

Liberal Red, Conservative Blue, or Something New?: A First Nation Voter's Guide to the 2021 Federal Election

By Brock Pitawanakwat

IN THE FIRST pandemic federal election in over a century, not much has changed. The only two federal parties who have ever formed government are the Conservatives and Liberals. Both are polling in the low to mid-30s, which means each has the support of approximately one out of every three voters. The New Democratic Party (NDP) is hovering just below 20% or one in every five voters; securing the balance of power in a minority government situation is their best outcome at this point. The only other party with elected MPs running a national campaign is the Green Party who managed a mere three federal seats (out of 338) before one defected to the Liberals amid party infighting. The Greens are polling a distant 2-4% without further apparent breakthroughs in the final week of the campaign.

There are three critical questions in this election for potential First Nations voters. First, "why now?"

In a brazen attempt to secure the majority he lost in 2019, Liberal leader Justin Trudeau called an early election during the COVID pandemic's fourth wave. Trudeau's maneuver has been widely panned by media and his political opponents, which has contributed to the testy tone of his campaign. Gone are Trudeau's sunny ways that swept the Liberals into power in 2015 (if any of that sunlight lingered beyond the 2019 election).

The second question is, "where do First Nations people fit in this federal election?" Regardless of the reasons for the election, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) counts a record number of 77 self-identified Indigenous candidates.¹ The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) identifies 54 Indigenous candidates running, including eight for re-election, under all the major national parties' banners (CPC 3, Greens 3, Liberals 19, NDP 27).² Indigenous people are not only voting but are increasingly willing to join political parties and even run as candidates.

Finally, the most pertinent question is, "why should First Nations peoples care about this election?" Despite the increased participation of Indigenous candidates, it is unclear what this federal election might offer to First Nation communities.

Exploring this latter question more in depth, this brief considers the commitments to First Nations people and offers analysis for those who choose to participate in the 2021 federal election.

A FIRST NATION AGENDA?

Generally, each of the parties are vying for votes with platforms containing promises around the climate crisis, COVID pandemic, economic recovery, government spending, healthcare, housing, military spending, and other issues. Do these issues matter to First Nations voters, too? Or, put another way: what might it mean to “Vote Indigenous” or “Vote Reconciliation?” The diversity of First Nations across the country means there is no simple answer. One approach is to look at the federal parties’ promises that are specific to First Nations.

Unfortunately, those promises are relatively few. AFN National Chief RoseAnne Archibald laments the lack of First Nation engagement in this election and argued that there should have been a separate debate dedicated entirely to Indigenous issues.³ National Chief Archibald expressed her disappointment that none of the federal parties reached out to her prior to the election for input on their parties’ policies. The AFN served notice to the federal parties of its five priorities with its election document, “The Healing Path Forward: 2021 Federal Election Priorities for First Nations and Canada.”⁴

The AFN is demanding action according to five themes: reconciliation, climate, economic growth, respecting First Nations’ jurisdiction, and rebuilding First Nation communities.

So how does each Party measure on these points?

THE CONSERVATIVE LEGACY

The Conservatives are the major party that appear the least aligned with the AFN’s demands. This is no surprise considering its new leader Erin O’Toole served in the unpopular government of Stephen Harper that stubbornly resisted implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action, or to support an Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). The 2021 version of their platform focuses on economic and justice themes: Indigenous entrepreneurship, land conservation, mental health, policing and more mandatory sentences, resource development, safe drinking water on-reserve, and treatment for drug addictions. The Conservatives also acknowledge the need for ongoing federal support in excavations at sites of former Indian Residential Schools (IRS).

Recent Conservative governments have struggled to maintain positive working relationships with First Nations. Two of the most high profile ruptures of these relationships occurred under Conservative-led governments, respectively, by Brian Mulroney during the so-called Oka Crisis, and more recently, by Stephen Harper, during the rise of Idle No More. O’Toole’s pledge to crack down on protesters who block or delay critical infrastructure seems to put him exactly in line with his Conservative predecessors.

LIBERAL BROKEN PROMISES

The Liberal party promised sweeping changes in 2015 and has spent the past six years fulfilling a few of those promises, while walking many others back. The 2021 Liberal platform presents five “Reconciliation” themes: confronting the legacy of residential schools, eliminating long-term drinking water advisories, confronting systemic racism, an Indigenous housing strategy, and protecting Indigenous children and families. The Liberals offer significantly more spending promises than the Conservatives along with commitments to continue work already underway: clean drinking water, climate change preparedness, commemoration for Residential School survivors, data governance, early childhood education, entrepreneurship, hiring health workers, implementing UNDRIP, infrastructure, mental health supports, northern travel claim benefits, and tax partnerships with interested Indigenous governments. The Liberals also promise to respond to the MMIWG inquiry’s Calls for Justice with new spending, if re-elected.

While the Liberal Party was able to court Indigenous voters in 2015, they lost that support in the 2019 election with broken promises around collaborative resource management, purchasing the Transmountain Pipeline and pledging to see its construction through, the bungled Indigenous Rights Framework for self-government, the continued fight against First Nation children in court, and Trudeau's public fallout with former cabinet minister Jody Wilson-Raybould.

This loss of support may continue through the 2021 election.

NDP RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

In some ways, the NDP strategy in this election is to deliver on the Liberals' unfulfilled promises of 2015 by implementing UNDRIP and the TRC's 94 Calls to Action. (Of course, the Liberals will argue that progress is being made on both). The NDP's platform is the most comprehensive of the three major parties and includes: implementing the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal (CHRT) decisions on Indigenous child welfare, supporting community-led economic development, coordinating environmental protection with Indigenous leadership, developing and implementing an Indigenous national housing strategy, increased infrastructure development in the North including improving cellular and internet access, implementing all of the MMIWG inquiry's Calls for Justice, establishing a National Action Plan for Reconciliation to be led by a new National Council for Reconciliation (again, something that the Liberals started but ultimately abandoned), prosecuting those responsible for criminal acts at Indian Residential Schools, and providing a treatment centre and compensation for those suffering from mercury poisoning in Grassy Narrows.

While the NDP has never formed government at the national level, and as such, not had the opportunity to break their promises to Indigenous people, they do have a record, especially recently, of building relationships with communities, visiting communities more frequently than the other parties, and recruiting Indigenous candidates.

GREEN UNCERTAINTY

The Green Party platform offers similar but less detailed policy proposals than the NDP. They call for "Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples and upholding the right of self-determination." The Greens propose to: implement the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), the TRC, the MMIWG inquiry, UNDRIP, and the CHRT ruling on Indigenous child welfare, and fund healing centres to address the IRS legacy. The Greens also call for collaboration with Indigenous peoples on environmental stewardship, increased funding for Indigenous arts and languages, renewable energy development in Indigenous communities, an Indigenous housing strategy, increased mental health spending, and safe drinking water.

Like the NDP, the Greens have yet to form a government. Of course, they don't enjoy the same level of support as the NDP nor have they built the same relationships. Indeed, while Elizabeth May was often the most knowledgeable leader on Indigenous issues in her time at the helm of the Greens, the Party has stumbled badly in recent years on their Indigenous proposals.

THE ASSIMILATION PARTY

The upstart in this election is the Peoples' Party of Canada (PPC). Despite having never elected an MP, the PPC is now polling nationally at 6-10% and could see its founding leader, Maxime Bernier, elected in his former riding that he held as a Conservative cabinet minister during the Harper era. Canada's electoral system, commonly referred to as "first past-the-post," rewards regional parties such as the Bloc Quebecois, who will secure many more seats

than their overall 7% national number would in a proportional electoral system. (The Bloc Quebecois is Quebec only and therefore not profiled in this policy brief, despite its unique proposal to revive the Treaty process and eliminate the Indian Act).

Of course, whatever electoral system Canadians choose to use, it is probably a good thing the PPC are restricted to the fringes and ultimately disappear from the landscape. They question climate change and COVID vaccines through the lens of junk science and conspiracies. On Indigenous issues, PPC leader Maxime Bernier has advocated for assimilation in the past and there are no signs of change now. The PPC platform doesn't appear to make any offers to improve life for Indigenous peoples in Canada, except to privatize reserve lands and demand more spending accountability for the "taxpayers" (a dog whistle for anti-Indigenous sentiments).

WHO SHOULD FIRST NATION PEOPLE VOTE FOR?

For First Nation voters, there are additional considerations beyond Party Platforms. Some First Nation voters argue that participation in a Canadian election is undesirable, unnecessary or even harmful because our nations are in a treaty or nation-to-nation relationship or that voting would validate settler colonialism. Those who choose to abstain from voting on principle are likely to have plenty of company in this election. As a result of widespread cynicism and the ongoing public health crisis, electoral turnout is anticipated to be the lowest in decades. I suspect it will return to low rates on reserve as well.

Even still, we do have the largest slate of Indigenous candidates running for election in history and reconciliation remains on the agenda, however infrequently it has appeared in this election. Indeed, returning to the AFN's Election Priorities, it is clear that many of them have not been mentioned in any meaningful way by any of the parties. So, like most Canadians, Indigenous people who choose to vote will do so based on interests, values, and even strategy. And like most Canadians, we will prepare ourselves for disappointment. Hopefully, it doesn't require another century for this particular trend to die.

CITATION: Pitawanakwat, Brock. "Liberal Red, Conservative Blue, or Something New? A First Nation Voter's Guide to the 2021 Federal Election." *Yellowhead Institute*, 16 September, 2021, <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2021/09/16/first-nation-voters-guide/>

ENDNOTES:

¹ Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, "A look into why there's a record number of Indigenous candidates for the 2021 federal election," September 8, 2021. <https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/election-2021-has-record-number-of-indigenous-candidates-running/>

² Assembly of First Nations, "Indigenous Candidates List for the September 20, 2021 Federal Election," Accessed September 13, 2021. <https://www.afn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/21-09-09-Indigenous-Candidates-List-for-the-September-2021-Federal-Elect....pdf>

³ Shari Narine, "Disappointing response to Indigenous issues in federal election leadership debate," in *Windspeaker*, September 10, 2021. <https://windspeaker.com/news/windspeaker-news/disappointing-response-indigenous-issues-federal-election-leadership-debate>

⁴ Assembly of First Nations, Press Release, August 31, 2021. <https://www.afn.ca/afn-national-chief-archibald-launches-a-strategic-direction-toward-positive-and-evolutionary-change-for-first-nations-and-all-canadians-in-the-healing-path-forward-2021-federal-priorities-fo/>