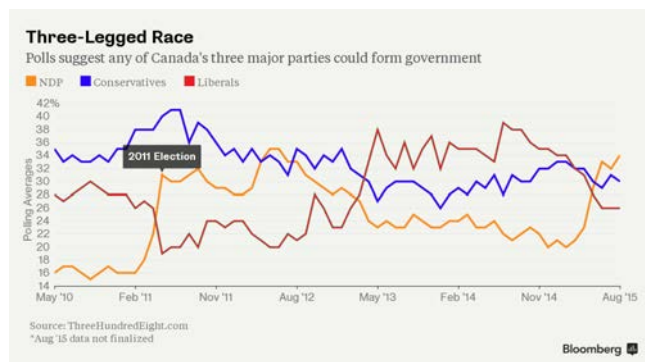
Unlike Mulcair's party, the Liberals have governed regularly throughout Canada's history, most recently from 1993 to 2006. On the other hand, Trudeau's conditional support for Harper's controversial anti-terrorism law didn't sit well with many progressive voters.

Liberal fortunes hinge on Ontario, where the provincial wing of the party won a majority last year under Kathleen Wynne. For starters, Trudeau will have to win back the 21 seats the Liberals lost to the Conservatives in Ontario in 2011.

His age, meanwhile, works for and against him. While Trudeau -- 13 years younger than Harper and 17 younger than Mulcair -- would represent generational change, he's been weighed down by a barrage of Conservative attack ads saying he's not ready to be prime minister.

ThreeHundredEight.com currently has the Liberals on track to win between 58 and 90 seats.

4. October Surprise



Erik Hertzberg/Bloomberg

A majority wasn't a lock last time, but it materialized for Harper in the late stages as many Liberals -- disillusioned with their leader and concerned with a surprise NDP surge -- either stayed home or shifted to the Conservatives.

Nanos sees a 20 percent chance of majority this time around, with the strongest possibility being that it's Conservative. For one party to win a majority, it has to have a regional base and also be competitive in other parts of the country, the chairman of Ottawa-based polling firm Nanos Research said.

The Conservatives and the New Democrats, with provincial strongholds in Alberta and Quebec respectively, fulfill those criteria. However "the Liberals do not," Nanos said. "The best case scenario for the Liberals would be a Liberal minority government."

Graves agrees on the 20 percent odds but sees an NDP majority as more probable. Job one for his promiscuous progressive voters is a change of government, the pollster said, "and having a change of government that looks quite different in terms of its values, orientations and policies than the current one."

5. Political Chaos

If the Conservatives win the most seats but not a majority, they could lose a confidence vote in the House of Commons. Governor General David Johnston, Queen Elizabeth II's representative in Canada who was appointed by Harper, could call another election or ask the second-place party if it could command the confidence of parliament.



Governor General David Johnston may play a role in the vote's aftermath.

Photographer: Eric Lalmand/AFP via Getty Images

Lyle, of Innovative Research, said a Conservative minority with the NDP in second is the most likely outcome, leaving the Liberals with a decision to make: allow the Conservatives to continue in office or give the NDP a shot at government. This process could involve long, agonized negotiations as Canada has no experience with formal coalition governments.

The NDP has supported the Liberals before in exchange for the implementation of favored policies. However the Liberals have never been called on to support the NDP, and a second-place finisher running the government has happened only once in the nation's history.

In addition, Harper doesn't have to convene parliament right away. Historically, the time between an election and the start of a parliamentary session has averaged 82 days. But an earlier Conservative minority waited four months to recall lawmakers in 1979 and lost a confidence vote two months later.

There is one other scenario. If Harper fell short of a majority, he could resign as Conservative leader and call a party convention to replace him. That would provide cover for not recalling the House and allow a fresh leader with a clean slate to try to form government, with Harper or an interim leader serving out a lame-duck period.

