



The downtown 416 Toronto skyline seen from suburban 905-land. 905 gave the Conservatives a sweep in 2011. In 2015 it swept them out. Istock photo

So Much for the Big Shift: How Ontario Went Liberal

Thomas S. Axworthy and Rana Shamoon

When Stephen Harper was propelled to a majority government in 2011 in part thanks to a sweep of Ontario ridings around Toronto, some concluded that his victory represented a fundamental shift in Canadian electoral patterns. Justin Trudeau, the Liberal Party and Ontario voters proved that theory wrong on Oct. 19. Tom Axworthy and Rana Shamoon analyze the results of the 2015 campaign in the country's most populous province, and what they could mean for Trudeau in four years.

In Canadian Federal Elections, all roads to power in Ottawa run through Ontario: It is the indispensable province. In the 2015 election, after redistribution, Ontario gained 15 new seats for a total of 121 seats compared to 78 seats in Quebec, 62 seats in the Prairies, 42 seats in British Columbia, and 32 seats in Atlantic Canada. In 2015, the Liberal Party of Justin Trudeau won 80 Ontario seats, compared to 11 in 2011; the Conservative Party won 33, down from 73 in 2011; and the NDP won 8 seats, down from 22 in 2011.

The 80 Ontario Liberal seats form more than 43 per cent of the total Liberal caucus. The Liberal success in Ontario is the fundamental bedrock in explaining how the country's "natural governing party" returned to govern.

Number of seats by party in Ontario		
	2011	2015
Conservative	73	33
Liberal	11	80
NDP	22	8
Total seats	106	121

Percentage votes by party in Ontario		
	2011	2015
Conservative	44.4%	35.0%
Liberal	25.3%	44.8%
NDP	25.6%	16.6%
Total Voter Turnout	61.5%	68.5%

So what happened? What are the big Ontario takeaways from 2015? Elections are won by bringing out your core vote, attracting new voters to your camp, depressing your opponent's core vote so that they will at least stay home, and attracting vote switches. The Liberal campaign succeeded on these fronts in Ontario in 2015. Turnout was the first key change: 68.3 per cent voting in Ontario compared to 61.5 per cent in 2011. The Trudeau campaign theme of generational change was predicated on the assumption that new voters could be enticed to the polls. And the increase of voters in Ontario proved detrimental to the Harper Conservatives, who had a dedicated pool of support but without much growth potential. In 2011, the Liberal base—disenchanted by then-leader Michael Ignatieff—stayed home: The raw number of Liberal voters fell from 1,743,241 in 2008, to only 1,400,302 in 2011. But in 2015, the raw Liberal vote jumped to 2,923,791, a 1.5 million increase. In Ottawa and Toronto, for example, the Liberal vote was over 50 per cent compared to a third for the Conservatives and 13 per cent for the NDP. The Liberal campaign was textbook—the base turned out, the opponent's base support fell, and new voters added enough weight to win an eightfold increase in seats.

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Number of votes by party in Ontario		
	2011	2015
Conservative	2,457,463	2,287,179
Liberal	1,400,302	2,923,791
NDP	1,417,435	1,084,555
Total Voter Turnout	5,531,478	6,532,714

This was most evident in the Greater Toronto Area: the GTA received 11 of the 15 new Ontario seats awarded in the redistribution. At 55 seats, this is more seats than eight of the provinces. The GTA is two distinct political realms, labelled by area code: the 416 is Toronto proper while the 905 suburban belt includes the municipalities that surround it. The party that wins the 905 wins government. In 2011, the Conservatives won 21 of 22 seats in the 905 and nine of 23 in the 416. But in 2015, in the larger GTA pool after redistribution, the Liberals won all of the seats in the 416 and 24 of 29 seats in the 905. Symbolic of this shift, heroine of the 905, legendary Mississauga mayor Hazel McCallion, not only endorsed the Liberals but she starred in campaign ads. Southern Ontario stayed largely Conservative but the 905 turned red and that was the difference. “Are you ready for change, my friends?” asked Trudeau at an October rally of 7,000 supporters in Brampton. They were ready.

The Conservatives were defeated in Ontario but not routed. The Conservatives' raw vote fell from 2,457,463 in 2011 to 2,287,179 in 2015, a notable decline in a larger voter pool to be sure, but not a calamitous one. The Conservatives still have 35 per cent of the vote in Ontario (compared to

the Liberals 45 per cent). The Conservative message of low taxes, less government and a more bellicose foreign policy resonated with millions of voters. But there was widespread repudiation of the mores and tactics of the Harper PMO, with even dedicated conservative-leaning Canadians like Conrad Black and Andrew Coyne publicly leaving the Conservative camp. Leaders have a shelf life and Harper was overripe.

The one truly catastrophic result was for the NDP, led by Tom Mulcair. The NDP vote in Ontario fell from 1,417,435 in 2011 to 1,084,555 in 2015—roughly 30 per cent of their 2011 support in Ontario either stayed home or voted for another party. In 2015 in Ontario, the NDP had only 16.6 per cent of the vote and eight seats compared to 25.6 per cent of the vote and 22 seats in 2011.

After the debacle of the 2011 Liberal campaign, both the Conservatives and NDP were gleeful. The “strange death of Liberal Canada” was largely forecast by partisans in both camps, as the Conservatives hoped to create a permanent Conservative majority coalition, and the NDP planned to vault from opposition to government by replacing the Liberal Party as the moderate progressive hope. The astounding 2011 election result saw the NDP rise from third to second with 103 seats, and the Conservatives seemingly firmly ensconced with a majority of 166. In 2011, with an unpopular Liberal leader and a galvanizing Jack Layton at the helm of the NDP, the country, especially Ontario and Quebec, bled blue and orange. But it turned out to be a blip, not a critical re-alignment election. As Brian Mulroney once observed, the Liberal Party is a tough old bird, not easily

disposed of. And so it proved in 2015.

The 2015 election was a referendum on Stephen Harper—a referendum the Conservatives lost. But with 70 per cent of voters desiring change, it was much less clear who would be the beneficiary of the “time for a change” sentiment. Trudeau was aided by the mistakes of his opponents, especially those of Thomas Mulcair. Orange is not the new red: Mulcair ran a campaign as a sitting prime minister before he had ever been elected to the post. Keith Davey, the famous Liberal rainmaker, used to say that Liberals had to campaign from the left and govern on the right. Mulcair changed the formula to campaign from the right and be left behind. The NDP running on a platform of a balanced budget gave an opening on the progressive side of the ledger that Justin Trudeau happily capitalized upon. Federally, this was a repeat of what had happened in Ontario in the provincial election of 2014—Andrea Horwath ignored the progressive base in her own party and the province, and Kathleen Wynne and the Ontario Liberals were allowed to outflank the NDP. The strategists of the 2015 Liberal campaign were close observers of Wynne’s success and were no doubt delighted that the NDP proved once again that those who forget history are condemned to repeat it. The NDP’s travails at least provoked one of the truly funny comments by CBC *At Issue* pundit Bruce Anderson assessing the shift of the NDP to the right. Anderson said wryly that it was hard to imagine the union core of the NDP massing in protest to the cry “What do we want? A balanced budget! When do we want it? Now!”

In the aftermath of the 2015 campaign, Liberals are triumphant. But there is danger in hubris, a condition which some believe is engrained in the Liberal Party’s DNA. Charles de Gaulle, no mean strategist himself, once reflected that the seeds of eventual defeat are usually sown in the immediate aftermath of one’s greatest victory. So in assessing the successful 2015 Liberal campaign in Ontario and Canada, what dangers lurk in a too-optimistic view that happy days are

here again as the former natural governing party returns to government? This question was asked to a day-after panel organized by the Toronto Board of Trade featuring noted strategists from each of the major parties: Jaime Watt, John Duffy and Robin McLachlan. This impressive trio noted three definite mistakes or misreadings of the 2015 campaign that Trudeau will have to avoid. The first is that, while acknowledging the skill of the Liberal campaign, the Liberals greatly benefited from the errors of their opponents, most notably the strategic blunder of the NDP’s small-c conservative stance, and the Conservatives’ fixation on the niqab issue, and jumping the shark with a brazen announcement about a hotline for “barbaric cultural practices.” The Liberals cannot count on such electoral gifts from the gods in future campaigns.

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Second, the Liberal campaign took over a portion of the progressive base of the NDP, and Justin Trudeau will be hard pressed to keep it. The promise of the Liberal electoral platform on health, tax cuts, infrastructure, First Nations, and so on, will be difficult to achieve given the state of the Canadian economy. This will require great skills at balancing multiple demands as expectations are high and Trudeau must avoid the fate of promising much but delivering little. The Liberals gathered behind their sails the overwhelming time-for-a-change sentiment, but it will be very easy to get blown off course.

Last, the Liberals swept Ontario but they did very well in Quebec, too, winning 40 seats and 35 per cent of the vote, their best showing since 1980 under Pierre Trudeau. The Quebec regional campaign also had an impact in Ontario: as the NDP began to crash in Quebec because of the niqab issue and the return of the Bloc Québécois, the air began to slowly seep from the balloon of Tom Mulcair. As the NDP began to fall, the anybody-but-Harper vote across the country, but especially in Ontario, coalesced around Trudeau. Historically, the reason why the Liberal Party has been so successful is because of its Quebec base. As a Quebecer, Justin Trudeau has a chance to restore that base. But responding to Quebec’s aspirations while keeping the rest of the country on side (or at least not opposed) requires tremendous judgment and a lot of luck. Quebec is the weathervane of Canadian politics—swinging wildly from the Bloc, to the NDP, and now the Liberals. With a prime minister from Quebec, issues of bi-national, bicultural coexistence, often on the back-burner in recent years, may re-enter the national conversation in a way that moves beyond the Constitutional battles of the past.

Since the early 1960s, when Lester Pearson and Walter Gordon made Ontario—and especially Toronto—the heart of the modern Liberal Party, the campaign truism has been “As Ontario goes, so goes the Liberal Party”. In 2015, Ontario returned to its Liberal roots. Yet, this attachment was lukewarm at the beginning of the campaign, only gradually coalescing around the Liberals as the best vehicle to remove Stephen Harper. In 2019, Justin Trudeau will face the challenge of winning Ontario on his own record, not as a reaction to the defects of an opponent. **P**

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