

ELECTION PRIMER FOR DIPLOMATS

Hosted by Carleton University's Initiative for Parliamentary and Diplomatic Engagement

Opening remarks

- Dr. Benoit-Antoine Bacon – President and Vice-Chancellor of Carleton University

Panellists

- Joël-Denis Bellavance – Award-winning observer of national affairs and Ottawa bureau chief for *La Presse*
- Heather Scofield – Economic columnist for the *Toronto Star* and former bureau chief for *The Canadian Press*
- Christopher Waddell – Professor and former Director of the Carleton School of Journalism and Communication

Guest presenter

- David Coletto – CEO, Abacus Data

Closing Remarks

- Dr. André Plourde – Dean of the Faculty of Public Affairs, Carleton University

Moderator:

- Maureen Boyd – Director, Carleton Initiatives for Parliamentary and Diplomatic Engagement

Welcoming remarks (Dr. Benoit-Antoine Bacon)

- Warm welcome to the 80 diplomatic missions attending this primer.
- Carleton University was ranked among the top five universities in Canada by Maclean's.
- The university is undergoing a strategic planning process; a key pillar of the planning is close engagement with the diplomatic community.
- Carleton is pleased to offer this primer. Election results are difficult to predict this year.

Presentation on Abacus Data's latest election polls (David Coletto) – see slides

Overview of the election campaign

- The 2019 election campaign feels different than previous ones. Its focus is unclear, as no central key policy issue has emerged.
- It has been a close race. Predicting results is impossible at this point.
- This election has been compared to the 1972 election, which had a similar situation: Pierre Trudeau, a charismatic and popular leader when first elected in 1968, did not deliver on the high expectations put on him in his first term. He ran again against a "dull" opposition leader and barely won a minority government.

- Until Feb 2019, Canadians were unique among G7 members in thinking their country was headed in the right direction. Their optimism dwindled when the SNC-Lavalin scandal broke, but satisfaction rates remain higher than in other countries.
- Canadians have a defensive stance this time. They are more fearful of the future, especially in the Prairies, and somewhat in Quebec. They are anxious about world events (unstable US politics, Brexit, Trade Wars, Iran) and think the world is less secure.
 - This is in contrast with the optimism and hopefulness felt in the 2015 election.
- Most Canadians describe the current economy as good or acceptable. They aren't under short-term economic pressures.

Popularity of party leaders

- Trudeau was viewed positively by Canadians for a long time, except on these occasions:
 - His trip to India in February 2018
 - The SNC-Lavalin scandal in February 2019. The numbers haven't recovered since.
 - The brown face incident did not have a big impact on his approval ratings
- Opposition leader Andrew Scheer was not well known when he became the Conservative Party leader. Today, he is similarly liked and disliked among Canadians.
- Scheer and Trudeau have about the same level of popularity currently.
- Canadians have a more favourable view of the remaining party leaders (NDP, Green Party, Bloc Québécois), with the exception of PPC leader Maxime Bernier.
- NDP's Jagmeet Singh is the only leader who saw a significant improvement in his approval ratings over the time of the campaign.

Polling trend lines

- Numbers have been relatively equal on both sides and they have been stable.
- Results are very different across the country. There is a growing sense of regionalism based on issues of energy and climate change.
 - The Conservatives have significant support in Alberta (AB) and Saskatchewan (SK).
 - In Atlantic, the Liberals are doing well, albeit not as well as before.
 - In Quebec, the Liberals are ahead but the Bloc Québécois (BQ) is gaining traction.
 - In Ontario, rural areas lean Conservative while urban areas lean Liberal.
- If Canadians voted today, 54% would choose a Liberal government and 46% would choose a Conservative one. NDP, Green and BQ supporters would support the Liberals.
 - Liberals seemingly have an advantage, but this can change based on voter turnouts, debate results, etc. It is still too close to call.

Important election issues

- Affordability is the most important issue for 58% of Canadians. Most parties have a wide-range of policies on this, all aimed at reducing cost of living.
- Canadians are also concerned about taxes (44% of Canadians care), climate change (42% care, it is the most polarized issue) and health care (41% care).
- Foreign relations with the US and China are somewhat important to Canadians but they are not a priority.

- The Liberal Party is focused on housing, mental health, health care, climate change, poverty, inequality and indigenous people reconciliation.
- The Conservative Party is focused on reducing the deficit, lowering taxes, the economic plan, oil, and refugee policies.
- Canadians have very different priorities based on where they live. Albertans are mostly concerned about pipelines and oil while Eastern Canada is mostly concerned about climate change. This has created a huge divide in Canada.

Maureen Boyd invites panellists to take their seats and introduces them to the audience.

Question 1 – For Heather Scoffield: We saw the slides that talked about affordability and taxes being the key issues. Is that what is driving public opinion? How has that changed over the course of the campaign?

Scoffield responds:

- The issue has indeed become a vote driver in the minds of political strategists, and it has become central to every party's campaign. They have all pitched tax proposals, tax measures or benefits. Their hope is to drive up public opinion.
 - For example, Scheer proposed to implement free museum admissions, Trudeau proposed to make camping more accessible for low-income families.
- Affordability was very central to the campaign until Trudeau's black face incident. Since then, the discussions have focused more on the leaders' trustworthiness and their ability to represent Canada overseas.
- The campaign is now centered on an image issue. Canadians evolved from asking themselves which party would bring them more prosperity to "which leader can I trust more to represent Canada in a respectable and honourable way?"

Question 2 – For Joël-Denis Bellavance: As a francophone born in New Brunswick who writes for a newspaper in Quebec and someone who spent his summer travelling in Western Canada, can you talk to us about regional differences in Canada and the suburban-urban split?

Bellavance responds:

- These differences will drive a lot of the results that we will see on election night.
- The divide is real. There are a lot of angry people in Saskatchewan, Alberta, and in certain areas of BC.
- After the election, Canada will probably focus on solving internal problems instead of international ones. The next Prime Minister will face issues of internal unity.
 - For example, the Premier of Alberta wants to hold a referendum on equalization payments. These payments are meant to distribute wealth across Canada and they benefit Quebec most prominently. They are part of the Constitution. In order to open and change the Constitution, a majority of provinces and the federal government have to agree.
 - Depending on who wins the election, the AB Premier might hold a referendum on a better economic deal with the rest of Canada, including pipeline construction.

- The worst scenario for AB is a Liberal minority government supported by the Green party. There will be a real danger to national unity if this happens. Indeed, it is likely that support will grow for separatist movements in Alberta.
 - Some of these movements met after Brexit and called for a separation of the Western provinces – “Wexit”. They think that if AB leaves, SK will go with them and they could form a new country.
 - The difference between this movement and the one in Quebec is that business people are ready to finance it.
 - Former SK Premier Brad Wall could be the face of this separatist movement. If this happens, Canadians will face a huge problem because he is very popular.
 - It is unclear how successful these separatist movements will be.

Question 3 – For Christopher Waddell: How does this campaign differ from the past? Is there a lack of vision or principled leadership in this election?

Waddell responds:

- It seems that our political leaders have forgotten they need to tell a bigger story. They haven’t done that yet.
- A lot of the media coverage has been on what parties want covered. We haven’t seen a significant attempt by the media to do something different or unique, which reflects the fact that newsrooms are getting smaller and have less funding. Depth of coverage has suffered as a result.
- Although this election resembles the one in 1972, it is actually more similar to the 1980 election. In 1980, the results were split between Eastern and Western Canada. Eastern provinces voted Liberal while western provinces elected Conservatives and a few NDPs. There were big conflicts on oil prices. This time, conflict is likely to arise on the issue of climate change. QC and AB/SK have opposite views on this issue.

Maureen concludes the first round of questions. She starts a new round with David Coletto.

Question 4 – Foreign policy in Canada and Canada’s role in the world are moving away from traditional non-partisanship. How is this reflected in the campaign and what does it mean? Is it just something that we note and that people talk about, or will it affect Canadians’ voting decisions?

Coletto responds:

- It is not hugely important to people. Implicitly in their choices, people recognize that whoever becomes Prime Minister will represent Canada abroad.
 - Some of Trudeau’s actions over the last four years and recent incidents have affected Canadians’ perception of him.
- Parties aren’t talking about foreign policy, except Scheer who announced he would decrease foreign aid. There were some discussions on NAFTA and whether Scheer could negotiate a better deal, but none of the parties are prioritizing this issue.

- Public opinion exists only as leaders drive it. Leaders could decide to focus on foreign policy during this election, but they don't want to because it is harder to divide Canadians when it is unclear what Canada can or cannot do without its allies.

Waddell adds:

- In 1979, Trudeau lost an election to Joe Clark. Clark wanted to move Canada's embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. Scheer has the same intention. This was an issue for Canadians in 1979, but it doesn't seem to be an issue today.
- The Liberals have promoted peacekeeping as a Liberal virtue and a traditional Canadian value. Although Canada has done some peacekeeping in Mali in recent years, the Liberals have retracted Canadian troops, potentially because it isn't as popular anymore.

Bellavance adds:

- In the past, Canada has prided itself on embracing multilateralism. The Conservatives have moved away from this approach. Harper's government was highly critical of the UN. In 2010, we lost our bid to win a seat at the UN Security Council. The Liberals on the other hand have prioritized multilateralism and hope to win a UN Security Council seat in 2020.
- It will be interesting to see how and if the black face incident will affect Canada's reputation abroad, because it was widely mediatized across the world.

Scoffield adds:

- It was especially cringe-worthy since Canada sent numerous diplomats at the UN General Assembly shortly after the incident.
- Party leaders brought up foreign policy at the very start of the campaign (in June for Scheer, in August for Trudeau) and then they stopped talking about it.
- One thing to watch is the emergence of nativism; a trend that has spread across the world and that is starting in Canada. There are signs of nativism in the "Canada first" approach seen in some of the Green, NDP, and Conservative platforms and speeches.

Question 5 – Maureen asks the panellists: Let's talk about Bernier and his views, and Andrew Scheer's call to cut social development assistance by 5% - is that a dog whistle to populism?

Bellavance responds:

- Scheer knows that people won't protest to cuts to foreign aid the same way they would for cuts to social programs. He promised to balance the budget in the next five years so he has to find programs to cut. Cutting foreign aid is what will anger Canadians the least.

Waddell adds:

- That said, there might get a lot of foreign repercussions as we would be one of the countries with the lowest aid delivery.

Boyd remarks this contrasts to Norway's foreign aid, and notes that Norway is also eyeing a UNSC seat.

Question 6 – Maureen asks the panellists: What will you be looking for in next two weeks?

Bellavance responds:

- The English debate tonight as well as volatility. In the last election, 25% of QC voters decided whom they would vote for when they were at the booth. Parties getting people to vote can turn against them if they decide to vote against them at the last minute.

Waddell responds:

- In 2015, there were a lot of ridings where a variety of parties did very well. With so much division, candidates might win with less than 30% of the vote. We might see unprecedented results. In the latest polls, the Green party had lost some support.
- The evidence suggests that people don't make up their minds until the very end.

Bellavance adds:

- Young voters in 2015 massively supported Trudeau. This time around there seems to be more youth support for the Green party as they associate the party with the protection of environment. This could harm the Liberals.

Coletto responds:

- Students will be coming home for Thanksgiving and they might try to influence their parents. This could crystalize Canadians' voting decisions.

Waddell adds that this also happened in 2015 when Canadians were wondering who to vote for between the Liberals and the NDP.

Scofield responds:

- It will be interesting to see whether climate change will become a decisive issue after Thanksgiving. It is a key difference between the Liberals and Conservatives. If it becomes a key issue, Scheer will have to do something to detour everyone's attention from it.
- In 2015, Harper took more risks once the Conservatives felt their momentum slipping away. If something similar happens this year, it will be an interesting two weeks.

Question 7 – Maureen asks David Coletto: One of your slides showed that climate change was not a high priority for Canadians. David, could you speak about this?

Coletto responds:

- Climate change is not a priority for a third of Canadians, but it is an important issue for the remaining two-thirds. 42% of Canadians describe climate change as an emergency, but there is no consensus on the issue.
- Climate change won't become a countrywide issue until AB & SK citizens recognize it as important, because the Conservatives rely so heavily on their votes. Albertans are not climate change deniers, but their economy is tied very closely to the oil industry. They are not ready to turn off the tap, as it would harm their economy.

Waddell adds:

- The Liberals tend to attract urban votes while the Conservatives attract rural ones. Climate change is truly a rural/urban issue because if you live in a rural area, you need to drive more and you will be more heavily impacted by the carbon tax. The Liberals have not convinced the rural areas that there are good offset for their carbon tax.

QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE:

Questions from H.E. Andriy Shevchenko, Ukraine Ambassador to Canada: We are witnessing this wave of anti-establishment around the world, but it's not so apparent here in Canada. What makes Canadians immune to this movement while it's so prominent around the world? How can you explain why Canadian electoral campaigns are so different to the US?

Waddell responds:

- The main difference between Canadian and American elections is money and time. Normally, election campaigns in Canada last between 35 and 40 days, and this is getting shorter. As well, until the last decade, we didn't have fixed election dates.
- Unlike in American elections, where the political system is corrupted by money on many levels, our system has many limits on spending and donations. These are hard to get around in Canada, so there is nowhere near the same amount of lobbying.

Bellavance responds:

- There is also a huge difference in the number of parties that exist in Canada and the US. Here, we have 6 parties whereas the US only has two.
- In response to the first question, Canadians are looking for certainty and stability. We observe a lot of instability in the US, for example, by facing difficult negotiations on NAFTA. Canadians are thus suspicious of anti-establishment sentiments, but we do observe some bubbles of it with Maxime Bernier's party. Since the black face incident, the election has focused more on who has the biggest skeleton in their closets.

Scofield responds:

- Canada is not immune to populist forces, but it has taken a bit of a different form. The tone of our leaders is not as extreme. Except for Bernier, leaders are very weary of the dangers of populism and have avoided anti-populist language. Trudeau was very anti-populist and he had some influence on Canadians.

Coletto responds:

- Most Canadians are not angry as citizens of other countries who have put the blame on foreigners. Canadians have not faced a big migration influx, a big financial crisis or a Brexit. The increased price of oil was the biggest shock on their system and caused anger among some Canadians, but one of the mainstream parties (the CPC) is speaking to it in a contained way.

Question from Elinor Sloan, Professor at Carleton: Could you comment on the news that Andrew Scheer is a US citizen? Does it matter to you? Do you think it will become an election issue?

Bellavance responds:

- It does not personally matter to me. It could become an election issue because the Conservatives made a big deal out of Ignatieff, Dion and Mulcair's double nationalities. They asked them to renounce their second nationality. If this issue comes up during the debate, it is likely to be significant.
- It is important because Canadians have always feared becoming the "51st American state". They do not want to worry about Scheer being influenced by US politicians because of his American citizenship.

Questions from H.E. Souriya Otmani, Moroccan Ambassador to Canada: What role can Canadian media have on the election? Are you afraid of foreign influence in this campaign?

Scoffield responds:

- The media hasn't been spoon fed content by the parties. Its role is to inform people and the media takes this role very seriously.
- The media industry is in a very bad financial state. Media agencies cannot follow everyone so they have come up with a lot of creative solutions. Their webpages are filled with explainers and interactive pages on every election issue.
- In terms of informing the electorate, it comes down to individual choices. People might click on sports stories instead of political ones. Social media also plays a role: many young Canadians are getting their news from Instagram or other platforms.

Bellavance responds:

- There has been limited external influence in this election. There is evidence that foreign states have tried to influence the diaspora, but they have limited power because our political system is set-up in a way that people vote for individual MPs, not the Prime Minister. There also hasn't been as much fake news as there was for the US elections, potentially because there is less foreign interest in the outcome of this election.

Maureen Boyd thanks the panellists, the volunteers and the sponsors.

Concluding remarks: Dr. André Plourde

- To an economist, affordability concerns are intriguing as Inflation has been low for 35 years and the rate of unemployment is at its lowest in decades. Affordability concerns are related to high housing costs in Vancouver and Toronto which, ironically, are solid Liberal regions.
- AB is indeed angry and has been for a while due to disruptions in the financial sector and to rapid technological changes that have harmed the oil industry. But if Alberta separated, it would not be easy to connect pipelines to the sea if they had to cross two other countries.

- A Liberal minority would work better than a conservative minority because they could get more support from the other parties. If voters do want a change however, they would need to elect a conservative majority.