



# Change and Consistency in the 2008 Canadian General Election



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## Introduction

The Canadian general election of 2008 was not as much a victory for the governing party as it was a defeat for the opposition leader.

The Conservative minority government of Stephen Harper elected January 23, 2006 was remarkably resilient; it was the longest uninterrupted minority government in Canadian history. This owed in no small part to the election of Stéphane Dion as leader of the Liberal Party at the end of 2006. Dion is widely believed to have been elected because he was the second choice of most of the delegates. He spent most of his brief leadership fighting his adversaries within the party and had little time to prepare a strategy for taking down Harper. This was the opposite of what had occurred during the previous minority government of the Liberals under Paul Martin. From its election on June 28, 2004 until its defeat on November 28, 2005, Martin was ruthlessly shadowed by an official opposition under Harper that doggedly pursued the defeat of the government.

On the other hand, Harper actively solicited the defeat of his government, which never happened. Harper was boxed in by a pledge of fixed election dates, which precluded an election before October 2009 without an awkward act of reneging on Harper's part. By the end of August 2008, Harper was apparently more eager to defeat Dion at the polls than he was reluctant to renege on his fixed election dates pledge, and the election was called for October 14.

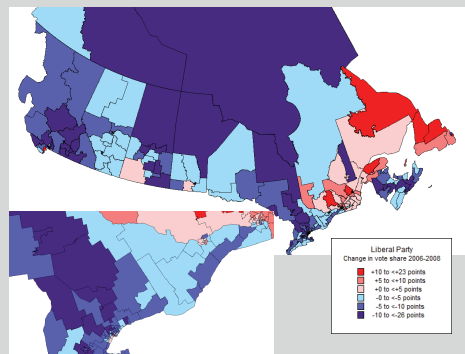
## Election results – October 14, 2008

	Dissolution	Election	Change
L	98	77	-21
C	127	143	+16
NDP	30	37	+7
BQ	49	49	0
Green	1	0	-1
Other	3	2	-1

Note: Vacant seats at dissolution count for party last holding (3L/1B)

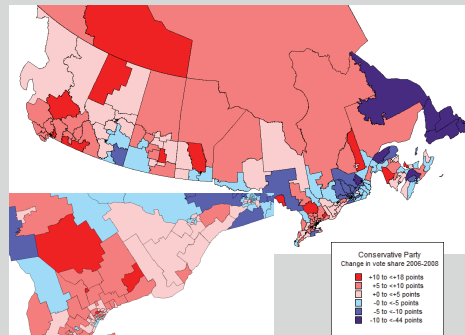
Harper's calculation paid off only in part. Although his minority government was increased from its previously marginal position (one seat smaller than the combined Liberal and NDP caucuses), the Tories fell short of a majority. The Liberal Party lost seats to both of its traditional rivals, plunging to an embarrassing 77 seats, less than half of what Jean Chrétien achieved in even the narrowest of his three majorities. The party gained nothing from Dion's controversial non-compete agreement with Green Leader Elizabeth May (who was included in the debates for the first time). These results spelled the end for Dion, who was forced to forge an unprecedented coalition with the other opposition parties in a desperate attempt to hold on to his leadership. Dion thus became the first Liberal leader in 120 years to fail to achieve the prime ministry.

## Liberal Party



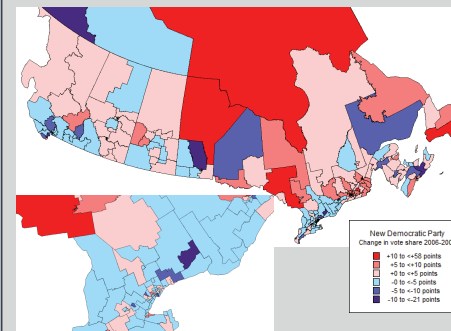
The Liberal Party share of the vote declined in 225 of 308 ridings. The gains in Quebec were not nearly enough to justify Dion's leadership, breaking the decades-old paradigm of strong support for Quebec leaders there. Losses in Ontario were devastating to the party that won all but one, two, and three seats in 1993, 1997, and 2000, respectively. Gains in Newfoundland and Labrador resulted from agitation against Harper by Premier Danny Williams.

## Conservative Party



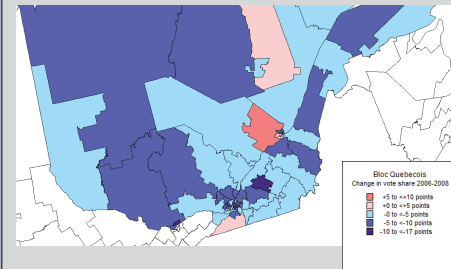
Conservative support increased in 202 ridings. In general, the party increased in support where it was most useful, particularly Ontario; losses tended to be in areas that were not fertile Tory ridings in the first place. The party fell back from the unexpected support it received in Quebec in 2006. The anyone-but-Harper campaign by Premier Danny Williams of Newfoundland and Labrador was successful; the Tories were wiped out there.

## New Democratic Party



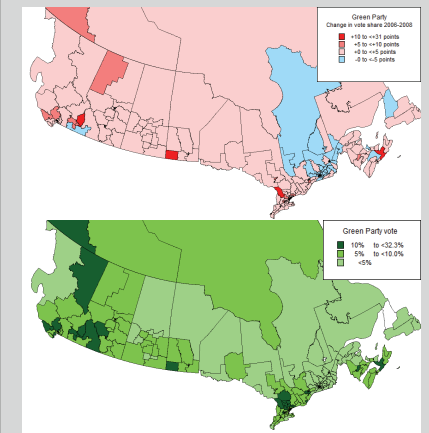
The New Democrats increased their seat count by seven and took second place in 67 ridings, compared to 53 second-place finishes in 2006. Overall, the party increased its vote share in regions where it was already strong. The party still holds a disconnected string of ridings for which campaigning requires extensive travel and inefficient marketing efforts by the leader (e.g., traveling a great distance to seek only one seat). Leader Jack Layton has established a 3-seat beachhead for the party in Toronto.

## Bloc Québécois



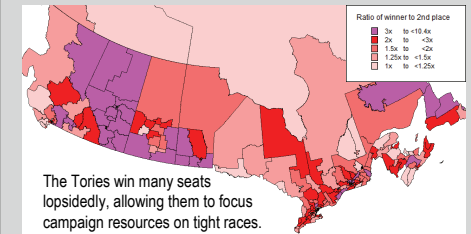
The Bloc made little progress in the 2008 election. Its vote share declined in 67 of 75 ridings. Its seat count of 49 was the same as at dissolution, counting one vacant Bloc riding. Bloc Leader Gilles Duceppe has now served in that capacity longer than the combined service of the other three leaders. In 2007, he quickly abandoned his attempted move to provincial politics. Less than two months after the national election, the December Quebec election only buoyed the Parti Québécois slightly while bolstering Liberal Premier Jean Charest greatly by restoring his party to majority status. The PQ did well enough that there will be no leadership vacancy for Duceppe to seek.

## Green Party



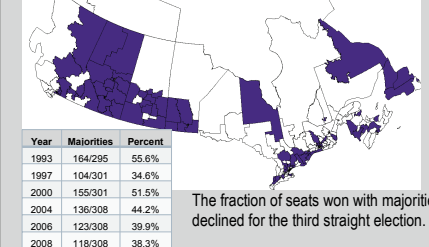
The Green Party remained marginal and increased its share of the vote only slightly in most of the country. The non-compete agreement between Leader Elizabeth May and Stéphane Dion led her to run in a Nova Scotia riding where her chance of winning was not optimum.

## Ratio of victories and Majorities



The Tories win many seats lopsidedly, allowing them to focus campaign resources on tight races.

## SEATS WON WITH MAJORITY



The fraction of seats won with majorities declined for the third straight election.