

Report

The 2018 Provincial Election in New Brunswick: The New Reality of a Minority Government in a Four-Party Legislature

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Abstract:

New Brunswick's 2018 election produced a minority legislature, the first in a century. The major parties continue to decline in voter support, and two new parties now have a presence in the Assembly. The election brings New Brunswick's electoral politics increasingly into the modern Canadian mainstream; one new caucus is the Greens. In other respects, the election made the old new again. The populist People's Alliance gained three seats partly on the basis of criticism of bilingualism policy. The Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives, in an informal alliance to govern, are all but confined to the anglophone parts of the province, while the defeated Liberals have all their strength in the Acadian north-east. The campaign mattered, as did constitutional conventions. The Liberals squandered a large lead in the polls, and the parties struggled to sort out the conventions of government formation.

Résumé

L'élection provinciale au Nouveau-Brunswick en 2018 a mené à la formation d'une législature minoritaire, une première en près de 100 ans. Les partis majoritaires continuent de voir leur soutien décliner au sein de l'électorat et deux nouveaux partis sont désormais présents à l'Assemblée. Cette élection confirme que les dynamiques électorales au Nouveau-Brunswick se situent dans le courant dominant du Canada moderne; le Parti vert forme maintenant un nouveau caucus. À d'autres égards, l'élection a aussi renforcé des dynamiques existantes. L'Alliance des Gens a obtenu trois sièges en partie sur des critiques dirigées vers la politique du bilinguisme. L'alliance informelle permettant à l'Alliance et le Parti progressiste-conservateur de gouverner repose sur des appuis se trouvant essentiellement dans les sections anglophones de la province, alors que les appuis le Parti libéral défaits sont concentrés dans le nord-est acadien. Tout comme les conventions constitutionnelles, la campagne a été importante. Le Parti libéral a dilapidé une avance importante dans les sondages et les partis ont eu du mal à régler le processus de formation du gouvernement.

Keywords

New Brunswick 2018 Election, Polls, Constitutional conventions, Minority government, Bilingualism

Mots-clés

L'élection provinciale au Nouveau-Brunswick en 2018, sondages, conventions constitutionnelles, gouvernement minoritaire, bilinguisme

Introduction

New Brunswick's 39th General Election was held on September 24, 2018. After a sleepy election campaign with few memorable moments or critical communication gaffes, election night produced the closest result in almost 100 years with Blaine Higgs' Progressive Conservatives (PC) winning 22 seats, incumbent premier Brian Gallant's Liberals (LIB) winning 21 seats, the upstart Green Party led by David Coon winning three seats, and the recently-formed populist People's Alliance of New Brunswick (PANB) led by Kris Austin winning its first ever seats in the legislature (three in total). The result was the first hung parliament and ultimately first minority government since the 1920 election. Considering the hung parliament result, the electoral emergence of two minor parties and the precipitous drop in combined PC and Liberal popular vote (down to under 70% after over 85% in 2014), it was truly a historic night in New Brunswick politics. The PCs, Liberals, and New Democratic Party (NDP) fielded a full 49 candidates and the Greens fielded 47 candidates. The People's Alliance ran only 30 candidates. Overall, 241 candidates stood for election, 21 more than in 2014, and 93 of these candidates were women, up from 71 in 2014.

Opinion polls at the start of the election campaign showed a comfortable Liberal lead but the margins soon tightened with a surprising surge in support for the PANB and a somewhat expected collapse in NDP support (Williams 2018a). On September 20, on the eve of the election, a Nanos Research poll had the parties with the following vote intentions – LIB 37.4%, PC 30.2%, NDP 9.6%, Greens 10.8%, and PANB 12.0%. On election night, the popular vote was: LIB 37.8%, PC 31.9%, PANB 12.6%, the Greens 11.9%, and the NDP 5.0%.

On a night of many historic footnotes, People's Alliance leader Kris Austin won the riding of Fredericton-Grand Lake. Austin was joined by two more successful candidates of the PANB, Rick DeSaulniers in Fredericton-York and Michelle Conroy in Miramichi. Green leader David Coon was re-elected by a much wider margin (2018 – 36.3%; 2014 – 4.5%) in Fredericton South and was joined by the second and third ever Green candidates elected to the New Brunswick legislature: Kevin Arseneau in Kent North and Megan Mitton in Memramcook-Tantramar. Table 1 presents changes in popular vote by party from 1999 to 2018.

Gerry Lowe won by just 10 votes over Progressive Conservative candidate Barry Ogden. After a recount and a number of court challenges over voting discrepancies, Lowe's victory was confirmed by a provincial judge. The Memramcook-Tantramar riding was also close and following an automatic recount, Megan Mitton won by just 11 votes over the Liberal incumbent.

Brian Gallant was the third premier in a row not to secure a second majority government following Shawn Graham (Liberal) in 2010 and David Alward (PC) in 2014. The tradition of governments serving at least two consecutive terms, which included Louis Robichaud (Liberal) from 1960 to 1970, Richard Hatfield (PC) from 1970 to 1987 and Frank McKenna (Liberal) from 1987 to 1997, seems like the distant past. In terms of breaking tradition, the combined Liberal and Progressive Conservative popular vote was the lowest since 1991 at 69.3%. Only twelve years earlier in 2006, before the Graham, Alward and Gallant failed re-election attempts, the combined Liberal-Progressive Conservative popular vote share was 93.9%. In raw numbers, 89,063 fewer New Brunswickers voted for the two major parties in

2018 compared to 2006. That being said, in the 1991 election, which came after the 1987 58-seat Liberal sweep, the legislature saw a minor party breakthrough of a total of nine seats combined for the Confederation of Regions (eight) and the New Democratic Party (one), with the combined Liberal-Progressive Conservative vote falling to 67.8%. Both the 1991 and 2018 elections featured dramatic challenges to the traditional party system in New Brunswick.

Table 1: Popular Vote 1999-2018

Party/Election	1999	2003	2006	2010	2014	2018
LIB	37.0%	44.0%	46.8%	34.2%	42.5%	37.4%
PC	52.6%	45.0%	47.1%	48.4%	34.6%	31.9%
NDP	8.7%	9.6%	5.1%	10.3%	12.9%	5.0%
COR	0.7%	DNR	DNR	DNR	DNR	DNR
Green	DNR	DNR	DNR	4.5%	6.6%	11.9%
PANB	DNR	DNR	DNR	1.2%	2.1%	12.6%

Legend:

- LIB = Liberal Party of New Brunswick
- PC = Progressive Conservative Party of New Brunswick
- NDP = New Democratic Party of New Brunswick
- COR = Confederation of Regions Party of New Brunswick
- Green = Green Party of New Brunswick
- PANB = People’s Alliance Party of New Brunswick
- DNR = Did not field candidates

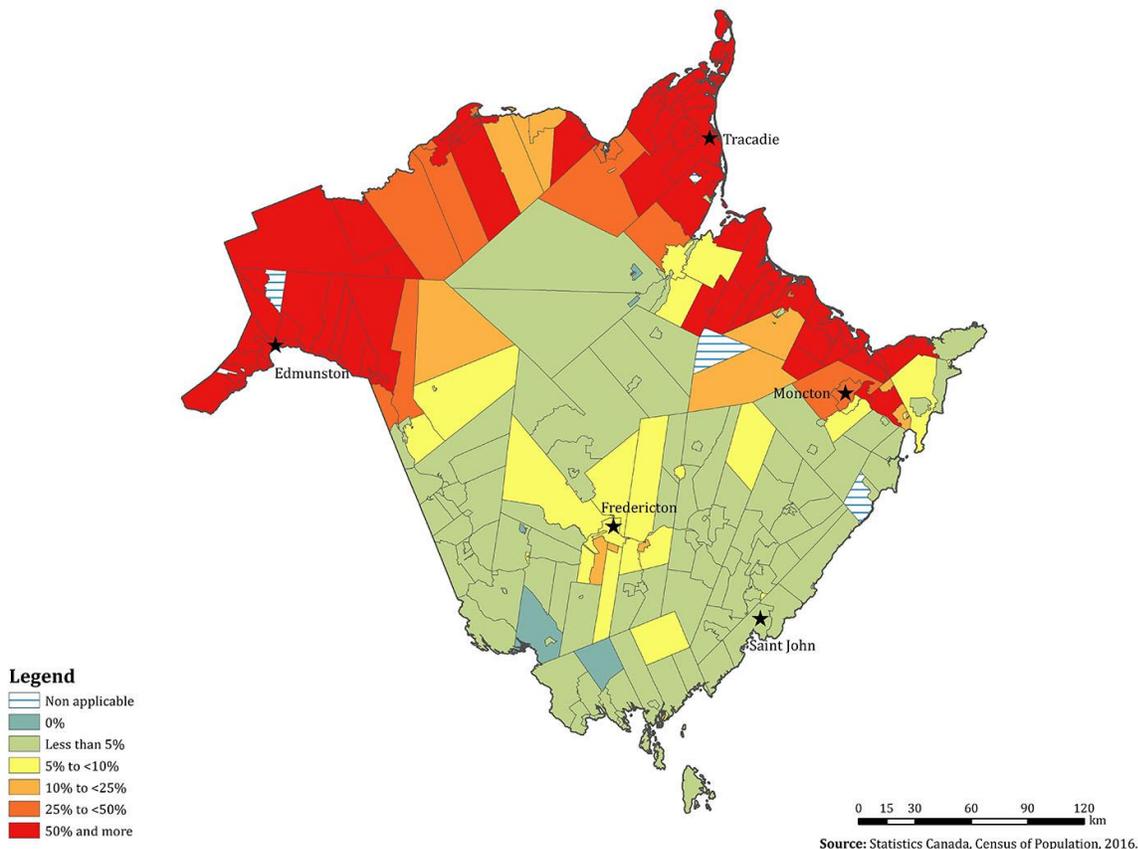
In 2018, the closest race took place in Saint John Harbour, in which the Liberal candidate Gallant’s failure to secure a second term was a case of campaign dynamics where smaller parties broke through and split the vote in meaningful ways, as well as a culmination of government errors over the preceding four years. Like Alward and Graham, a perception grew that the government’s ability to handle big files and to follow through with policy agendas was weak, most notably highlighted by the debacle over property tax assessments. This 2017 self-inflicted wound, in which the premier’s office pressured public servants to implement a new computer system for assessing property taxes, led to odd tax increases for members of the public. The backlash was swift and the whole system was eventually abandoned (Jones 2017).

The other issue for the Liberal Party was the growing linguistic polarization in their support. The Liberals had a significant vote concentration in majority Francophone ridings, where they increased their winning margins from the previous elections, but a decline in vote share in the Anglophone ridings. The 2018 Liberal vote of almost 38% should have translated into a majority government, but was remarkably inefficient. As commentators stressed in the closing days of the campaign, the Liberals had traditionally needed a large provincial vote advantage over the Progressive Conservatives in order to overcome the PC advantage in Anglophone ridings. Eric Grenier suggested “there was a dramatic swing in the francophone vote between 2010 and 2014 that helped the Liberals get elected but increased the inefficiency of their vote” (2019a). Following the defeat of Bernard Lord’s two term

government, the PC vote in francophone ridings plummeted as David Alward and Blaine Higgs failed to resonate with voters. This led to an almost 23 point move in votes in these ridings between the PCs and the Liberals from 2010 to 2014 (Grenier 2019a). Further, Brian Gallant was from an area with a significant Francophone population, Shediac Bay-Dieppe, and helped deepen the dominance of the Liberal Party in the Acadian portion of the province. But those ridings were clustered in a stretch of the province between Moncton and Campbellton where over three-quarters of New Brunswick's francophone population live (see Map 1).

Map 1

Population with French as their first official language spoken, census subdivisions, New Brunswick, 2016



(Statistics Canada, 2019)

The Greens and the People's Alliance both played on public frustration regarding a perceived lack of difference between the two major parties (Austin 2018). Kris Austin capitalized on Anglophone voter resentment in areas where there was an inchoate sense that the provincial government had ignored issues relevant to their communities. This was mixed with a healthy dose of anti-duality/anti-bilingual animus that had been simmering since the Confederation of Regions party formed the official opposition in 1991. David Coon combined the Greens' traditional environmental and climate change message with a unique focus on

government transparency and was able to expand the party's support beyond his Fredericton South constituency. The emergence of smaller parties as viable electoral contenders may explain why voter turnout had a slight uptick in 2018 compared to the 2014 election (see Table 2).

Table 2: Voter Turnout

Year	Net total	Valid	Rejected	Votes cast	% voted
1967	313,685	257,671	-	257,671	82.14%
1970	331,643	265,891	3,415	269,306	81.20%
1974	408,182	310,098	2,485	312,583	76.58%
1978	441,454	330,492	3,269	333,761	75.60%
1982	471,798	384,557	2,694	387,251	82.08%
1987	501,646	408,516	2,620	411,136	81.96%
1991	517,613	411,590	3,138	414,728	80.12%
1995	525,132	389,562	3,688	393,250	74.89%
1999	525,465	394,237	2,942	397,179	75.59%
2003	563,080	383,074	3,583	386,657	68.67%
2006	558,688	374,156	3,091	377,247	67.52%
2010	538,965	371,742	3,160	374,902	69.56%
2014	577,529	371,739	1,622	373,361	64.65%
2018	568,671	381,775	1,412	383,187	67.13%

As for Blaine Higgs and the Progressive Conservatives, they did not do anything in the campaign to hurt their electoral chances and still saw their vote total decline from 34.64% in 2014 to less than 32% in 2018. Their vote was efficient, however, and they targeted just enough ridings to win the most seats on election night. They were the net beneficiaries of an odd vote split in which three of five ridings that voted for the Greens or People's Alliance for the first time were losses for the Liberals. In Memramcook-Tantramar, Kent North, and Miramichi, incumbent Liberals failed to get re-elected. Only in Fredericton-Grand Lake and Fredericton-York did the PCs lose incumbents. By flying under the radar in the campaign and targeting enough ridings, the PCs were able to win just enough seats to be in a position to form a minority government.

Players

Three of the five leaders had led parties in campaigns before 2018, with Blaine Higgs and NDP leader Jennifer McKenzie playing the role of newcomers. The incumbent premier Brian Gallant won the Liberal Party leadership in 2012. Before becoming party leader and premier, Gallant had lost in Moncton East to then Premier Bernard Lord in the 2006 election. At 32, Gallant was the second youngest premier in New Brunswick history. During his time as premier, he exhibited a much different style than the low-key David Alward (premier 2010-2014), with the government following an activist government model.

In contrast to Gallant, the Progressive Conservatives had selected a relatively older (in New Brunswick leadership terms) party leader in their October 2016 leadership convention. In a seven-candidate, three-ballot convention, Higgs, who was 62, led during each round,

eventually beating former Saint John Mayor Mel Norton on the third ballot 57.1% to 42.8% (McHardie 2016). Higgs was no newcomer to New Brunswick politics; he had been a powerful finance minister during the David Alward government from 2010 to 2014 and three decades earlier had been involved in the Confederation of Regions Party (Poitras 2018). Higgs' focus on fiscal management and pragmatic leadership defined his path to the top of the Progressive Conservative Party.

To the political left of the Liberals was the consistently struggling NDP. In 2014 the NDP, led by future Progressive Conservative education minister Dominic Cardy, achieved their best ever popular vote support of 13.9%; however, this still translated into zero seats in the legislature. Just over two years later, in 2017, Cardy resigned as party member and leader in a very public and dramatic fashion. Cardy complained that he "[could not] lead a party where a tiny minority of well-connected members refuse to accept the democratic will of the membership" (in Ross 2017). Shortly after, he joined the Progressive Conservative Party and more specifically the office of Leader of the Opposition Blaine Higgs (Morris 2017). In a two-page breakup letter, Cardy blamed "a group of extremists, people who identified as communists, people who did very little for the NDP but constantly undermined the decisions of the party" (in Bruce 2017). In August 2017, former chair of the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board Jennifer McKenzie was acclaimed leader and pledged to take the party in a new direction: "I am a socialist," she said, "and I believe in the power of people working together. And I hope to take this party into the future based on the solid principles on which the New Democrats are founded" (in Chilibeck 2017a).

As the NDP veered toward existential crisis, the 2018 election saw major breakthroughs for both the Green Party and the People's Alliance of New Brunswick. Both parties maintained their leaders from the 2014 campaign – MLA David Coon for the Green Party and Kris Austin for the PANB. Since the 2014 election, from outside of the legislature, Austin had continued his party's campaign against certain aspects of New Brunswick's bilingualism policies including duality which provided two separate English and French health care authorities and unilingual school buses (Williams 2018b). After his unsuccessful attempt at a Progressive Conservative nomination in 2009, Austin, a former church minister, formed the populist People's Alliance in 2010.

New Brunswick's other 21st century upstart political party, the Greens, were formed in 2008 and made their legislative breakthrough in 2014 when David Coon won the Fredericton South riding with 31% of the vote. Between 2014 and 2018, Coon had been a consistent presence on the provincial political scene even as he led a legislative caucus of one. With a focus on environmental and democratic issues, Coon reflected the new national Green Party momentum at the federal level and in a number of provinces including British Columbia, Ontario, and Prince Edward Island. Remarkably, Coon was re-elected in 2018 with 3697 votes and by a vote margin of 2368, which was greater than his overall vote support in 2014 of 2272 votes (Fraser 2018). As well, New Brunswick had a small increase in the number of female candidates, up over 20 from the last election, but only a modest increase in the number of women elected in 2018. Only 11 of the 49 MLAs were female (see Table 3).

Table 3: Women in New Brunswick Elections 2010-2018

	2010	2014	2018
Liberal candidates	12	13	19
Liberal candidates elected	0	4	5
PC candidates	14	14	14
PC candidates elected	8	4	4
Green Party candidates	23	22	23
Green Party candidates elected	0	0	1
NDP candidates	17	15	25
NDP candidates elected	0	0	0
PANB candidates	5	5	9
PANB candidates elected	0	0	1
KISS NB/IND candidates	0	2	3
KISS NB/IND candidates elected	0	0	0
Total female candidates	71	72	93
Total elected	8	8	11

The Election Lead-up: 2014-2018

The context of the 2018 New Brunswick election was a contrast of dramatically different political styles among the front runners (Brian Gallant and Blaine Higgs) and the foreshadowing of a shakeup to the popularity of minor parties in New Brunswick (Greens, PANB, NDP). Separated by twenty-eight years in age, Gallant and Higgs presented generational and performative differences. The Gallant Liberal government fit the mold of modern Canadian political branding and marketing with active social media and continuous, branded government announcements. In many ways, this government echoed the spirit, style, and substance of their federal counterparts –Justin Trudeau’s Liberal government. On the other hand, after taking over the reins of the Progressive Conservative party, Higgs led a low-key opposition with less emphasis on party brand or leader style. Higgs’ managerial style approach reflected other former provincial Progressive Conservative leaders from across the country such as Bill Davis (Ontario premier 1971-1985) or Ed Stelmach (Alberta premier 2006-2011). While Higgs’ role as the province’s finance minister from 2010 to 2014 brought with him the policy legacy of the Alward government (pension reform, pursuit of greater natural resource development), Gallant’s policy legacy was more concentrated on social policy including post-secondary education tuition reform and extending subsidies for daycares (Chilibeck 2018a).

When Gallant had campaigned for the Liberal leadership in 2012 he had pledged to bring a “new approach” to governing, yet in one of his last major addresses to the provincial legislature after stepping down as leader he said, “one of my greatest regrets as a legislator is that over time, I became too jaded and fell into some of the old, adversarial ways of this place” (in Poitras 2018b). While Gallant may have had regrets over some of his behaviour, he did bring limited institutional change including starting his tenure with the smallest cabinet in almost half a century (12 ministers). The honeymoon of Gallant’s 2014 victory did

not last long as within weeks of forming government his new Liberal MLA from Saint John East, Gary Keating, unexpectedly resigned. The resignation led to a November by-election that the Liberals lost by 827 votes to Progressive Conservative Glen Savoie (Morris 2014).

After staking ground against fracking during the campaign, the Liberals introduced a moratorium soon after forming government in 2014. The government set five conditions that needed to be met before the ban was lifted: a plan for regulations; waste-water disposal; consultations with First Nations; a royalty structure; and a social licence to move ahead (Bateman 2018). The government's actions took the spotlight off the fracking debate, but the Liberals still needed to publicly support natural resources as an economic driver of the province. Gallant's support was rhetorically expressed with his support for the Energy East pipeline project which would have brought crude oil from Alberta to the Irving refinery in Saint John. When the project was considered dead in the fall of 2017, blame was placed on a variety of factors, but it still put pressure on the Liberal government's plans for the economy (Bissett 2017).

Some of Gallant's early missteps were policy reversals on new medical equipment for the Saint John Regional Hospital, changes to fees for nursing homes, controversial school closures, and adjustments to childcare funding (Morris 2015). In the face of this adversity, Gallant vowed to hit the "reset" button after only one year at the helm (Lewis 2015). Like David Alward who for two and a half years faced an interim opposition leader in Victor Boudreau, Gallant had two years of interim Progressive Conservative leader Bruce Fitch. In Gallant's second year there were more blunders. He initially failed to pass what to many was an obscure law allowing the government to veto where judges live in the province. It took the Liberal government two attempts to pass the Judicature Act (Huras 2016). As well, the government faced opposition to changes to post-secondary tuition support programs, scrapping the Tuition Rebate Program and replacing it with the Tuition Access Bursary (Huras 2016). The government struggled as well in dealing with the issue of separate school buses for anglophone and francophone students, an issue that would spur on momentum and attention for the People's Alliance of New Brunswick.

In an area of democratic reform, the Liberal government appointed an independent, non-partisan commission to study the province's electoral system and rules in late 2016. The commission reported in the spring of 2017 with recommendations to move to a preferential ballot and a lower voting age. However, Gallant pledged not to pursue any electoral reform through a provincial referendum or until after the next provincial election (Chilibeck 2017b). As well, by the end of their first mandate, he faced criticism as the Liberals had dramatically cut back on Assembly sittings— 50 fewer days than David Alward's government (2010-2014) and 88 fewer days than Shawn Graham's government (2006-2010) (Chilibeck 2018b).

As the 2018 calendar drew closer to election day, the Liberal government attempted to move past some of their policy challenges and political fumbles and embark on a relentless campaign of government announcements, promoting their record and projects in a not-so-subtle political and electoral fashion (Jones 2018). At dissolution, the legislature had a slim Liberal majority with two vacant seats and former Liberal Speaker Chris Collins sitting as an Independent following a personal dispute (see Table 4 below).

Table 4: Party Standings and Election Results 2006 to 2018

	2006	At diss.	2010	At diss.	2014	At diss.	2018
PC	26	23	42	41	21	21	22
Lib	29	32	13	13	27	24	21
NDP	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
PANB	*	*	0	0	0	0	3
Green	*	*	0	0	1	1	3
IND	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
Vacant	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Total	55	55	55	55	49	49	49

*did not run candidates

Despite spin attempts by government communications, the Gallant Liberals had to run on a record that could not mask a series of gaffes and mistakes. Like the Graham government, they were marred by blunders with their attempts to change policy.

Polls

Between the 2014 and 2018 New Brunswick elections, the Liberals were consistently ahead of the Progressive Conservatives in public opinion polls; the majority of the time ahead by double digits. From June 1, 2016 to May 31, 2017, CRA (Corporate Research Associates, now called Narrative Research – the most active pollster in the region) had the Liberals over 50% and consistently 20 points ahead of the PCs. Other polling firms such as MQO Research and Mainstreet Research were more bearish on Liberal support, with both firms showing the Tories in the lead in May 2018 (43PC to 35LIB) and July 2018 (39PC to 38LIB). The last CRA poll before election day, reported on September 9, 2018, had the Liberals up 12 points. From that point on, however, polling showed Liberal support under 40 percent and with only a lead of five to seven points on the PCs. See Table 5 below.

In a September 14th Forum Research Poll, 28% percent of those polled responded that Brian Gallant would make the best premier, compared to 26% for Blaine Higgs. The Green leader, David Coon, was preferred by 12%, People’s Alliance leader Kris Austin by 11%, and NDP leader Jennifer McKenzie only 4%.

After months of consistent results, the polls published in the last two weeks showed a few dramatic trends that nevertheless caused little change in momentum for the party that would eventually form government, the Progressive Conservatives. The last four public polls showed the Liberals dipping under the 40% mark which many viewed as problematic for their road to a majority government. Due to expected wide margins of victory in the northern ridings, the common wisdom was that the Liberals would need to win by at least seven or eight points to secure a majority of the seats. As well, the last fourteen days of polling data showed dramatic, nearly historic, changes in support for the minor parties as the NDP collapsed and the Green Party and PANB flirted with numbers in the teens. Late polling would be prescient as it suggested a hung legislature and unprecedented results for the Green Party and PANB.

The headlines of the press releases of the final public polls reflected the change in a relatively sleepy campaign. On September 14th, Forum Research declared “Liberals Lead But PCs Tracking for Thin Majority”. On September 21st, the *Telegraph Journal* sponsored Nanos release noted, “Ten Percent Report Likely to Change Vote” and on September 23rd another Forum Research poll press release exclaimed “NB Headed Toward Minority”. As the table below shows, the late polling was quite accurate in predicting the electoral outcome on September 24th.

Table 5: Polls

Polling Company	Date Conducted	PC	Liberal	NDP	Green	PANB
CRA	1-19 Aug	30	50	7	7	6
CRA	23 Aug – 9 Sep	33	45	6	10	5
Leger	7-11 Sep	32	41	8	8	10
Forum	10-11 Sep	32	37	4	11	15
Nanos	17-20 Sep	30	37	10	11	12
Mainstreet	20-21 Sep	29	35	3	16	15
Forum	23 Sep	29	36	4	14	16
Election	24 Sep	31.9	37.8	5.0	11.9	12.6

Issues

Unlike the previous two New Brunswick elections, this election did not turn on a single issue. In the 2014 campaign, the David Alward Progressive Conservative government’s gamble to expand shale gas exploration and fracking turned into an “all-eggs-in-one-basket” approach to resource development and led to their failed *Just Say Yes!* campaign (Lewis, Bateman and Desserud 2017). In 2010, Shawn Graham’s Liberal government proposed selling NB Power to Hydro Quebec. Despite NB Power’s historically unpopular status in the province as a mismanaged crown corporation, there was an unexpected grassroots campaign to block the move and the Liberals plummeted in support prior to the 2010 election. Both the shale gas policy strategy and the selling of NB Power represented a failure in government communications to consider how the public would react. Both policies generated public backlash that left the government scrambling and appearing tone-deaf. In the case of fracking, clashes near Rexton, New Brunswick between Indigenous communities, environmental activists, shale gas company workers and supporters, and the RCMP culminated in a stain on the government for its failure to comprehend how personal resource policy can be. Social media largely drove these public responses to each and that demonstrated how flat-footed government could be in handling quickly organized public opposition. In 2018, no single issue dominated and despite flat economic growth and government mistakes that had become all too typical of modern New Brunswick governments, the Liberals held most of their vote percentage advantage from the previous election. It is just that they did not benefit from vote splitting and the targeting of particular constituencies.

The 2018 election also lacked an overall change narrative. Unlike in 2010 and 2014, when the incumbent premiers were expected to lose the elections as soon as the writ was dropped, Gallant and the Liberals held a comfortable advantage over the PCs in polling

throughout the campaign and on election night. This time, few New Brunswickers saw Blaine Higgs and the PCs as a government in waiting. This might explain why the change narrative was not present with either the Liberals or the PCs. Instead, it was smaller parties garnering almost 30% of the vote, the highest percentage in decades, that was the real story of the 2018 campaign. Both major parties failed to inspire the voters to their left and right. Where historically a protest vote or a shrinking core of NDP voters would be the only votes that did not go Liberal or PC, as noted previously, the 2018 election saw the Liberal and PC combined vote shrink to their lowest levels since the 1991 election.

If there was a single issue that was central to the campaign, it was New Brunswick's stubbornly flat economy which had lagged behind the economic performances of the other Atlantic Canadian provinces since the Lord years. The lack of an economic vision by provincial leaders over successive governments has led to bland election cycles with high levels of voter apathy. Only 67% of voters turned out for the 2018 election (Quon 2018). With one third of the electorate not participating, the doom and gloom economic forecasts for the province may have contributed to the decline. A sentiment shared by non-voters is that it does not matter which party is in power since they ultimately cannot fundamentally improve things. That appears to be a growing concern in New Brunswick.

Following the hung legislature and the failed attempt by Gallant to hold on to power, noted New Brunswicker and celebrated Canadian political author and analyst, Donald Savoie, lamented that New Brunswick also has significant disadvantages unique to the province. With a "sharp linguistic divide" that can be exploited, an aging and declining population despite some growth prospects from other parts of Canada given the lower costs of living and housing, and a provincial government dependent on transfer payments, Savoie portrayed New Brunswick as a province that was rudderless and unable to address long term challenges (2019). A lack of economic growth, combined with increasing proportions of the provincial budget allocated just to health care costs, had commentators calling it a death spiral.

Data from Vote Compass surveys suggest that the bigger provincial campaign issues were typical of a New Brunswick election. In data collected at the start of the campaign, when asked what was the most important issue facing New Brunswick, about half of the respondents chose the economy. This was similar to data collected by Vote Compass for the 2018 Ontario provincial election. But it was not the same as surveys of Quebec voters for their 2018 election, where health care was more important than the economy in Vote Compass's Quebec election tool. The next closest issue in New Brunswick was health, chosen by just under 20%, followed by the environment, language issues and then education. Social programs were chosen by just under 10%, followed by democracy and institutions, social justice, immigration and diversity, arts and culture, and infrastructure each between 0-5%. When the data were stratified based on educational background and age group, respondents with university degrees or college or trade school overwhelmingly selected the economy. Health care was universal across educational backgrounds, as was the environment. But language issues were less important to people with university degrees. In terms of age group, the economy mattered most to people 35 years and older. For younger people, aged 18-34, while the economy was still the most important issue, the environment was second followed by education. For the 35-54 demographic, language was the second most important issue.

Perhaps the most notable finding was that the most important issue stratified by vote intention. Voters who intended to vote for the PCs, the Liberals, and the NDP selected the economy as the most important issue. This was followed by health care for those who intended to vote NDP and Liberal, and education by those who intended to vote PC.

Those who intended to vote for the Green Party selected the environment first and those who intended to vote for the People's Alliance selected language first. This was followed by the economy for these two groups of voters. In fact, the People's Alliance supporters were split very closely between the economy and language. On the language issue, apart from those who intended to vote for the People's Alliance, this was relatively a non-factor for those who intended to vote for any of the other parties.

From this data, one can glean some insight into how the parties were campaigning. Blaine Higgs ran away from the divisiveness of bilingualism, telling the public that his views had evolved on the issue. Gallant and Coon made sure the public understood that bilingualism and its principles had their full support. Language only resonated as an important issue with a narrow segment of the public. But it was enough to allow the People's Alliance to concentrate their vote in a few ridings and galvanize voters around a populist appeal that had not been successfully mined since the Confederation of Regions years.

Save for language, what the Vote Compass data demonstrated was that most voters were somewhere in the middle on a lot of issues and on social issues. In particular, on policy areas such as health care and abortion services, there is a large consensus for more spending and better accessibility. Both right wing nationalism and left wing populism, dog whistles on divisive issues or dramatic shifts to new ways of thinking about policy, did not seem to be very popular in the Vote Compass data. Perhaps that is why the election campaign unfolded without a particular issue driving the vote and why most of the party platforms stuck to tried-and-true policy ideas.

Campaign

The 2018 campaign mattered. It brought out some longstanding voter grievances that had been simmering since the 1990s, invigorated progressive left and rural conservative voters with new voices in the political culture, and frustrated both the Liberal and PC parties as they faced an increasingly disgruntled electorate. Gallant and Higgs failed to seal the deal on a majority government as voters turned away from both major parties. While the PCs won the most seats, and would find a natural governing partner with the PANB, the election campaign itself should serve as a warning to both major parties. Now that two smaller parties have changed the dynamics in political culture in the province and gained an electoral foothold, traditional voting patterns can shift. The lack of big ideas, of ways to engage the public in redeveloping the province, certainly allowed David Coon and Kris Austin to offer voters new visions for governing. And regardless of right-of-centre and left-of-centre criticisms of what were considered fringe movements and parties, both the Greens and the PANB showed on election night that populist appeals and good government and long-game strategies can sometimes work at the expense of short-term promises and rolling out spending announcements in an election year.

As mentioned earlier, the campaign unfolded with polling numbers that showed both the Greens and PANB in a position to win at least one seat each. Vote Compass tracked voter

intention and a series of issues developed through questions designed by academics over the course of the campaign. After the first week of the campaign, data showed that traditional issue concerns like the economy and health care were not the priority with many of these voters. The Liberal and PC platforms did not even really address some of these other issues nor did the campaigns have a way of targeting groups that did not respond to traditional campaign announcements. For respondents whose vote intention was the PANB, their major issues and some of their responses did not fit with a campaign narrative. For example, when asked whether government spending makes economic problems worse, People's Alliance supporters, based on the findings from respondents from the start of the campaign to September 4, overwhelmingly "somewhat agreed" or "strongly agreed" (Vote Compass Report on Economy and Finances 2019). That data should have been a big tell to the Liberal campaign that traditional election year spending announcements and promises with funding attached would not convince these voters to vote for them. Likewise, for voters whose intention was Green, the most important issue was overwhelmingly the environment with all others a distant second, including the economy.

Of all the data collected, the most telling was on People's Alliance supporters and their belief that language was the most important issue and the cause of government problems in the province. Despite Kris Austin's attempts to nuance the language message more in the 2018 campaign, speaking about duality and duplication of services in two languages, as opposed to a more blunt, radical populist anti-francophone message attacking bilingualism and the bicultural establishment within the New Brunswick public sector, the PANB vote intention data showed that PANB supporters were far more visceral than the leader.

The other signature campaign issues, including the PC's pledge to eliminate the proposed carbon tax the Gallant government had been negotiating and was trying to get approved by the federal government, and the Liberal promise to freeze NB Power rates, were not effective issues in terms of a campaign narrative. In fact, both the Liberals and PCs appeared to target low hanging fruit: the carbon tax elimination might have played well with the Tory base, but it was not an issue on which the PCs might pick up votes, since New Brunswick had yet to implement a carbon tax. As for power rate freezes, that policy ran counter to the reason for implementing a carbon tax in the first place, namely an overall reduction of emissions.

The general discontent voters felt gave way to hyper-localized issues predominating during the campaign. Rather than this being a typical provincial-wide campaign with the usual swings in every sector, it ended up becoming an election focused on 17 close ridings. Similar to the red state-blue state challenge of U.S. presidential elections, all four parties saw a significant number of ridings as non-competitive in this election, and the margins by which Liberal and PC candidates, as well as Green leader David Coon and People's Alliance leader Kris Austin, won in these safe seats certainly bears that out. The problem for the Liberals, however, was that it seems they did not realize until too late that some of their perceived 'safe seats' were in fact competitive.

What they found out too late was that local and regional issues tended to undercut their vote advantage. During the campaign, a number of MLAs and long-time cabinet ministers found their traditional support evaporate as smaller party candidates and the opposition PC challengers focused on local issues. Ridings that had been traditional Liberal strongholds saw support slip away late in the campaign. It could be argued then that instead of a provincial campaign, which the Liberals were trying to run, there were three other parties

running on local issues and focused on specific ridings. Their one attempt at provincializing the campaign was in the closing weeks. The Liberals began desperately to paint the PCs as budget slashing enemies of civil servants. Their black and white sign ads against the PCs featuring the monicker “Blaine Higgs #NotForYou” portrayed Higgs as a dark figure who will gleefully throw people out of work (New Brunswick Liberal Party 2018). If anything, though, the attack ads’ amateur negative advertising outlandishness helped the PC leader’s image.

While most of the incumbents were re-elected and only a handful of ridings saw new candidates win for the same party, those lost by the Liberals to the PCs, in Saint Croix, Fundy-The Isles-West Saint John, and Shippagan-Lamèque-Miscou, cost the Liberals their majority. The defeat of cabinet ministers John Ames, Rick Doucet, and Wilfred Roussel in those respective ridings proved the difference in the campaign. In each case, however, local issues and local candidates drove the desire for change. Robert Gauvin in Shippagan-Lamèque-Miscou and Greg Thompson in Saint Croix were well known in the ridings and star candidates for the PCs. Roussel had trouble connecting with voters, Ames had flipped a reliable Tory riding but failed to build on that support. And Doucet, a long-time Fisheries minister, had a particular blindspot in terms of anger amongst the communities on the coast and islands still reliant on the fishing and seafood industries. His failure to deliver needed resources became a local narrative. Much like the 2016 Hillary Clinton campaign realizing too late that Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin were slipping away, so too did the Liberals fail to see what was happening in these critical ridings.

Leaders’ Debates

One of the most important takeaways from the leaders’ debates was that Blaine Higgs refused to participate in a French language debate without translation given his lack of bilingual skills. The PC campaign offered to send a francophone surrogate in his place, but the other parties refused this change. As a result, there were just two leaders’ debates on major networks, the first on CBC and the second on CTV. In between there were two debates back to back on Rogers TV, including a French language debate in which Higgs was provided with translation. The Rogers TV debates were staid and subdued, but there were some moments in the other debates that merit attention.

While nothing in the debates likely shook the electorate, two moments stood out. The first occurred in the CBC debate, when Blaine Higgs revealed that he had been offered a position in the Gallant government after the last election and produced a sworn affidavit that this had indeed taken place. Gallant immediately said that had not occurred and then clarified this following the debate. But Higgs made his point and drew a contrast with the personal negative advertising that the Liberals had deployed against him. It also showed he was willing to fight back against the personal attacks.

The second moment occurred in the CTV debate in which Gallant accused the other leaders of being open to working with the People’s Alliance. Kris Austin had been placed front and centre in the CBC debate as a result of a random draw. Austin championed an anti-duality platform in the first debate without direct attacks, but in the second, Gallant refused to even consider being in some sort of coalition or working with the People’s Alliance and called out what he saw as its anti-Francophone sentiment. Even David Coon acknowledged that the decision on whom to work with would be up to his caucus. Gallant’s position in that

debate showed an inflexible attitude towards working across the aisle. Despite the grievances of Liberal francophone supporters towards the PANB, Gallant closed an avenue that after election night he badly needed. He made it impossible to form a support coalition because of the seat breakdown. While it may have showed he was willing to take a principled stand against anti-francophone rhetoric, perfectly explainable in terms of his own views and his party's base, it hurt the Liberals' bargaining position in the election aftermath with the PANB (and the Greens) holding the balance of power and the former having an eager partner in the PCs (Fraser and McPhail 2018).

Aftermath

New Brunswick now has a minority government, the first in the province in anyone's memory. Confusion about the formation of this government was evident on election night. Early on, citing more PC seats in the Assembly than those won by the Liberals, Blaine Higgs of the PCs argued that he was entitled to form the government. With the Tories ahead by a seat before all the ballots were counted, he said: "As in any race, the one who has the most numbers wins, I've been speaking with some constitutional experts -- so we're good." (MacDonald 2018)

This of course is normally what happens in parliamentary systems but not always. In minority situations, the party enjoying the confidence of the legislature at dissolution retains the opportunity to continue as government in the new legislature. The precedent for this is the aftermath of the 1925 election in which prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King's Liberals won fewer seats than Arthur Meighen's Conservatives but were nonetheless called upon by Governor General Byng to form a government. King persuaded the Governor General that he, not Meighen, could curry the support of the Progressives and others in the House to cobble together a working majority. In the aftermath of the 2018 New Brunswick election, it was not immediately clear to anyone if either major party could count on the support of the two new parties. In cases of such ambiguity, the King-Byng precedent is compelling. Some observers consider that the 1925 precedent is out of date, and that the "modern convention" is that the party winning the most seats gets to form the government, but this argument seems more a partisan pitch than a constitutional analysis. (MacDonald 2019)

A more recent example supports the right of the incumbent to seek the confidence of the legislature. In the British Columbia elections of 2017, the incumbent Liberals won 43 seats, followed by the NDP at 41 and the Greens at 3. Before the Legislature met, the NDP and the Greens had ratified a formal confidence and supply agreement to last four years. Nonetheless, Premier Christy Clark exercised her right to remain in office and convene the Legislature to meet her fate. Her government fell one month after the other parties inked their agreement. Despite the writing being on the wall, she had a right to remain premier until the Assembly decided otherwise.

The day following the election, Higgs accepted that Premier Gallant had the prerogative to meet the Assembly and see if it would express confidence in his government. This is an indication, perhaps, that he and his advisors were unprepared on election night for a minority scenario. It also may suggest that at the highest reaches of the political class, knowledge of parliamentary conventions was spotty.

New Brunswickers were no less confused. A poll following the election indicated that a slight majority of New Brunswickers believed that the popular vote is more important than the number of seats in the legislature in determining who should be asked to form a government. Only 27% of respondents said the number of seats was more important, while an additional 19% were unsure. Fully 29% said “confusion” was their general response to the outcome of the election (Huras 2018). Clearly, knowledge of parliamentary conventions was no better amongst voters than amongst the political class. All were on a steep learning curve.

Confusion was leavened by the appearance not just of four parties in the Assembly, but by the character of the two new parties. Greens in Canada often touted the line, not left or right but forward, suggesting that they were different from the old partisan formations and operate on a new, unconventional political axis. We can work with anybody, leader David Coon consistently intoned. It was not hard to speculate that a Liberal-Green alliance was plausible and even likely. Yet Coon resisted the approaches of the Liberals in the weeks following the election.

The People’s Alliance positioned itself as the party of the people, criticizing conventional parties and advancing a populist platform that defied easy ideological characterization. The party defended the interests of small businesses and criticized corporate welfare. It opposed the use of certain herbicides by the big forestry companies. But its positions on bilingualism attracted the most attention. It gingerly raised concerns about bilingualism, criticizing on fiscal grounds duality in the provision of hospital care and decrying the need for bilingual ambulance attendants in the face of staff shortages. It ran a limited slate of candidates in ridings overlapping areas of Confederation of Regions Party support in the early 1990s. While the new PANB MLA Michelle Conroy herself comes from Acadian stock, leader Kris Austin frequently declaimed anti-French bigotry, and another PANB MLA has the last name of Desaulniers, the party could not shake its anti-French image. For this reason, Premier Gallant ruled out even a gesture to the People’s Alliance to discuss support in a hung legislature.

This left the Alliance to consider a deal with the Progressive Conservatives. This was the most likely pairing. Leader Kris Austin, after all, once ran for a PC nomination. The PANB early on resisted a formal agreement, but within days of the election, Austin announced an informal commitment to support Higgs’ government: “We want to give New Brunswickers some confidence that, as we’ve said all along and we continue to say, we will work with Mr. Higgs and the PC party to go on a bill-by-bill basis to promote stability in government for 18 months” (CBC News 2018a). While other parties pointed to the agreement as evidence of anti-French sentiment on the part of the Tories, Higgs affirmed the constitutional protection of bilingualism and the PANB subsequently let the language issue slide down its list of priorities. Undoubtedly, the language issue remains a third rail in New Brunswick politics, and in the early period after the election, the politicians shied away from touching it.

The post-election period was more exciting than the election campaign itself. Premier Gallant fashioned a Throne Speech and attempted to retain the confidence of the Assembly and especially the support of the Greens, but on November 1 was defeated 25-23. Gallant had some Green support, but that was not enough. With the support of the People’s Alliance in hand, Higgs persuaded the Lieutenant Governor to ask him to form a government, and he was sworn in as premier on November 9.

Who would become Speaker of the Assembly? For some time this question remained unanswered. No one appeared to want the post and Daniel Guitard, the Liberal MLA from Restigouche-Chaleur, the most recent Speaker, demurred. Since the election of the Speaker is the first order of business in a new Legislature, all other business including the reading of the Speech from the Throne depends on it. In the absence of a candidate, the Legislature cannot transact the public's business and the Lieutenant Governor would be forced to dissolve the Assembly and call for new elections.

In principle, the Progressive Conservatives could advance one of their own for the Speaker's position. This would reduce them to the same number of voting members as the Liberals. The Assembly would be neatly divided down the middle. New Brunswick had been in this position before, and in relatively recent memory. In 2003, Bernard Lord's Conservatives won a one-seat majority of 28 seats to the Liberals' 26 and the NDP's 1. In 2006, Miramichi-Bay du Vin PC MLA Michael "Tanker" Malley left the caucus to sit as an independent over what he considered insufficient government attention to his constituents' health care needs. The government was in a minority position. Malley was coaxed back into the fold and promised the newly vacant position of Speaker, a responsibility he discharged utterly without distinction until the 2006 election which the Conservatives lost. Malley did understand that in cases of tie votes, the Speaker casts the deciding vote in a manner to keep the government in place. The same rule would, of course, apply in the case of the Higgs government, but the closer the divisions, the more tenuous the Tories' hold on power. As such, the Tories withheld a candidate.

From the Liberals' perspective, it must have felt like a game of chicken. The Liberals could have refused to put up a candidate for speaker, but this would almost certainly have precipitated new elections (assuming that neither the Greens nor the Alliance would advance a candidate). Would this have been in their interest? Voters in general would be surly about intransigent politicians forcing them into another \$13 million trip to the polls. Further, Liberal leader Brian Gallant was the subject of internecine Liberal criticism for having lost the election and for running a government that isolated a tight inner circle from the much larger network of long-time stalwarts. Liberal prospects in new elections were not rosy. In the event, Liberal Daniel Guitard announced that he would stand for election as Speaker, adding only that "[t]he day there's something that happens that will [prevent] me from being impartial will be the day I leave" (CBC News 2018b). Thus ended the long tale of determining of who really won the 2018 election.

Conclusion

Political scientists often read large, historical forces into events like campaigns and elections. Indeed, the breakthrough of the Greens in New Brunswick and elsewhere in Canada and the developed democracies has attracted extensive scholarly attention, as has the more recent surge in populism. But politics is often very local – even accidental. The single-member plurality (SMP) electoral system magnifies the political consequences of small shifts in popular vote. Significant developments often have small beginnings. Take for example the 2014 election of David Coon in Fredericton South. The well-known environmental activist ran for the first time in that race along with three other popular candidates and won the seat on the strength of less than 33% of the vote – hardly a tidal wave of support. But four years

of effective work in the Assembly combined with the development of a small army of dedicated volunteers enabled Coon to become one of the most hard-working, visible, and respected MLAs in the province. He used his platform as an MLA to grow the party, attract capable candidates, and allay voter concerns that the Greens are wide-eyed, out-of-touch idealists. In 2018, his own election was a cake-walk and he helped create a caucus of three MLAs. The SMP system generally punishes third parties; in the particular circumstances of New Brunswick politics, it has assisted the growth of third parties. But it is worth noting that Green growth coincided with the demise of the provincial NDP. Time will tell if the Greens will present a permanent challenge to the Liberals as the party of the centre-left.

Meanwhile, the Progressive Conservatives went into the 2018 campaign almost broke. The party even put its Fredericton headquarters up for sale in 2018. Blaine Higgs, the aging former Irving official, did not come close in visual appeal to Brian Gallant, the young, telegenic, 'sunny ways' Trudeau knock-off. But there was little enthusiasm in the Liberal campaign and the Conservatives eked out one the most efficient popular vote distributions in recent memory. In some ways it was a campaign the Liberals lost, not a campaign that the Tories won. At the same time, Higgs' team was able to convey a sense of competence and concern about the long-term economic health of the province.

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