

CANADIANS VOTE IN A SPRING ELECTION

Introduction

Focus

The spring 2011 federal election began as an election that no one wanted. But along the way it energized and engaged the Canadian electorate and resulted in a changed political landscape. This *News in Review* story examines why this election was called, the position of political parties on major issues, strategies used on the campaign trail, and an analysis of the election's outcome.

On May 2, 2011, Canadians voted in their fourth federal election in less than seven years. The five-week election campaign began with the fall of the Conservative government after a historic vote of non-confidence in the House of Commons. The opposition parties found the government to be in contempt of Parliament over a failure to adequately disclose costs of a proposed crime bill and expressed non-confidence in the government's budget.

At the beginning of the campaign, poll after poll indicated that Canadians did not want another election. Voters initially felt that the 2011 general election would simply result in the return of the status quo, characterized by another minority government and an uncertain political future. However, the election campaign began to heat up after sparks flew in the leaders' English and French debates.

Election advertisements, town-hall forums, door-to-door canvassing, and the use of social media fuelled voter interest and discussion about election issues, the leaders, and their parties. The final weeks of the campaign witnessed a significant rise in votes cast at advanced polls—and a surprising and rapid surge of popularity for the New Democratic Party.

Did the voters' feelings that this election had greater potential than initially thought carry over to voting day? Yes and no. Elections Canada reported that 61.4 per cent of eligible voters cast their ballot in 2011—up slightly from a record low in 2008, but still one of the lowest rates of voter turnout in a general election. However, Prime Minister Stephen Harper obtained his first and long-sought-after majority government as leader of the Conservative Party by winning 166 seats in the House of Commons. Sworn in as Canada's 22nd Prime Minister in 2006, Harper had governed under a minority mandate.

The 2011 federal election also produced a number of other election "firsts." Winning 102 seats, the New Democratic Party became, for the first time in Canadian political history, the Official Opposition. The Green Party won their first seat, with leader Elizabeth May's success in the British Columbia riding of Saanich-Gulf Islands. The Liberal Party suffered its worst defeat ever, winning only 35 seats. The Bloc Québécois also faced a stunning defeat—winning only four seats and losing official party status.

To Consider

Brainstorm a list of responses to the following questions and then discuss them with your classmates.

1. What is the purpose of an election?
2. What qualities would you look for in a leader?
3. Do you think voting in elections is important? Why or why not?

You may wish to revisit these questions and your initial responses after completing the readings and activities in the next sections of this *News in Review* story.

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Video Review

Further Research

Information about voter eligibility and how to vote can be found on the Elections Canada's Web site at www.elections.ca.

Pre-viewing Activity

Work with a partner to answer the following questions. You may wish to discuss your answers as a class.

1. What are your general impressions of politicians?

2. Do you think you would ever want to be a politician? Why or why not?

3. If you could send one message to the Prime Minister, what would it be?

Viewing Questions

As you watch the video, respond to the questions in the spaces provided.

1. How did the 41st general election begin?

2. When the 2011 federal election was called:

- a) Which party was in power?

- b) Was this a minority or majority government?

- c) Which party formed the Official Opposition?

3. When the 2011 election campaign began, what was Stephen Harper asking the Canadian voters for?

4. Outline the election priorities for the following political parties:

- a) Conservative Party

b) Liberal Party

c) Bloc Québécois

d) New Democratic Party (NDP)

e) Green Party

5. What was the purpose of a "vote mob"?

6. Which issues did each of the following leaders focus on during the election debate?

a) Stephen Harper (Conservative)

b) Michael Ignatieff (Liberal)

c) Jack Layton (NDP)

7. a) What happened to support for the NDP mid-way through the campaign?

b) Why was it called an “orange crush”?

8. Advanced polls showed an increase of 34 per cent in voter turnout over the 2008 general election. Did this trend continue on election day? Why or why not?

9. Which political parties celebrated the 2011 election outcome?

10. For which political parties was the 2011 election a sad occasion?

Post-viewing Activity

As a class or in small groups, discuss the following questions.

1. On May 2, 2011, the Conservative government, under the leadership of Stephen Harper, got their first majority government. The party won 167 of 308 seats in the House of Commons but only 39.6 per cent of the popular vote. Do you think this election outcome accurately reflects the interests of Canadians? Explain your answer.

2. The next general election will likely occur in 2015.

a) What issues might you like the political parties to focus on?

b) What qualities would you look for in a political leader?

c) Assuming you are an eligible voter, do you plan to vote in the next general election? Why or why not?

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The Government Falls

Further Research

To learn more about how Parliament operates, refer to the March 2011 *News in Review* story titled "Parliament and the Election Question," which can be accessed at <http://newsinreview.cbclearning.ca>.

Reading Prompt

As you read this section, record answers to the following questions:

1. What caused the Conservative government to fall?
2. Why was the House of Commons vote "historic"?
3. What happened in the aftermath of the vote?

The defeat of the Conservative minority government on March 25 set the spring 2011 election campaign into motion. For the first time in Canadian political history, the opposition parties found the government to be in contempt of Parliament and expressed non-confidence in the government.

Why did this happen?

Elections in Canada are called for one of three reasons: the Canada Elections Act requires that an election be called at least once every five years; the government decides that, based on their popularity, the time is right to call an election with the intention of increasing their number of seats in the House of Commons; the government is defeated on a matter of confidence, such as the budget. This was the reason for the May 2 election.

How was the government defeated?

In early March 2011, the Speaker of the House of Commons, Peter Milliken, ruled that the government broke the rules of Parliament twice: first, by refusing to remove from office a cabinet minister who lied to Parliament; and second, for failing to provide cost estimates for crime legislation, F-35 fighter jet purchases, and corporate tax cuts.

Responding to this ruling, the opposition parties of the Liberals, New Democrats, and Bloc Québécois decided to work via committee to produce a report for the House of Commons that

would focus on the government's failure to disclose costs of proposed legislation. Because of the government's perceived "unethical" actions, the opposition parties, in particular the Liberals, aimed to hold the Conservative government in contempt of Parliament (*Toronto Star*, March 18, 2011). However, finding the government in contempt is not enough to defeat them because it is not specifically a confidence motion.

Speculation of the government's defeat heightened when the Conservatives tabled their budget on March 22, 2011. Soon after Finance Minister Jim Flaherty delivered his budget speech to the House of Commons, the leaders of the Bloc and the Liberals announced that they planned to vote against the budget. Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff stated that "we're forced to reject the budget and we're also forced to reject a government that shows so little respect for parliamentary democracy and our democratic institutions" (*Toronto Star*, March 23, 2011).

Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe argued that his party could not support the budget because it did not meet the needs of his province. New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton also opposed the budget because it did not meet his party's specific requests for increased funding to hire new doctors and nurses, to support low-income seniors, and to raise pension benefits. In response, Flaherty argued that "the job of the government is not to appease opposition

Definition

Non-confidence motion: A motion that means that the government has lost the confidence of the majority of the members of Parliament; as a result, the government must either resign or request the Governor General to dissolve Parliament and call an election

parties” and that the government would refuse any amendments to the budget (*Toronto Star*, March 23, 20011).

Unless a minority government is able to successfully negotiate with and convince opposition parties to vote in favour of their legislation—as the Harper-led Conservatives had done with prior budgets over the past few years—it would be impossible for them to maintain the confidence of the House and remain in power. The Conservatives did not have enough seats in Parliament to pass legislation on their own.

Start the Election Engines

On March 25, 2011, the Conservative government was defeated by a vote of 156-145 in favour of the Liberal motion that held the government in contempt of Parliament and expressed non-confidence in the government due to the opposition parties’ refusal to support the government’s budget. Prime Minister Harper then requested the Governor General, David Johnston, to dissolve the 40th Parliament and issue, or “drop,” a writ of election. The next day, May 2, election campaigning officially began.

Follow-up

As a potential voter, indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements. Be prepared to defend your decision either in writing or orally.

1. The opposition parties had a sound rationale for bringing down the minority Conservative government.
2. The opposition parties used this opportunity to bring down the government in order to gain greater political power.
3. The minority Conservative government should be held accountable for their actions.

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The Issues

Focus for Reading

As you read the following information, rank the issues that you feel are most important (#1) to least important (#3). Highlight or circle the political party that you would support on each of these issues. Also list any other issues that you think political parties should address.

Even before the 2011 federal election was officially called, the major political parties used surveys to find out what issues were important to the Canadian electorate. The public's response often

shaped the platforms that were launched on the campaign trail. The following information outlines the position of the major political parties on a few of these issues.

Jobs/Economy

In the spring of 2011, economic recovery in Canada was still considered to be fragile. According to Statistics Canada, the country's unemployment rate was 7.7 per cent in March 2011.

Conservative	Liberal	NDP	Bloc	Green
<p>Top priority remains the economy.</p> <p>Focus on creating jobs and economic growth by keeping taxes low.</p> <p>Increase trade with emerging markets like India.</p> <p>Provide skills training for unemployed Canadians.</p>	<p>Increase corporate tax rates by 1.5%.</p> <p>Limit the lucrative tax break on stock options over \$100,000.</p> <p>Cut government advertising, limit the size of cabinet, and reduce spending on consultants.</p> <p>Review all federal program spending and cut wasteful spending.</p>	<p>Ensure economic prosperity through proper regulation, strategic investments in both physical and social infrastructure.</p> <p>Give small businesses a 2% tax cut.</p> <p>Give tax credits for companies that hire in Canada.</p>	<p>Ask for compensation from Ottawa for the harmonization of Quebec's sales taxes back to 1992.</p> <p>Support sustainable development through the development of new technologies.</p> <p>Give tax credits for research and innovation.</p> <p>Develop a comprehensive support plan for the manufacturing and forest industries.</p>	<p>Apply 2% of the GDP to continue stimulus spending.</p> <p>Develop a "smart economy" by turning old-industry blue-collar jobs into new-industry green-collar jobs.</p> <p>Generate demand for green products. Invest \$2-billion in a national rail service.</p> <p>Improve access to EI for workers who qualify.</p> <p>Increase corporate taxes to 19%.</p>

Source: CBC News Canada Votes 2011, www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canadavotes2011/votecompass/; CTV online news, www.ctv.ca/mini/election2011/platforms/index.html; political party Web sites

Health Care

Constitutionally, health care in Canada falls under provincial and territorial jurisdictions, but transfer payments or funds are needed from the federal government to cover rising costs, especially as the Canadian population ages. Presently, health-care spending consumes approximately 40 per cent of provincial budgets (*The Globe and Mail*, March 31, 2011).

Conservative	Liberal	NDP	Bloc	Green
<p>Canadians should have reasonable access to timely, quality health-care services, regardless of their ability to pay.</p> <p>Provinces and territories should have maximum flexibility to deliver health services within a universal, public health-care system.</p> <p>Add a sixth principle to the Canada Health Act to provide federal funding.</p> <p>New family doctors and nurses who work in rural areas will have some of their Canada Student Loans covered.</p>	<p>Universal access to quality, timely care regardless of ability to pay, and regardless of location is part of what defines Canada.</p> <p>Introduce strategies such as: health promotion, sport, and national food programs.</p> <p>Improve coverage of prescription drug costs.</p> <p>Hire more doctors and nurses for rural areas.</p>	<p>Work with provincial and territorial partners to promote a single-payer system and replace fee-for-service delivery.</p> <p>All Canadians should have universal access to high-quality public health care.</p> <p>Fight the privatization of public health-care services.</p> <p>Hire and train more doctors and nurses and provide incentives to encourage Canadian physicians working abroad to return.</p>	<p>Expand R&D program for pharmaceutical sector.</p>	<p>Fully support the Canada Health Act (CHA). Believe the five criteria of the CHA are non-negotiable.</p> <p>Oppose any level of privatized, for-profit health care.</p> <p>Implement a pharmacare program to reduce the cost of prescription drugs.</p> <p>Focus on preventative health-care strategies.</p> <p>National campaign to discourage marijuana use.</p> <p>Help and support elderly populations.</p>

Source: CBC News Canada Votes 2011, www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canadavotes2011/votecompass/; CTV online news, www.ctv.ca/mini/election2011/platforms/index.html; political party Web sites

Environment

During campaigning, the focus was mainly on economic recovery, with less emphasis on other issues. The exclusion of the Green Party from the national debates is thought to have diminished the profile of the environment issue in the 2011 federal election.

Conservative	Liberal	NDP	Bloc	Green
<p>Conserve and protect the environment by working toward a National Conservation Plan.</p> <p>Establish a new national park in Toronto's Rouge Valley.</p> <p>Make investments in clean energy research such as carbon capture storage.</p> <p>Set domestic greenhouse gas emission targets to be in line with the United States at 17% reduction from 2005 levels by 2020.</p>	<p>Implement a Green Renovation Tax Credit to retrofit over 1 million homes by 2017.</p> <p>Invest in clean resources, establish clean energy partnerships.</p> <p>Create a cap-and-trade system for industry.</p> <p>Reinvest revenue from capped oil sands tax breaks for development into technologies to reduce environmental impacts from oil sands.</p>	<p>Adopt the Climate Change Accountability Act to ensure that Canada reduces greenhouse gas emissions to a level 80% below 1990 by the year 2050.</p> <p>Establish interim emission reduction targets for 2015-2045.</p> <p>Use revenues raised from the sale of emission permits to invest in green technologies and transition to a green economy.</p> <p>Enact a national public transit strategy.</p>	<p>Fight climate change; apply the Kyoto Protocol, with a true carbon market, based on a territorial approach.</p> <p>Provide tax incentives to help families convert their home heating system from oil to hydroelectricity.</p> <p>Provide a refundable tax credit for transit passes.</p> <p>Re-establish the eco AUTO Rebate Program for fuel-efficient vehicles.</p>	<p>Reduce Canadian emissions 30% below 1990 levels by 2020, and to 85% below 1990 by 2040 regardless of what other countries do.</p> <p>Implement policies to reduce Canada's greenhouse gas emissions and commit to technology and financial transfers to help developing countries meet their emission targets.</p> <p>No further development on the oil sands.</p>

Source: CBC News Canada Votes 2011, www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canadavotes2011/votecompass/; CTV online news, www.ctv.ca/mini/election2011/platforms/index.html; political party Web sites

Follow-up

Select one of the five political parties and create a one- to two-page campaign "flyer" (hardcopy or digital) that will be used by your selected party to outline their position on the important issues of this election. The information in your flyer needs to attract and convince voters to support your party. Use related party images, logos, and colours as well as a catchy slogan.

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On the Campaign Trail

Did you know . . .

The Internet was used extensively in the 2011 election campaign not only by political parties but also by individuals to increase voter engagement.

Reading Prompt

What qualities do you think a leader should have? As you read the information that follows, ask yourself if each party leader possesses those qualities.

Research into voting patterns and behaviour indicates that some Canadians vote for a party because they like that party's leader the best. How did the various leaders' styles, events, and party strategies contribute to the twists and turns on the 2011 federal election campaign trail?

Leaders' Styles

Stephen Harper, Conservative Party

- Has led the longest-running minority government.
- Described as being decisive and a strong manager by his supporters but labelled as controlling and undemocratic by his critics.
- What needed to win? Convince voters that he is the most competent leader to guide Canada into economic recovery and to trust him enough to be granted a majority government.
- Biggest challenge? To appear more approachable, likeable, and trustworthy to the electorate.

Michael Ignatieff, Liberal Party

- 2011 general election was his first national campaign; all the other leaders had prior election experience.
- Described as being passionate and unscripted; he liked to answer questions and hold town hall forums, and enjoyed meeting Canadians along the election trail.
- What needed to win? Canadians had to get to know him and his party's platforms, and he had to learn to talk in "sound bites."

- Biggest challenges? To get Canadians to buy into his message. Continual defence against Conservative online and television ads portraying him as an academic elite, unpatriotic, and selfish.

Jack Layton, New Democratic Party

- Long-time politician who started his career as a Toronto City councillor.
- Described as enthusiastic, passionate about social democratic ideas, and hard-working.
- What needed to win? Canadians had to be convinced he could lead the country.
- Biggest challenge? Reassuring the public that his health was improving after battling prostate cancer and recovering from hip surgery.

Gilles Duceppe, Bloc Québécois

- Longest-serving federal leader and experienced politician.
- First politician ever directly elected to the House of Commons on a sovereignty-based platform.
- Described as intelligent and as someone who thrives on the media spotlight.
- What needed to win? Not expected to ever win seats outside Quebec.
- Biggest challenge? To keep Quebec voters interested in sovereignty in the wake of pressing national and international economic and environmental issues.

Elizabeth May, Green Party

- Has never been elected to the House of Commons despite the fact that over half

- a million voters supported the Green Party in the 2008 general election.
- Well-known environmental activist and former founding executive director of the Sierra Club of Canada—a prominent environmental group.
- Described as tenacious and intelligent.
- Biggest challenge? To raise the profile of the Greens across the country—not just focusing on the British Columbia riding of Saanich-Gulf Islands that May hoped to win—and to convince Canadians that the Greens are not just a single-issue (environment) party.

Analysis

Attack ads were used by the Conservatives, Liberals, and NDP, throughout the campaign. Some of these ads ran digitally or on the television and radio. Read through the following attack-ad excerpts:

- Conservative ad on Michael Ignatieff: “He (Ignatieff) did not come back (to Canada) for you” (www.conservative.ca)
- Conservative ad on Jack Layton: “Canada will pay the price” (www.conservative.ca)
 - Liberal ad on Stephen Harper: “Harper: Demanding Absolute Power” (www.liberal.ca)
- NDP ad on Ignatieff and Harper: “Ignatieff failed his first test as leader. Jack Layton is the only leader strong enough to stand up to Harper. Down with Ignatieff” (www.ndp.ca)
 - a) What do you think are the purposes of these attack ads?
 - b) Was your perception of the leaders influenced by these ads? Why or why not?
 - c) Do you think attack ads are an effective campaign strategy or do they turn off voters?

Working in small groups, read each of the following quotes made by the political leaders during the 2011 campaign. Ask yourself the following:

- a) Why do you think the leaders made these statements?
- b) Do you agree or disagree with these statements?
- c) Would you vote for these leaders? Why or why not?

Record your responses to each quote on a separate piece of paper. Pass the pieces of paper around the group and respectfully comment on your group member’s responses. As a group, discuss the similarities and differences within your responses.

Quote 1

“How could we accept putting our confidence in people who don’t even speak our language?” — Bloc leader, Gilles Duceppe (*The Globe and Mail*, May 2, 2011)

Quote 2

“To make sure the economy stays on track for all of us and the next Parliament does not raise taxes, Canada needs a stable majority Conservative government.” — Conservative leader, Stephen Harper (*The Globe and Mail*, May 2, 2011)

Quote 3

“Let’s work together . . . to make life better for seniors who are living in poverty, to make our policies for the environment the most advanced.” — NDP leader Jack Layton (*The Globe and Mail*, May 2, 2011)

Quote 4

“We’ve got a contest in this election between the politics of fear and the politics of hope. And we are the party of hope.” — Michael Ignatieff, Liberal leader (*Calgary Herald*, April 16, 2011)

Quote 5

“We need hope over fear, we need compassion over competition, we need to recognize that Canadians deserve a government where 308 MPs figure out how to work together. Whether a majority or a minority, we are elected to serve the people of Canada, not any one political ideology. ” — Elizabeth May, Green Party leader (CBC Canada Votes online, May 2, 2011)

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Activity: Why are we not voting?

Did you know . . .

Australia has one of the best-known compulsory voting systems whereby all eligible voters must be registered and cast their ballot on election day or be fined.

Even though the 2011 election has resulted in significant changes to political parties and ultimately to the functioning of the 41st Parliament, does this change reflect the interests of Canadians? With the third-lowest voter turnout in election history the question remains: why are people not voting?

Election Results – By the Numbers:

The following table outlines the 2011 general election results and compares them with the 2008 election results.

Party	2011 Election # seats won	2011 Election % of popular vote	2008 Election # seats won	2008 Election % of popular vote
Conservative	167	39.62	143	37.63
NDP	102	30.62	37	18.20
Liberal	34	18.91	77	26.24
Bloc	4	6.05	49	9.97
Green	1	3.91	0	6.80
Independent	0	0.43	2	0.65

Source: CBC News Canada Votes 2011 and 2008, www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canadavotes/

Your Task

Part 1

As a political expert, you have been asked to join a three- or four-member panel to answer the question: Did the outcome of the 2011 Federal election accurately reflect Canadian's desire for political change?

Using information from this issue of *News in Review* as well as careful analysis of the 2011 election results, formulate your answer by taking into consideration the following:

- Social media: Will they get more people interested in politics?
- Leadership styles, campaign strategies, and election issues: Do Canadians feel connected?
- Electoral reform: Would alternatives like compulsory voting and proportional representation more accurately reflect voter's choices and increase voter turnout?

Be prepared to present and to defend your answer(s) to fellow classmates.

Part 2

After listening to other panel members' answers, write a post-election blog. Your blog needs to be three to five lines in length and respond to the following statement in a concise yet convincing manner: *"Politics are boring. I don't like any of the leaders. Nothing is going to change. My vote doesn't really count, anyway."*

Remember to start your blog off with a catchy title.