

Report

The 2019 Provincial Election in Prince Edward Island

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Abstract

Prince Edward Island's 67th General Election was held 23 April 2019. The results were unprecedented, with the Progressive Conservative Party (PCs) winning 12 seats on election night, the Green Party of Prince Edward Island (Greens) winning eight, and the incumbent Liberal Party (Liberals) reduced to just six seats. The New Democratic Party (NDP) was shut out once again. This is PEI's first "hung parliament," and PEI is now the first province in Canada with a Green Party Official Opposition. Five of the Green's eight MLAs are women, so this is also the first Official Opposition party in Canada with a majority of females. Liberal premier Wade MacLauchlan, credited with saving the Liberal Party from defeat in 2015, lost his own seat in 2019. The election was also marked by a tragedy: together with his young son Oliver, Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park Green Party candidate Josh Underhay was killed in a canoe accident the Friday before the election. A deferred election was held on 15 July, and was won by the PC candidate, Natalie Jameson. A referendum asking Islanders whether they wanted to adopt a Mixed Member Proportional electoral system was held in conjunction with the general election. The No side won with 52% of the vote, but winning just 13 of 27 ridings.

Résumé

La 67^e élection générale de l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard a eu lieu le 23 avril 2019. Les résultats ont été sans précédent, avec le Parti progressiste-conservateur (PC) remportant 12 sièges le soir de l'élection, le Parti vert de l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard (verts) en remportant huit et le Parti libéral (libéraux) sortant réduit à seulement six sièges. Le Nouveau Parti démocratique (NPD) a été de nouveau exclu de l'Assemblée législative. À l'issue de cette élection, l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard se retrouve avec son premier gouvernement minoritaire des temps modernes et aussi avec la première Opposition officielle au Canada formée par le Parti vert. Cinq des huit députés verts étant des femmes, le Parti vert est donc également le premier parti d'Opposition officielle au Canada avec une majorité de femmes. Le premier ministre libéral Wade MacLauchlan, crédité d'avoir sauvé le Parti libéral de la défaite en 2015, a perdu son siège en 2019. L'élection a également été marquée par une tragédie : le candidat du Parti vert de Charlottetown-Hillsborough Park, Josh Underhay, et son jeune fils Oliver ont été tués dans un accident de canot le vendredi précédant l'élection. L'élection différée du 15 juillet a été remportée par la candidate du PC, Natalie Jameson. Un référendum demandant aux Insulaires s'ils souhaitent adopter un système électoral proportionnel mixte a eu lieu parallèlement à l'élection générale. Bien que le camp du Non ait obtenu 52% du total des voix, il n'a remporté que 13 des 27 circonscriptions.

Keywords: PEI, election, minority government, Green Party, electoral reform

Mots-clés: l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard, gouvernement minoritaire, le Parti vert, réforme électorale

Summary

Prince Edward Island's 67th General Election was held 23 April 2019. No party secured a majority; this is a first in PEI (Neatby 2019f). Given the hung parliament outcome, the standard Canadian practice was followed wherein the largest party formed a single-party minority government. That party was the PCs, who secured 12 seats election night, and so its leader Dennis King was asked to form a government. Unlike recent experiences in British Columbia and New Brunswick, no other leader challenged his right to do so. Peter Bevan-Baker's Green Party won eight seats, an impressive result given that the party had only won its first seat in 2015, and a second in a by-election held November 2017. The Liberals won six seats in 2019, but the Liberal leader and premier, Wade MacLauchlan, lost his own seat. Several cabinet ministers lost their seats as well. The NDP, this time led by Joe Byrne, did not win a seat (Figure 1).

The Liberals, PCs and Greens ran a full slate of 27 candidates. The NDP ran 24. Thirty-five women ran in 2019, four more than ran in 2015, and six were elected election night: five for the Greens, one for the PCs (Table 1). The death of Green candidate Josh Underhay, which occurred the Friday before the vote, resulted in the writ for that district (No. 9) to be withdrawn and its polling date revised. A deferred election was held on 15 July, and won by the PC party candidate, Natalie Jameson, adding one more to the PC's total of elected females.

Twenty-two (of 27) incumbents ran again, including all eight PCs and both Greens. The PC and Green incumbents were all re-elected. Twelve Liberal incumbents ran again; five did not. Only five of the 12 Liberal incumbents were re-elected. One Liberal incumbent ran as an Independent, but he was not successful. Another had won his seat in a by-election, but he was not successful either. The incumbent in District 9, Speaker Buck Watts, did not run again, so that deferred election did not include an incumbent. Most PC incumbents improved their vote totals from 2015, with two (Darlene Compton in District 4 and Brad Trivers in District 18) receiving 342 and 333 more votes respectively. Former PC leader James Aylward, however, did not do so well. Although he managed to hold on to his seat in District 6 (in Stratford, a Charlottetown suburb), his vote total dropped by 885 votes. Aylward received 2155 votes in 2015, but just 1270 in 2019. His riding presents the best example of a vote split: the Liberal candidate received 882 votes and the Green candidate 805 (the NDP candidate received just 31 votes).

The Rise of the Greens

PEI is said to have the "purest two-party system in Canada" (Stewart 1994: 117). Up until 2019, only the Liberals and the PCs have ever governed or formed the Official Opposition. Other parties have had little to no success in electing MLAs: until 2015 only the NDP had ever captured a seat, and that was a one-time event in 1996. In 2015, Green Party leader Peter Bevan-Baker won his seat in the general election, marking the first time a Green Party candidate was elected in Canada east of British Columbia, either provincially or federally (Desserud and Collins 2016). Just two years later, Bevan-Baker was joined by Hannah Bell, who won a by-election in Charlottetown held in November 2017.

The presence of Green MLAs in the House rattled the Liberals and the PCs, who have long been accustomed to having the legislature all to themselves. Soon, the Green Party and its allies found themselves subject to attacks by both the governing Liberals and the opposition PCs. For example, Bevan-Baker was ejected from the House when he refused to apologize for describing what he considered to be a “colluded debate” as “a farce,” (20 December 2017 *Hansard*, 1315-1316) this despite the fact the word “farce” was not on the proscribed list (it is now), and had been used by other MLAs in similar contexts without penalty.¹

In another incident, the PR Coalition – an electoral-reform advocacy group whose board contained members of the Green Party executive – was attacked in the House as being a well-funded “foreign” organization using social media to promote “fake news.” A PC MLA asked the Liberal Attorney General about rumours she had heard regarding District 11, the seat that Green Party member Bell had recently won.

Recently, Facebook has been in the news because of personal data being shared for political purposes without those people’s consent. A number of Islanders have approached us from District 11 and told us that during the Charlottetown-Parkdale [by] election Green Party staff and volunteers who were out campaigning door-to-door began the conversation by saying that someone in the household supported proportional representation. Does the minister of justice know how the Green Party of PEI would have been in possession of this PR coalition campaign data?

Minister, are you concerned with the passing of personal information, collected under different pretenses to the Green Party of PEI? (17 April 2018 *Hansard*, 1770)²

The minister replied that indeed he was concerned, and he looked forward to working with the PC member to get to the bottom of this issue. This, then, was a coordinated attack on the PR Coalition, but also an attack on the Green Party and the newly elected member, and done so in the context of a red-herring mention of Facebook and recent scandals involving that company’s sharing of personal data for political purposes in the UK and the US. The Liberals soon added their own charges. Liberal cabinet minister Paula Biggar reported to the House a circuitous connection:

Today I found it interesting that whistleblower Christopher Wylie is testifying by video before the House of Commons. For those who don’t know who he is, he’s a whistleblower with Cambridge Analytica who are tied with a Canadian affiliate, AggregateIQ and that particular group are tied together with the BC Green Party who, in turn, have ties to the Green Party here PEI through one of their campaigners that was working with, actually, the proportional representation group. (29 May 2018 *Hansard*, 3166)

Not surprisingly, those under attack were somewhat dumbfounded by these accusations, but even their rather light-hearted defence became fodder for more attacks. At one point, members of the Green Party executive were threatened with a contempt of parliament charge, only because they mused publicly (on social media) that perhaps they should seek legal advice concerning the character attacks they were experiencing in the House. This, charged some MLAs, constituted a threat to sue and so a breach of their parliamentary privilege. However, the Speaker wisely ruled that there were no grounds for contempt charges (26 April 2018 *Journal*, n.p.).

Despite these attacks, or perhaps because of them, the popularity of the Greens and its leader continued to grow (Figures 2 and 3). It had not started out this way. Polls published just after the 2015 election gave no indication that the Greens were headed for a breakthrough. The party had won a respectable 10% of the popular vote in 2015, but its polling numbers barely budged in the following months (Table 2). Meanwhile, the popularity of the governing Liberals soared. A CRA poll from November 2015 (so six months after the 4 May 2015 election) pegged support for the Liberals at 61%, and the Greens at just 11% (the PCs were at 18% and the NDP at 9%). But the Green Party's fortunes would change dramatically after the Plebiscite on Democratic Renewal, held in late 2016. The PR Coalition played an active and significant role in this campaign, prompting one reporter to label the PR Coalition as a "new political power" (Campbell 2016b).

One of the Liberal campaign promises made in the 2015 campaign was electoral reform, or at least the Liberals promised it would study options for such reform. The June 2015 Throne Speech promised that the Government would

initiate and support a thorough and comprehensive examination of ways in which to strengthen our electoral system, our representation, and the role and functioning of the Legislative Assembly. During this Session, we will table a White Paper on Democratic Renewal that will be referred to this Assembly and serve as a means to engage Islanders on the fundamentals of our democratic process.³

The resulting White Paper recommended a plebiscite using a preferential ballot, with which voters would rank up to five options.⁴ To the surprise of many, the winning option was Mixed Member Proportional. However, the turnout was very low, this despite voters having several options for voting. Voters could cast ballots in person, by telephone, or on-line, and the voting period extended over 10 days. Sixteen-year-olds were also allowed to vote. Nevertheless, only 37% bothered to cast ballots, this in a province where turnout in provincial elections in PEI is normally in the 80% range (Figure 7) (Collins and Desserud 2017).

MacLauchlan had refused to set a threshold during the campaign (Campbell 2016a), but now argued that, with such a low turnout, he did not believe he had an appropriate mandate to bring forth such a fundamental change to the province's electoral system. The results, said MacLauchlan, were "debatable" (Wright 2016).

In combination with the low voter turnout of 36.5 per cent, it is debatable whether the plebiscite conducted between October 29 and November 7 produced a clear majority. Among the five options on which Prince Edward Island voters were asked to express their preference, Mixed Member Proportional Representation received 52.42 per cent support during the fourth round of counting. During the first three rounds of counting, First-Past-the-Post (the current system) received the highest number of votes. By the fourth and final round of counting, the support for MMP represented 19 per cent of eligible voters, or fewer than one in five. It is doubtful whether these results can be said to constitute a clear expression of the will of Prince Edward Islanders, to adopt the language of the Special Committee on Democratic Renewal.⁵

Islanders did not agree with the premier's assessment, or at least opinion polls that followed this decision suggested a majority favoured some sort of electoral reform. An MQO poll asked: "Do you believe that the next provincial election should be contested under a new electoral system?" Fifty-two percent polled said Yes, 29 percent said No, and 19 percent were undecided.⁶

Nevertheless, it would be an oversimplification to credit electoral reform itself as the reason for the rise in support for the Greens. The campaign for electoral reform, specifically proportional representation, was led by the PR Coalition rather than the Green Party itself, and the PR Coalition started to ramp up its advocacy for PR in September 2016. However, while Bevan-Baker supported the coalition's activities, during this time his name was only barely associated with electoral reform. A review of the Island newspaper, *The Guardian*, reveals that Bevan-Baker was rarely (only once, in fact) mentioned in association with electoral reform throughout the September-October 2016 campaign period. But once the government announced that it would not be honouring the vote, and once the fall 2016 sitting began (November 15), Bevan-Baker was consistently being quoted or commented upon (positively and negatively) with regards to electoral reform, and, more important, in connection with the government's failure to honour the vote.

This, then, might better account for the upswing of support for the Greens and the plummet in support for the Liberals. The CRA poll that revealed this dramatic change went into the field 7 November to 29 November 2016. That poll showed that support for the Liberals had dropped from 64% in August 2016 to just 46%, while the Greens support improved from 9% in August to 22%. Green Party support would continue to grow over the next year. By the time the by-election was held a year later, in November 2017, the Greens found themselves catching up with the Liberals in terms of overall popularity, and Bevan-Baker polling ahead of the other leaders in personal popularity (see Figure 3).

The Decline and Fall of the Liberals:

MacLauchlan and his Liberal government never recovered from the drop in popularity

following the decision not to respect the plebiscite results. When the campaign for the vote on democratic renewal began in August 2016, MacLauchlan's personal popularity was close to 50%. Just a few months later, it had dipped to 37%. By the time the 2019 election was called, the Liberal premier's popularity had slipped to just 20%.

The failure to respect the vote became a touchstone for a broader concern: that the MacLauchlan government and the Liberal Party had been in power too long and were now out of touch with the public. An example of this was the government's decision to reject the recommendations of a three-member board tasked with rationalizing the Island's school system (Wright 2017b). Like much of Canada, PEI's rural population is shrinking, as more and more farms are sold or shut down and people move to the cities (Randall et al. 2015). This phenomenon is well reflected in Island schools: some rural schools have seen their enrollments drop to half of what they were just a few years ago, while other schools in the Charlottetown area are overcrowded.

The board targeted several rural schools for closure; however, these recommendations were rejected by the premier the day after the report was presented. The public hearings leading to the recommendations had been emotional and raucous, with many rural Islanders worried the hearts of their communities would be lost. So while those who thought they would lose their schools rejoiced when MacLauchlan overruled the board, people in Charlottetown and Summerside, who were hoping for reallocated resources to allow them to expand their schools or build new ones, were disappointed. And no one was happy that they had been dragged through a difficult process, apparently for nothing.

Meanwhile, economic indicators revealed that the PEI economy was outpacing the rest of the country. The Atlantic Provinces Economic Council (APEC) described the PEI economy as "on a tear" (APEC 2017), a catch phrase that MacLauchlan would repeat over and over. However, the good economic news did not translate into renewed support for the Liberals.

The Return of the PCs

Following the 2011 election, and continuing up to 2019, the PCs saw one leader after another come and go; in 2013, PC leader Olive Crane was forced out of office and then booted from caucus. One of her supporters crossed the floor to join the Liberals (Wright 2013). Things did not settle down after the 2015 election, and the PCs ended up changing leaders three times leading up to the 2019 election, averaging one leader per year. But with the election of Dennis King in February 2019, the fortunes of the PCs changed.

Just as was initially the case with the Greens, the polls that followed the 2015 election did not present an optimistic future for the PCs. Indeed, the picture was even bleaker than that facing the Greens at the time. The PCs received 37% of the popular vote in the 2015 general election, but the polls which followed regularly placed support for the PCs down around the 20% mark. Occasionally, the party would move up: 25% approval rating in November 2016; 28% in November 2017. But otherwise, the party averaged only 23% in its approval ratings over the four years going back to 2015.

Unsurprisingly, then, the PCs were not taken seriously as contenders for the 2019 election, at least not by the governing Liberals. The eclectic background of their new leader, Dennis King, contributed to this. King's previous career was a journalist and

communications manager, and for a time he worked in the Pat Binns' PC government, which was in power from 1996 to 2007. However, King was better known as a member of a popular comedy group known as the "Four Tellers," whose act consists of telling amusing stories about growing up on PEI (Neatby 2019c). So King put his communications skills to work and made a serious effort to engage with Islanders. He exceeded expectations throughout the campaign, showing himself to be articulate when explaining issues, particularly those involving the environment and agriculture. He also claimed that he was willing to work collaboratively with the other parties and their leaders, setting a campaign tone of civility and collegiality that drew praise from across Canada (S. Ross 2019).

The Continued Frustration of the NDP

Until the Greens made their dramatic entrance into PEI politics, the NDP held the honour as the only party other than the PCs or Liberals to have ever elected an MLA on the Island. In 1919, a disaffected Conservative did win a seat running as an Independent (and ran unopposed by the Liberals), but the first truly "third party" MLA was not elected until 1996. That was Dr. Herb Dickieson, running in the first PEI provincial election that used single-member ridings.

Dickieson did not win his seat the next time around, and the NDP struggled election after election. But some thought the 2015 vote marked a bit of a breakthrough, as the NDP actually garnered more votes than the Greens, picking up 11% of the popular vote to the Greens 10%. Nevertheless, these votes did not translate into seats.

NDP leader Mike Redmond eventually resigned as leader, making the way for Joe Byrne to win the leadership in April 2018.⁷ Running in the riding of Charlottetown, Byrne had finished second to Liberal Sean Casey in the 2015 federal election, and the NDP hoped that Byrne would build on his local support in 2019. Such would not be the case. Even Byrne's election as party leader in April 2018 did nothing to move the numbers, and the party only averaged 7% in polling support over the four years following the 2015 election (Figure 3).

Byrne ran in District 12, a mixed-income riding in downtown Charlottetown, held by a long-serving Liberal cabinet minister whose brother is also the mayor. The riding boundaries had been altered during the latest reapportionment, but it is unclear whether this hurt Byrne (though it certainly did not help). The new boundaries did seem to help the Greens, whose candidate upset the Liberal incumbent and won the seat. Byrne won only 11% of the votes in his own riding and his party only 3% province wide. The 2019 election also marked the return of Dr. Herb Dickieson as a candidate. He did not win his seat, but did come second with 33% of the vote, far and away the best result for the NDP.

Women in PEI Politics

Thirty-five women ran in 2019, including two who ran in the deferred election. This is four more than ran in 2015. The NDP had 10 female candidates, the Greens nine, the Liberals eight and the PCs seven. Only two ridings had no female candidates, but none had more than two. No NDP women candidates were elected (the NDP were shut out). The Liberals did not elect any women either. The Greens elected five women candidates and the PCs

two, for a total of seven women elected in 2019, or two more than in 2015 (Table 4). Women received 27% of the votes cast in ridings with female candidates, down from 31% in 2015. Overall, however, women candidates received 25% of the votes, which is slightly up from 2015 (23% in 2015; note that voting turnout was down considerably in 2019). Women running for the Greens had the best success, with 43% of the total Green vote going to the party's female candidates. The Liberals were next with 21% of the Liberal vote going to female candidates, and the PCs and NPD close behind with 20% and 19% respectively.

The Campaign

The Green Party's steadily improving polling numbers throughout 2018 fueled speculation that the Liberals would call an early election, perhaps as early as the late spring or early summer of that year. Although denying that an election was imminent, MacLauchlan told assembled Liberals at an April 2018 meeting that "if any districts are ready to nominate candidates, they might want to consider doing so before the end of June" (R. Ross 2018). Announcements from prominent cabinet ministers in 2018 that they were resigning from cabinet and not running again also fueled speculation that an early election would be called. However, if the Liberals were hoping that the Greens would peak early, and that their own numbers would turn around, they would be disappointed. Instead, Liberal support continued to erode, and support for the Greens continued to grow.

PEI has, ostensibly anyway, a fixed-date election. According to the PEI *Election Act*, the election following 2015 was to take place on the "first Monday in October in the fourth calendar year following ordinary polling day in the most recent general election" (Election Act, sec. 4.1.2(b)), so 7 October 2019. The legislation allows for an election to be postponed, as late as to the following April,⁸ if a federal election "overlaps with the writ period" (sec. 4.1.3). There is no specific allowance for an early election call, except for the constitutional principle of Responsible Government that expects the Lieutenant Governor to take the advice of the premier when a dissolution is requested, and the fact that Election Act does not, nor could not, limit her ability to do so. So the timing of election call, which eventually did come in late March 2019, raised some eyebrows.

Observers also wondered why the Liberals did not wait until after the government had tabled its budget. Under PEI's legislative calendar, the House meets in two sessions a year, barring special sessions. One is the in fall (November to December); the other in the spring (April to May). The spring session is when the Budget is presented and debated. When MacLauchlan called the election on 26 March 2019, the House had not been reconvened, and so no budget was presented.

It is not clear why the Liberals decided to go to the polls without first passing a budget. PEI's economy is doing well; the Conference Board of Canada had predicted that PEI would lead the country in economic growth, with a GDP for 2019 growing at a rate of 3.2% (Yarr 2019). The Liberal government, albeit inconsistently, claimed that it was running strong surpluses, and even paying down the debt. In March 2019, just ten days before the election was called, finance minister Heath MacDonald announced that the province's projected surplus had grown from \$4.4 million in November 2018 to an astonishing \$13.8 million. In the 2018 budget, the government had forecast a surplus of only \$1.5 million (Campbell

2019a). Given there was no particular pressing need to hold an April election, the Liberals could easily have reconvened the House, passed an “election budget” and headed to the polls for a mid-May election. That they decided not to, raised questions: were these budget numbers exaggerated? Were there internal issues that would have emerged were the House back in session? Did the Liberals think their governing days were finished, and just wanted to get things over with?

MacLauchlan used the nomination meeting of long-time MLA and cabinet minister Richard Brown (District 12) to announce that he had visited the Lieutenant Governor and she had granted his request for a dissolution. MacLauchlan then proceeded to attack his opponents. Peter Bevan-Baker, a dentist who was first elected in the same election as MacLauchlan’s entry into politics, was called a “career politician” who was trying to bring to the Island “untested ideas.” Dennis King presided over a “divisive” party that “pitted communities against communities and Islanders against Islanders” (Neatby 2019a).

The campaign, then, got off to a spicy start. However, neither King nor Bevan-Baker took the bait. Instead, both went out of their way to be agreeable and collegial, so much so that their camaraderie became the story of the campaign. In the leaders’ forums and debates, the two focused much more on where they agreed than where they disagreed, and while they did criticize the failures of the Liberal government, they also were quick to give credit where credit was due. In the televised debate, King could be seen applauding his opponents after they had made their statement or arguments, or he would “rebut” by promising to take a serious look at his opponents’ ideas, if and when he became premier. The ritual and polite post-debate handshake was replaced with hugs and backslaps. This was either thoughtful strategy or naive politics, but it seemed to work – or at least it did not hurt.

Issues and Platforms

The PC election platform marked King’s party as a very different conservative party than has emerged in other parts of the country. The party’s election slogan, “It’s About People,” sounded familiar, reminiscent of the Ontario PC slogan “For the People.” But that is where similarities ended. Among other promises, the PEI PCs promised to invest in mental health and women’s health, address housing issues, support local artists (particularly indigenous artists), and stressed the importance of diversity and inclusivity:

Groups that have been traditionally disenfranchised—including women, members of the LGBTQ2+ community, Indigenous people, ethnic and religious minorities, newcomers, and persons with disabilities—continue to feel the effects of institutional bias. There continues to be unbalanced representation in our political institutions, which can sometimes have a negative impact on policy decisions. (9)

The PCs’ environmental policies matched up well with the Green Party’s own, with emphasis on protecting the Island’s water supply and implementing more aggressive soil conservation and crop-rotation policies. Of course, election promises are made to be

broken. But that the PCs believed this was what Islanders wanted to hear, and would get their party elected, is nevertheless significant.

The Green Party's campaign slogan was "imagine something better," and its platform showed how that party was working to broaden its voter base, to rebrand itself as a fiscally prudent party, and to reach out to rural PEI. The Greens also stressed health care, not the environment, as their number-one priority. They promised to introduce "rural health care hubs" as a solution to the shortage of physicians in PEI, and in particular in rural PEI. Prioritizing health care proved to be a savvy choice, given that opinion polls said that 38% of Islanders identified health care as what the new government's top priority should be; only 9% thought it should be environment and climate change (Neatby 2019b).

This is not to say that the Greens downplayed the importance of the environment. But whenever the Greens spoke of environmental issues, they invariably tied these issues to the economy. As well, they emphasized individualism and uniqueness, eschewing the idea that a Green government would know best. Rather, the Greens promised to work with Islanders to find unique solutions:

We face too much risk with our export market focused on the US - we need to balance business and economic activity and diversify our exports to other markets including regional and local. We must build a strong sustainable economy by strengthening and supporting rural and urban communities in developing their own *unique opportunities and culture*.⁹

To this was added a call for a "Basic Income Guarantee," universal basic dental care, a provincial "pharmacare" program, and a school food program.

A significant feature of the Green Party platform was its attempt to reach out to rural PEI, and in particular Island farmers. Rural PEI has been unfertile ground for Green support in the past. This time, the party's message was simple: "We do not believe that Islanders must choose between protecting the environment and supporting traditional industries" (16). The messaging seems to have worked: in 2011, the average for the Green Party was just 124 votes per rural riding. In 2015, the party was not able to field candidates in three rural ridings, and not counting Bevan-Baker's exceptional results in his seat, averaged only 242 votes per rural riding. In 2019, again not including Bevan-Baker, the average rural vote for Greens was 652. Including Bevan-Baker, the average jumps to 724 votes per rural riding.¹⁰

The Liberal campaign focused on the government's strong record of fiscal stewardship. The economy is doing very well, the Liberals argued, so now was not the time to change the leadership. The Liberal campaign slogan was "PEI is Working," and claimed that the party had a "clear plan." The platform itself was quite comprehensive in the issues it attempted to address: such as jobs for rural Islanders, improved wait times for medical services, increased funding for K-12 education, improved trades training, and tax relief for low income earners. As well, all promises included a price tag. Less obvious were specifics about how the Liberals would accomplish these goals. Of course, the other parties could be criticized for the same vagueness. However, the party in power is expected to be able to

provide more specific solutions. As Bevan-Baker challenged in the leaders' debate: you keep saying you have a plan. What is it? And why have you waited until now to bring it forward?

The tone of the Liberal campaign was in marked contrast to the collegiality of its rivals. As the Liberal platform document stated:

On April 23 2019, Islanders will make an important decision. Together, we will decide among the following choices:

- The Liberal Party of Prince Edward Island – which has consistently balanced the duties of social equity, financial integrity and progress toward economic prosperity as fixed and guiding goals.
- A Conservative party that has had five leaders since 2015¹¹ – and consequently lacks the discipline required to guide Prince Edward Island toward a fairer, more prosperous destination
- An untested Green party proposing schemes that will smother ambition and the potential of our province to succeed. (4)¹²

Finally, the NDP seemed to be caught off guard by the election call, despite the fact that rumours of an early election had been circulating for over a year. When the election was called, the party had only 12 candidates nominated. In the end, the party was only able to run candidates in 24 ridings, and several were “paper” candidates; that is, people willing to put their names on a ballot, but who did not live in the riding.

The NDP platform presented five priority areas: income security, housing, health and well-being, education, and agriculture and fisheries. One of the more interesting platform items was a promise to build a medical school at the University of Prince Edward Island. PEI is the only province in Canada without a medical school (New Brunswick has two, but they are partial programs and are run in conjunction with full medical schools in other provinces). But UPEI does have a veterinary college and a nursing program, and so the NDP argued that with such an infrastructure in place, UPEI could accommodate a medical school as well. UPEI was not consulted on this idea. When asked for the costs of this and other proposals, party officials answered honestly. As a CBC journalist reported: “Though the party hopes to gain as many seats as possible in the election, officials said they don’t expect to form government and so haven’t fully estimated the cost of their plan” (Doria-Brown 2019).

Advanced Polls

Three advance polls were held. The first was on 13 April (a Saturday), the second on 15 April (a Monday), and the third on 18 April (the Thursday immediately before the regular polling day, Friday being Good Friday). Forty-eight percent of eligible voters cast their ballots in an advanced poll. As was the case in 2015, both the Liberals and the PCs took full advantage of these polls by ensuring that their supporters were identified and ensured

easy access to the polling stations as needed. In 2015, the Liberals achieved 40.9% of their overall vote count in the advance polls; in 2019, that number increased to 52.4%. The PCs percentages also improved, from 38.8% to 47.7%. Of course, in both cases, their actual votes diminished from 2015 to 2019. The Green Party, whose overall votes skyrocketed in 2019, saw 42.4% of their supporters take advantage of the advanced polls. That was up from 22%. In only five ridings did the winner of the advanced poll lose the election – in two cases, the PCs came first in the advanced poll, but lost to the Greens. In three other ridings, the Liberal candidates won the advanced polls, but in two cases lost to the Greens, and in one case, to the PCs.

Analysis of the Vote

The consistent lead in opinion polls enjoyed by the Green Party and its leader were a strong indication that the 2019 election would produce remarkable results. However, the polling numbers were not broken down regionally, and given the relatively small sample sizes (anywhere from 300 to 500), would not have been useful even if they had been. So predictions that the Greens could actually win the election were not taken too seriously by people studying the election “on the ground.” The polls did reveal one significant trend: support for the PCs rose dramatically after King was chosen party leader in February 2019, rising from 20% in November to 32% in April. In that same poll, however, the Greens reached 37% and led all other parties. In hindsight, that appears to have been their peak, and they fell to 31% popular vote in the election (Figure 2; Tables 2 and 3).

Rural and Urban vote:

In the April general election (so ignoring the deferred election), the PC Party won no seats in either Charlottetown or Summerside, PEI’s only two cities,¹³ although it did win District 6, which is in the Charlottetown suburb of Stratford. With the exception of District 23, which is predominantly rural but includes a part of Summerside, the Green Party only won seats in Charlottetown or Summerside. The Liberals won two seats in Charlottetown, as well as one in the Charlottetown suburb of Cornwall. Its three other seats were all in rural PEI.

It is tempting, then, to regard the results of the 2019 election as a rural versus urban division, and to a certain extent this is true. However, an examination of the second-place finishes reveals that the Green Party has a significant voting base in rural PEI as well (Figure 5). This is in striking contrast to the 2015 and 2011 results, when the Green Party’s rural support was insignificant. The reason for this shift is likely because of the personal popularity of the Green Party leader, but also the Green’s “rebranding” of their party by broadening their platform to appeal to a wider range of socially-progressive voters, as well as their concerted effort to support farmers. Another important observation is that the PCs actually received slightly fewer votes in 2019 than the party won in 2015 (30,413 compared to 30,663: Table 5), but the party won five more seats. So vote splits helped the PC Party, as did a better distribution of those votes.

The Liberals were the big losers in terms of votes, winning just 24,346 votes in 2019,

compared to 33,481 in 2015 (Table 5). This, by the way, is the third election in a row that support for the Liberals has declined: the party received about 20,000 votes fewer in 2019 than it did in 2007, when the Liberals took power from the PCs. This means its 2019 results are just 55% of its 2007 results. Nevertheless, such things are relative. The Liberal loss was significant, but overall – and including the deferred election results – they finished with just 954 votes fewer than the Greens. The party, then, is still a force to contend with.

The NDP also saw a precipitous decline in their support, going from 8997 in 2015 to just 2450 in 2019. The party had hopes that it would improve on its 2015 showing, at which time it won 11 percent of the vote, and maybe this time see those votes translated into seats. However, such would not be the case, and the NDP ended up with one of its worse showings since the party began running candidates. Only two NDP candidates managed to receive more than 10% of the vote; as noted its leader got just 11%, while Dr. Herb Dickieson had the best showing with 33% and a second-place finish to Liberal incumbent (and cabinet minister) Rob Henderson. If Dickieson's results are removed from the calculation, the NDP averaged only 65 votes per riding where they fielded candidates.

Voting turnout was also down, so it appears that disaffected Liberals and NDP voters either stayed home or voted Green. In any case, they did not vote PC (Table 5).

The decline in voting turnout came as a surprise, given the unprecedented polling support for the Greens, the revival of support for the PCs, and the strong turnout in the advanced polls. The turnout in 2019 was the lowest level since Elections PEI began calculating turnout (Figure 7). However, the difference in the number of people voting was slight: just 1678 fewer people voted in 2019 than voted in 2015. So one reason for the record low turnout percentage was that the number of eligible voters rose significantly, from 100,343 in 2015 to 107,109 in 2019.

Youth and Younger Voters

Elections PEI has done some preliminary analysis on younger voters; that is, 18-24 year-olds and 25-39 year-olds. In 2015, 9223 18-24 year-olds were eligible to vote, and 66.3% did. However, in 2019, 9226 18-24 year-olds were eligible to vote, but just 62.5% did. Voters in the 25-39 year-old category had an even poorer record: out of 19,260 eligible voters in 2015, 74.1% voted. In 2019, that category held 21,101 voters, but only 68.1% voted (Neatby 2019d).

Volatility

Voting volatility continues to increase, with the 2019 election recording the highest score since the province adopted single-member ridings in 1996 (Figure 4). More Islanders than ever are willing to change their vote and support a different party. We may have to revise our assumptions about entrenched voting behaviour in PEI, at least concerning supporters of parties other than the PCs.

Blue or Green Wave?

As mentioned above, the consistent strength of the Greens in public polling led some to predict a Green Party victory. The prospect of such a result attracted attention across the

country and even from news outlets outside of Canada.¹⁴ Even the Greens' failure to win the election still convinced some that this was a harbinger of success for the Green Party nationally. Did the election indicate the beginnings of a "green wave"? Probably not. The personal popularity of Green leader Bevan-Baker, coupled with the personal unpopularity of Liberal premier MacLauchlan, likely convinced voters who were not willing to support the PCs to support the Greens as a viable option, or as the place to park their "anti-Liberal" vote. This is not to take away from the successful strategy employed by the Greens, and their broad-appeal election platform certainly mattered. But given that environmental issues were not considered a top priority by most Islanders, it is difficult to see this success as having implications off the Island.

So was the success of the PCs, then, evidence rather of a "blue wave"? That was the other narrative that emerge from the 2019 PEI election (Watt 2019). Canada now has conservative governments in six provinces, and almost had one in a seventh (Newfoundland and Labrador). Was the PEI result, then, good news for the Conservative Party of Canada? This was also unlikely. The PEI PCs positioned themselves to the left of the governing Liberals, and presented a platform that was nothing like what conservative parties in Quebec, Ontario, and Alberta campaigned on. As well, the PCs picked up fewer votes in 2019 than the party won in 2015 (Table 5); hardly an indication of a stampede towards conservatism.¹⁵

PEI has, as stated above, one of the purest two-party systems in Canada. It also has one of most stable, with the same party winning election after election until the voters get tired of the governing party and vote for another. This is, again, what happened in PEI. The difference this time is that those voters who had tired of the Liberals did not move their votes to the PCs. Instead they either stayed home or, mostly, voted Green. That is still remarkable, but not yet indicative of a watershed election.

Referendum on Electoral Reform

A referendum on electoral reform was held in conjunction with the provincial election. Unlike the plebiscite on democratic reform held in 2016, the referendum gave voters only two choices: "do you support PEI adopting a Mixed-Member Proportional System? No or Yes" (in that order on the ballot). A threshold was set: in order to be "binding" a Yes vote had to receive an absolute majority as well as a majority in 60% of the ridings. This latter measure was designed to placate rural PEI, which (as far as the Liberals were concerned) feared a PR system, believing it would concentrate power in the population centres.

The MMP option was a hybrid PR and FPTP system. PEI's 27 ridings would be reduced to 18. Nine seats would then be allocated "at large." Parties would be assigned seats in the nine at-large group only if their percentage of seats was less than their percentage of popular vote. These seats, then, would be "top ups" designed to offset the "inequitable" character of the FPTP system, which tends to punish small parties and reward large parties.

A voter under this system would cast two votes: one for the candidate of her choice in her riding, and the second, the candidate of her choice for the nine at-large seats. Once the popular vote was calculated, and it was determined that, say, the NDP received 11% of the popular vote, but no seats, then the NDP would be rewarded with one at-large seat (11% of

nine). That seat would go to the NDP candidate who received the most votes on the second ballot. Unlike the MMP norm where the second ballot is for a ranked party list, this would be for a specific individual candidate which presumably would have led to competition amongst candidates of the same party.

The legislation governing this referendum prohibited any organization except those approved by the Referendum Commissioner from spending more than \$1000 on campaigning for either the Yes or No side. Nor could anyone campaign for a “none of the above” or another electoral system, like a preferential ballot. To be an approved Yes and No organization, groups had to convince the Referendum Commissioner that their interest in the outcome was “bona fide.” The executives of these organizations had to be Islanders in residence since July of 2018, and be unpaid volunteers. No candidates, potential candidates, or members of a political party executive could be members of such an organization. The consequence was that the PR Coalition was forced to disband, as its organization did not comply with most of these rules (Yarr 2018). As well, the Green Party also had to drop its advocacy of PR from its party platform.

Yet, despite these attempts to ensure that the electoral reform question would be kept separate from the election campaign (an irony, given the explicit attempt to link the two in order to ensure suitable turnout), the leaders were asked during one of the leadership debates if they supported electoral reform, and specifically whether they supported the MMP system. Only Premier MacLauchlan refused to answer; the other three leaders all said they supported the MMP system, with PC leader Dennis King explaining that he had already voted in the advanced poll, and had cast his ballot in favour of MMP.

In the end, the results did not favour the Yes campaign. Although 14 ridings¹⁶ supported the Yes side, only 48% voted Yes overall. Of the 14 ridings that voted Yes, six also voted for a Green candidate – three-quarters of that party’s seats. However, five PC ridings also supported the Yes side, and the Liberals split: three for the Yes side, three for the No side. District 9 also voted Yes. The distribution of votes interesting, with most of the Yes ridings being in Queen’s County, which includes Charlottetown (see Figure 6). As well, the voting turnout for the referendum matched that of the election; indeed, with District 9 votes added, more people voted in the referendum. On average, the difference between people voting for the referendum and for candidates was only minus 29 votes per riding.

Meanwhile, all leaders pledged that they would respect the vote, regardless of the outcome. But given that both King and Bevan-Baker support electoral reform, we have likely not heard the last of this. Perhaps a different model will be proposed.

Deferred Election

On the Friday before the election, the Green Party candidate for District 9, Josh Underhay, died in a canoe accident together with his young son, Oliver. District 9 is one of the Charlottetown ridings, and the Greens thought they had an excellent chance of winning that seat. The death of their star candidate was, of course, quite a blow. In fact, the entire province went into mourning. Some candidates from rival parties replaced the outside lights of their campaign headquarters with green light bulbs in tribute. Candidates from all parties suspended their campaigns.

Under PEI's election act, the death of a candidate that takes place after the official nomination date but prior to the vote results in the writ for that riding being suspended and revised. So a "deferred election" was called for 15 July. Many thought that the deferred election was a by-election, and indeed that how it was initially referred to by the media. There is, however, a difference. In a deferred election, the original writ is revised, not revoked, nor is there a "no return" delivered by the Returning Officer (which would generate a by-election). Instead, the writ is revised by changing the date of the poll. So the deferred election is technically still a part of the general election. Why this matters is that candidates who run in a general election (and lose) are not eligible to run in a deferred election; you cannot run in more than one riding in a general election. With the success of the Greens in the general election, several defeated Green candidates immediately came forward hoping to secure the nomination to replace Underhay. But they were soon told by Elections PEI that they were not eligible to run.

The candidates nominated by the other parties for District 9 in the general election remained on the ballot for the deferred election. However, the PC candidate, Dr. Sarah Stewart-Clark, announced that she was withdrawing her name. A professor at PEI Atlantic Veterinary College, Dr. Stewart-Clark was a "star" candidate for the PCs, and had competed for the leadership of the party against Dennis King. Many assumed that, were she successful in the deferred election, she would be immediately elevated into cabinet. So the PCs were forced to find a new candidate, and duly nominated Natalie Jameson.

The Greens ended up with just one candidate seeking the nomination, and so members were asked to vote for the proffered candidate, or to choose the "no candidate" option. This odd circumstance came about because the Green Party had decided they would use an *ad hoc* candidate selection committee to determine who the official candidates for nomination would be. However, the selection committee had been set up prior to the ruling by Election PEI regarding the eligibility of candidates for the deferred election. Meanwhile, the committee had already narrowed down the options for District 9 to just two candidates (five had come forward). It is not clear why the party thought this necessary. In any case, one of the remaining two was deemed ineligible, and so the one eligible candidate was elected with a vote of 128 to 33. The "No" were apparently a protest against the Green Party's decision to narrow the field in the first place (Neatby 2019e).

Given that the PC government is in a minority situation, and given that it had no cabinet ministers from Charlottetown, the PCs had a lot riding on District 9. A victory would bring the PC total to 13, one shy of a majority. The other parties had a lot at stake as well. A Green win would bring their total to nine, just three behind the PCs. A Liberal win would bring their total to seven, just one behind the Greens. And while the NDP were not optimistic, a victory would give them a seat and a toehold. In the end, Natalie Jameson of the PCs won handily, capturing all but two polls, and holding a 371 margin of victory over Green candidate, Dr. John Andrew. Jameson garnered 43.7% (1080) of the vote. Andrew received 27.7% (709). Liberal candidate Karen Lavers won 25.7% (635) while NDP candidate Gordon Gay managed just 1.9% (46).

Aftermath:

One of the most remarkable elections in PEI history also had one of the lowest voting turnouts. The actual number of voters increased slightly, but the percentage (76.3) was a record low (the number of eligible voters increased between 2015 and 2019). It is too soon to say whether this election marks a change in PEI's normal voting behaviour. However, having the Green Party form the Official Opposition will certainly be a change for the Island, and voters now have an incentive to consider parties other than the Liberals and the PCs: arguments that voting for a party other than the Liberals or PCs is a waste of a vote no longer hold.

Meanwhile, the PC promise to behave in a more collegial and cooperative fashion extended to the Throne Speech and to the first Question Period of the new legislature. In the Throne Speech, the Lieutenant Governor stated that¹⁷

My Government is committed to leading through active collaboration with all sides of this Assembly. That commitment includes open and regular consultation in all key areas of our work, including on elements of this Speech, the upcoming 2019-20 operating budget and in the development and tabling of legislation.

In an interesting break with precedent, the first bill passed was not *pro forma*, but was instead "An Act to promote collaboration and cooperation amongst all elected members of the Legislative Assembly with the commitment to work together, putting the interests of Islanders at the heart of every decision."¹⁸ Then, in his first Question Period as leader of the Opposition, Bevan-Baker introduced a non-binding motion to limit heckling, for which the Premier promptly announced his support.

The King government tabled its first budget on 25 June 2019. The Greens were quick to criticize the budget as being nothing more than a "warmed-up Liberal leftovers." Green House Leader Hannah Bell declared she could not support the budget, as the promised consultation did not take place (Campbell 2019b). In the end, the budget passed with the help of all six Liberals and six Greens. One Liberal MLA was overheard saying, "how could we vote against our own budget?" However, two Green MLAs, one of whom was Bell, did vote against.

Meanwhile, Narrative Research's November 2019 opinion poll pegged the approval rating of the King government at 77%, "the highest satisfaction level since Robert Ghiz's Liberals held a 77% rating in 2008." In terms of voter support, however, the PCs dropped down to 38% (from 45% in August), while the Green Party scored 29% (down from 37%). Support for the Liberals rose from 16% to 26%. Given that the share of PC voters is statistically the same as it was in 2015, the Liberals are hoping that the increase in support for the Green Party primarily consists of disaffected Liberals, who may well return to their party once they choose a new leader. The Liberals plan on taking their time in choosing a new leader, and no one expects the King government to fall any time soon.

APPENDIX: supplementary charts and tables

FIGURE 1: 23 April 2019 General Election results

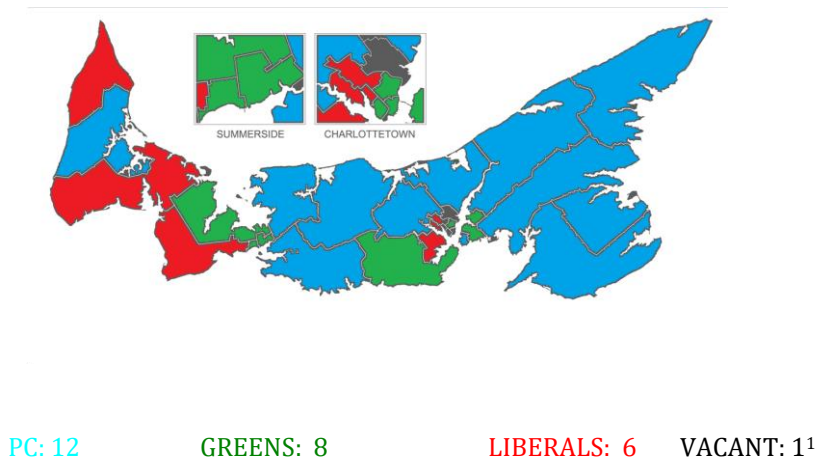


FIGURE 2: PEI party popularity: CRA polls²

¹ Deferred election held July 15, won by PCs.

² All numbers from Corporate Research Associates (now Narrative Research) polls, available at: <https://cra.ca/newsroom/>

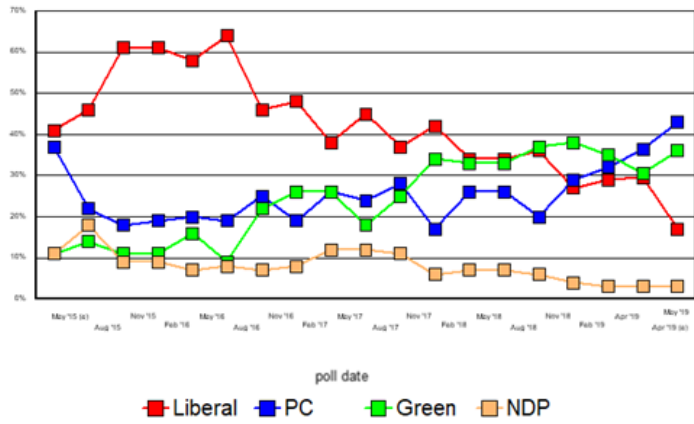


FIGURE 3: PEI party leaders popularity 2015-2019: CRA polls

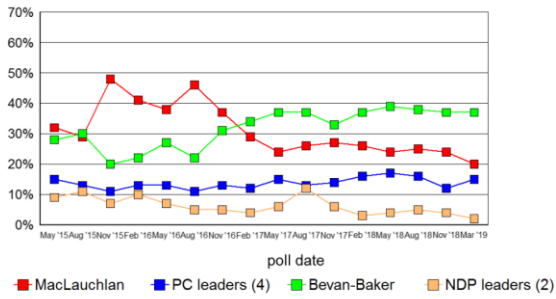


FIGURE 4: Electoral volatility, 1996-2019

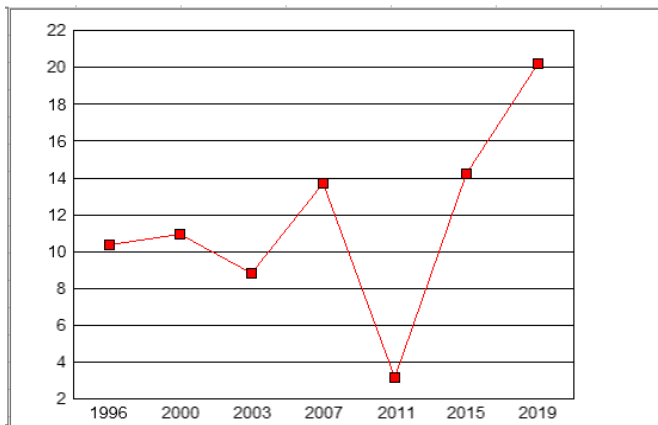


FIGURE 5: Second-Place results, 23 April 2019 General Election

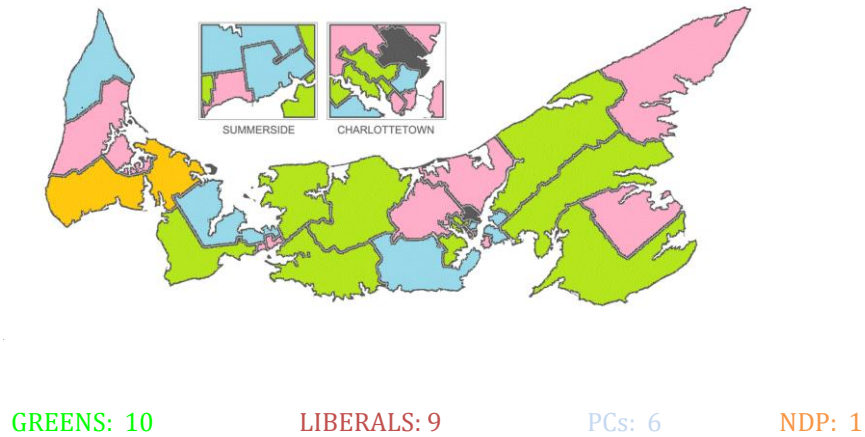


FIGURE 6: Referendum results³

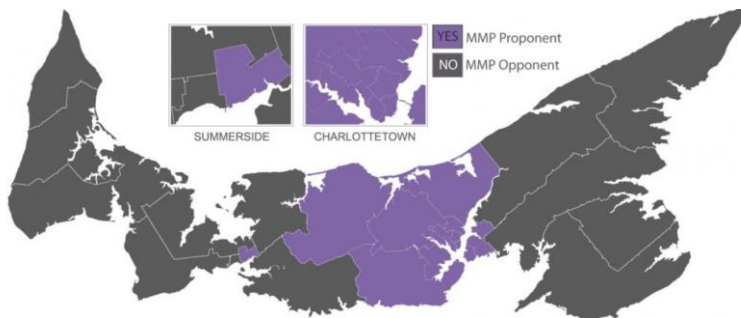


FIGURE 7: PEI Voting Turnout, 1966 – 2019 (Elections PEI)

³ <https://www.electionspei.ca/referendum-results-map>

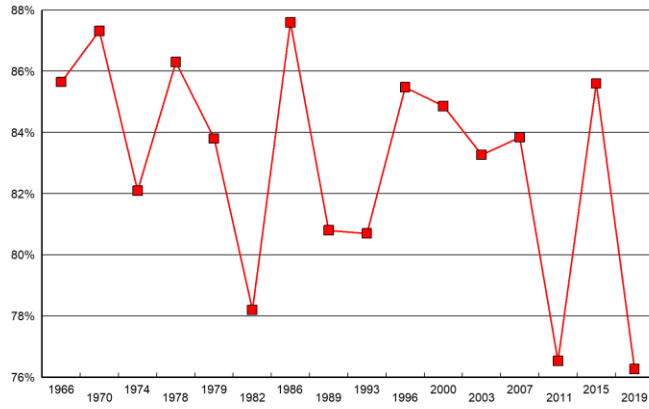


Table 1: Party standings and election results: 2007 to 2019

	2007	at diss.	2011	at diss.	2015	at diss.	2019	+ def. elec.
PC	4	2	5	3	8	8	12	13
LIB	23	24	22	20	18	16	6	6
GRN					1	2	8	8
IND				1		1		
VAC		1		3			1	

Table 2: Party popular vote (% of votes cast): 2000 to 2019

	2000	2003	2007	2011	2015	2019	+ def. elec.
PC	57.6%	54.0%	41.2%	40.2%	37.4%	36.5%	36.7%
LIB	33.6%	42.4%	52.7%	51.4%	40.8%	29.5%	29.4%
NDP	8.4%	3.0%	2.0%	3.2%	11.0%	3.0%	3.0%
GRN	DNR	DNR	3.0%	4.4%	10.8%	30.6%	30.6%
IND	DNR	DNR	0.7%	0.0%	DNR	0.4%	0.3%

Table 3: Party popular vote (% of eligible voters): 2015 vs. 2019 (includes deferred election)

	2015 total vote	% of elig. voters	2019 total vote*	% of elig. voters
PC	30664	32.1%	30413	28.4%
LIB	33478	35.1%	24346	22.7%
NDP	8997	9.4%	2450	2.3%
GRN	8850	9.3%	25300	23.6%
Total valid votes**	81989	85.9%	82791	77.0%
Eligible voters	95444	100%	107109	100%

*Includes deferred election results

** does not include spoiled or rejected ballots; spoiled and rejected ballots count towards turnout.

Table 4: Female candidates 2015-2019

parties	# candidates		# female candidates		% female candidates		# successful female candidates		% of successful female candidates	
	2015	2019	2015	2019	2015	2019	2015	2019	2015	2019
	201	201	201	201	201	201	201	2019	2015	2019
	5	9	5	9	5	9	5			
PCs	27	27	6	7	22%	26%	1	2	17%	29%
GRN	24	27	9	9	38%	33%	0	5	0	56%
LIB	27	27	7	8	26%	30%	4	0	57%	0
NDP	27	24	9	11	33%	46%	0	0	0	0

Table 5: Vote gain and loss 2015-2019

Year	GREEN	NDP	LIBERAL	PC	Total votes	Eligible voters
2015	8858	8997	33,481	30,663	81,999	100,343
2019	25,300	2450	24,346	30,413	82,791	107,109
diff.	16,442	-6547	-9135	-250	-792	6766

Notes

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- ¹ See, for example, comments by PC MLA Jim Bagnall (20 April 2011 *Hansard*, 1783), “She was told by the minister, and it’s turning around, Madam Speaker, and making a farce of this place, because we’re supposed to be able to debate these things.”
- ² See also Campbell 2018.
- ³ http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/SFT_E_15.pdf
- ⁴ <http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/democraticrenew.pdf>
- ⁵ Given the low turnout, MacLauchlan’s reluctance to honour the vote was understandable. However, his statement was not a fair representation of how a preferential ballot works, or what the counts meant. MacLauchlan’s full comments can be found at: www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/news/statement-premier-maclauchlan-regarding-plebiscite.
- ⁶ The telephone poll was conducted 13-16 January 2017. See Wright 2017a.
- ⁷ In the 2019 campaign, Redmond publicly supported Dennis King and the PCs (Guardian 2019).
- ⁸ Which would be the five-year constitutional limit.
- ⁹ <https://www.peigreens.ca/platform> (emphasis added).
- ¹⁰ Bevan-Baker was not the Green Party leader in 2011. He received 306 votes, or 9% in his riding that year. In 2015, as leader, Bevan-Baker won 55% of the vote in his riding (2077).
- ¹¹ This includes the interim leader, Steven Myers, who led the party in January and February of 2015.
- ¹² <https://liberalpei.ca/2019-liberal-platform/>
- ¹³ It is useful to keep in mind that PEI does not have any large urban centres. Its largest city is the capital, Charlottetown, which has a population of just 36,000. The Greater Charlottetown Area has a population of about 50,000.
- ¹⁴ For example, see Cecco 2019.
- ¹⁵ That being said, a new Narrative Research poll taken after the PEI election claimed support for the CPC on PEI was at 42%, ahead of the Liberals (32%) and the Greens (22%) (Narrative 2019a).
- ¹⁶ Out of 27: the revision of the writ in District 9 did not cancel the referendum vote in that riding. The threshold was set at 17 ridings.
- ¹⁷ <http://www.assembly.pe.ca/docs/speech-from-the-throne-1st-66th.pdf>
- ¹⁸ Bill 1 (1st Session of the Sixty-sixth General Assembly).

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