

Article

Third-Party Rivalry and the Green Vote in the 2019 Federal Election

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Abstract

The Green Party of Canada (GPC) did not elect new candidates in BC in the 2019 federal election even though climate change was an important issue to voters. This paper uses survey results from the 2019 Canadian Election Study, including a module designed by the author and interviews with GPC candidates. GPC's third-party rival, the New Democratic Party (NDP), gave a false impression that GPC members were as socially and fiscally conservative as some members of the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC). The author's module shows women are more fearful than men that women's right to have an abortion could be challenged if party discipline were relaxed. Though it would be highly unlikely for a GPC candidate or MP to hold an anti-abortion position, the NDP planted seeds of doubt in the minds of young female voters who tended to be the ones more likely to consider voting Green.

Résumé

Le Parti vert du Canada (PVC) n'a pas élu de nouveaux candidats en Colombie Britannique à l'élection fédérale de 2019, même si le changement climatique était un enjeu majeur pour les électeurs. Ce document utilise les résultats du sondage de l'Étude électorale canadienne de 2019, incluant un module créé par l'autrice et des entrevues avec les candidats du PVC. Le Nouveau Parti démocratique (NPD), qui rivalise le PVC pour devenir le plus important des tiers partis à la Chambre des communes, a donné la fausse impression que les membres du PVC étaient aussi conservateurs, sur les plans sociaux et financiers, que certains membres du Parti Conservateur du Canada (PCC). Le module de l'autrice démontre que les femmes craignent plus que les hommes que le droit des femmes à l'avortement puisse être remis en cause si la discipline du parti était assouplie. Bien qu'il soit très peu probable qu'un candidat ou un député du PVC présente une position contre l'avortement, le NPD a semé des graines de doute dans l'esprit des jeunes électrices qui ont tendance à être celles qui sont le plus susceptibles à voter pour le Parti vert.

Key Word: 2019 federal election, Green Party of Canada (GPC), Green Party of Canada election campaign in British Columbia (BC), Maurice Pinard's theory on political openings for third parties

Mots-clés : élections fédérales Canadiennes de 2019, la théorie de Maurice Pinard concernant la percée des tiers partis, campagne électorale du Parti verte de Canada (PVC) en Colombie-Britannique (CB)

Introduction

Every indication suggested that the 2019 federal election would differ from those preceding it. Climate change was a significant issue for many voters. On September 27, 2019, at least 80,000 people in Vancouver, as in other cities worldwide, participated in climate change marches to demand that governments take more action to combat climate change (Laframboise, 2019). In 2011, the first Green Party of Canada candidate, its leader, Elizabeth May, was elected in Saanich and the Gulf Islands. Would the 2019 federal election be the year that the Green Party of Canada (GPC) could finally overtake the New Democratic Party (NDP) and win other seats on Vancouver Island?

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Clearly, the Greens were ascending. In the 2012 Victoria byelection GPC candidate Donald Galloway came close to defeating Murray Rankin, the NDP star candidate. The difference between them was only a mere 1,151 votes. In the 2015 general election, the popular vote for the GPC increased in all ridings on Vancouver Island, especially in Victoria, as shown in Table 1 below. Jo-Ann Roberts, the Green party candidate, remembers the highly competitive race between the GPC and the NDP in Victoria. She described how a female voter approached her during a campaign event and berated her for running because she had difficulty deciding whether to vote for the NDP or the GPC and feared that vote-splitting could lead to the Conservative candidate winning the election (Roberts, 2021). In Esquimalt-Sooke-Saanich, the GPC’s candidate, Frances Litman, came in third place with nearly 20 percent of the popular vote, the third-highest vote in Canada for the GPC. The promising result in Nanaimo-Ladysmith indicated that the Greens should also target more resources in the next election. Paul Manly came fourth in that election with 20% of the popular vote, but it was the closest four-way race in Canada that year (33% NDP, 23% LIB, CON, 23%, and GPC 19%). Manly ran again in the 2019 federal by-election in Nanaimo-Ladysmith and won 37% of the vote.

Table 1. GPC vote on Vancouver Island

	% Votes/Placement		
Riding	2011	2015	2019
Saanich-Gulf Islands	46 (1)	54 (1)	49 (1)
Victoria*	12 (4)	33 (2)	30 (2)
Esquimalt-Saanich-Sooke	13 (3)	20 (3)	26 (2)
Nanaimo-Ladysmith**	7 (4)	20 (4)	35 (1)
Cowichan-Malahat-Langford	7(3)	17 (4)	20 (3)
Courtenay-Alberni	7(4)	12 (4)	14 (3)
North Island-Powell River	5(4)	8 (4)	14 (3)

*Byelection 2012, 34 (2)

**Byelection 2019, 37(1) Source: Elections Canada

Manly’s campaign manager, Ilan Goldenblatt, explains that “the byelection gave Manly a good opportunity for the electorate to take a chance on Paul and have a second chance whether to keep him or go back to the NDP” (Goldenblatt, 2021). The Trudeau government was near the end of its first mandate, and a general election would only be in a few months. Since the byelection was legally mandated, it would go ahead, but the byelection results would be cancelled out by the upcoming general election and therefore not affect which party would form a government. This sort of argument neutralized some of the fear that voters experience in a first-past-the-post system where strategic voting is common. Voters feel they cannot vote for smaller parties and need to stay with the incumbent. In terms of this progressive riding, voters feared that voting for the GPC would lead to a Conservative victory. Manly’s supporters tried to convince voters that they should send a second GPC MP to Ottawa if they want governments to consider climate change more seriously. “Part of our messaging was that if Paul did win, it would be a major political earthquake in Canada noted by the rest of Canada and beyond, but if the riding remained NDP, the rest of Canada would yawn” (Goldenblatt, 2021).

When Manly won the seat in the byelection on May 6, dozens of media stories appeared in newspapers across Canada and worldwide. A few days later, *The Guardian* in the UK published an article entitled “climate change threat could herald ‘dawn of new era’ for Green Party” (Guardian, 2019). Prime Minister Trudeau said that the byelection win for the GPC shows that Canadians are “preoccupied with climate change” (Canadian Press, 2019a). Green party supporters hoped that the stage was set for a Green party breakthrough.

Maurice Pinard and others have suggested that worsening economic circumstances and issue unresponsiveness may spark support for a rise of third parties. Pinard wanted to account for the meteoric rise of the Social Credit/Créditistes in the federal election of 1962. While in the preceding election Social Credit had only 0.6 per cent of the provincial vote and no seats, in the 1962 election it suddenly obtained 26 per cent of the vote and captured a third of the Quebec seats in the House of Commons. Éric Bélanger draws parallels between this 1962 election and the election of 1993 when “the Bloc Québécois received 49 percent of the vote in Quebec and captured enough seats to form the official opposition and the Reform Party got 38 percent of the vote in the Western provinces and won only two seats less than the Bloc” (Bélanger 2004a, 581). However, this paper wants to account for the GPC’s *lack of success* in the 2019 federal election when circumstances seemed to be conducive to a modest breakthrough for the party in some ridings on Vancouver Island in British Columbia. Leader of the GPC, Elizabeth May, was re-elected for the third time in Saanich-Gulf Islands. Paul Manly, who had previously won a seat in a by-election in Nanaimo-Ladysmith, was also re-elected. No new GPC candidates were elected in BC in the 2019 federal election.

This paper analyzes survey results from the 2019 Canadian Election Study (CES 2019) that includes a module designed by the author to capture voters’ perceptions on climate change and democratic reform (author’s module). Data from this survey takes place during the campaign period (October 17-October 19) and the post-election period (October 26-29). The final sample for this module contains 1,034 respondents who were English-speaking Canadian citizens aged 18 and over, living in British Columbia. Analysis in this paper also relies on interviews of GPC candidates in British Columbia. A questionnaire guided the interview process but allowed new ideas to be brought up during the interview depending on what the interviewee said.

Theories of Third Parties

Pinard defined a third party as “any non-traditional party which has not yet been in power. It thus remains in the eyes of the voters as an untried alternative.” (1971: 455). It was Pinard’s contention that worsening economic conditions for large segments of the population at the time of the election would trigger a groundswell of support for a third party. A third party could mobilize voters discontented with the rapid deterioration of the economy and quick to blame the incumbent party (Pinard 1971: 100). In his analysis of the rise of the Reform Party and the Bloc Québécois in the 1993 election, Bélanger expanded Pinard’s concept of strain to include non-economic grievances like regional alienation and ethnolinguistic conflict in Quebec (Bélanger 2004a: 582). However, in the case of the GPC, it is not so much strain or grievance, but the mainstream parties’ non-responsiveness to climate change that is motivating some voters to consider the GPC.

Many voters disliked the Liberal government’s decision to approve the expansion of the Kinder Morgan pipeline. They felt that it was contradictory for a government that claimed to

be taking climate change seriously. Some GPC candidates indicated that the Liberal government’s decision to purchase the pipeline was what motivated them to run as candidates. Respondents to the author’s module were asked what they think should be the federal government’s policy regarding the oil sands. As Table 2 indicates below, GPC voters differ substantially from their NDP, Liberal Party of Canada (LPC), and Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) counterparts in that more of them want a rapid transition to a green economy that is less dependent on fossil fuels and prefer that the federal government’s policy be “shutting down the oilsands as quickly as possible.”

Table 2. Percentage of voters and the policy of the federal government regarding the oil sands

Party	GPC	NDP	LPC	CPC	PPC
Shutdown	34	20	12	3	0
Ban Foreign	17	23	21	24	39
Maintain	8	8	12	13	8
Expand	17	28	30	47	39
N	(94)	(145)	(217)	(231)	(13)

Source: author’s module

Survey question: What do you think should the policy of the federal government regarding the oilsands in Alberta? 1.) Shutdown the oilsands as quickly as possible. Oil is so polluting and should stay in the ground. 2.) Ban foreign oil imports and turn Canadian unrefined petroleum into gas, diesel, and propane for the Canadian market. By 2050 shift all Canadian petroleum from fuel to feedstock for the petrochemical industry. 3) Maintain the current policy. 4.) Expand exports from the oilsands. Invest in carbon capture and storage, and other green technologies.

Surprisingly, the position of GPC leader Elizabeth May differed from these GPC voters. May advocated a gradual approach instead. She suggested, “banning foreign oil imports and turning Canadian unrefined petroleum into gas, diesel, and propane for the Canadian market” (Green Party of Canada, 2019). May’s position aligns more with about twenty percent of NDP and LPC voters. Half of the GPC candidates interviewed for this article preferred shutting down the oil sands operation immediately. The leader of the Green Party of Quebec, Alex Tyrell, came out publicly during the federal election, criticizing May’s position on the oil sands as being “a far too moderate approach for a lot of people within her party” (CBC As It Happens Interview, May 30, 2019). The candidate for Esquimalt-Sooke-Saanich, David Merner, was concerned that such a position would not balance principle with practicality. Merner, like some other candidates interviewed for this study, felt that they were caught in a dilemma. The science dictated that they should choose the first option of shutting down the oil sands immediately since time was running out to mitigate the effects of climate change. But politically they felt it would be unrealistic to try to sell that option to Canadians who might think that the party is too radical for them (Merner, 2019). The data suggests that this is a valid concern. Voters of all the other parties, whether left or right, believed that the federal government should expand production in the oil sands.

Liberal MP Terry Beech was re-elected in Burnaby North Seymour, ground zero for the Kinder Morgan pipeline. He stated that many voters in his riding did not want the pipeline built. Beech was one of the only two Liberal MPs to vote against the Conservative motion in the House Commons to support Kinder Morgan’s proposed Trans Mountain pipeline expansion (Verenca, 2017). He felt that it was his obligation to represent the views of the constituents in the riding and vote against the Conservative motion and the position of most

of his caucus. Still, the prime minister and cabinet respected his decision and did not force him out of the caucus. However, Beech was still able to express some understanding of his party's position, saying that "they are trying to balance the economy and the environment" (Verenca, 2017). The Liberal government wants to satisfy oil-rich provinces like Alberta while at the same time putting a national price on pollution. In an interview, he elaborated on the difficulties that governing parties often face. "The science demands that they move faster because climate change requires it, but if the government moves too fast, some population is negatively affected. The governing party will quickly lose the electorate's confidence. Substantial policies move the dial *step by step* without destroying the economy" (Beech 2020, italics added). Dana Taylor, candidate for West Vancouver Sunshine Coast Sea to Sky Country, explained that the GPC differs from the other parties in that they reject incrementalism and "are in a hurry to transition the economy to be less dependent on fossil fuels. The GPC's targets for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions are deeper and sooner than the other parties. They do not understand why the government should be buying a pipeline" (Taylor, 2019).

The second explanatory variable included in Pinard's model is one-party dominance. Pinard defined this to be when the main opposition party received less than a third of the vote over an extended period, causing it to atrophy, both at the polls and as an organization. In the 1960s, the federal Progressive Conservative Party in Quebec was historically weak. Pinard argued that "this opened the avenues for the rise of Social Credit. Given the strains, the lack of any viable alternative to the Liberals left the electorate of many districts with no other choice but to turn to a new party" (Pinard 1971: 248).

Other political scientists have questioned the relevance of one-party dominance as a factor in explaining the rise of third parties. Graham White pointed out that "any universal operationalization of the concept must necessarily be artificial and misleading: one-party dominance is in several ways a relativistic concept (since it is dependent on perceptions which may vary widely) and therefore admits no standard defining formula" (White 1973: 401). He argued that "class theory offered the better overall explanation" for the rise of third parties than Pinard's structural theory (White 1973: 420). André Blais tested five different aggregate indicators of one-party dominance and found that only two mildly supported Pinard's theory. Blais concluded that "one-party dominance is not a crucial factor in the rise of third parties" (Blais 1973: 436).

Pinard responded to his critics by reformulating his one-party dominance system as only one type of "a more general condition of structural conduciveness, that of the political nonrepresentation of social groups through the party system" (Pinard 1973: 442). He suggests distinguishing between two types of third parties: protest ones like Social Credit and ideological ones like the Farmers and the Labor movements and like the Parti Québécois. Pinard claims that one-party dominance would contribute to the rise of protest movements, but it would not be a significant factor in the rise of ideological parties. Protest parties of the radical (ideological) type can emerge in party systems characterized by strong competition when many voters feel that "their central ideology and long-term grievances cannot be accommodated through any of the existing parties" (Pinard 1973: 442). The empirical findings presented in Bélanger's article support Pinard's hypotheses. While one-party dominance is a significant factor in accounting for the rise of the Reform Party in Western Canada, it "did not seem to be as significant a factor in the rise of the Bloc Québécois" (Bélanger 2004a: 585). Founded with the primary purpose of promoting the sovereignty of

Quebec, the Bloc fits Pinard's definition of an ideological party. "It provided a new vehicle for sovereigntist voters whose main interest had yet to be represented through the existing federal party system" (Bélanger 2004a: 585).

Putting issue unresponsiveness of major parties central to Pinard's third-party theory also proved useful in explaining the rise of a new political party on the provincial scene in Quebec. Pinard was able to show that "ADQ benefitted from the traditional economic conservatism of a majority of francophone voters" (Pinard 2003: 4). In addition to neoliberal ideology, the ADQ appealed to voters who refused to associate with either the sovereigntist or federalist camp. ADQ was able to benefit from a low rate of polarization along constitutional lines among francophone voters in Quebec. This was in stark "contrast to the constitutional views of the Quebec Liberal Party which is resolutely federalist and of the Parti Québécois which is resolutely sovereigntist" (Pinard 2003: 1). The ADQ had found a niche appealing to voters tired of constitutional debates and of big government in a province that was known for its nationalist movement and being one of the most heavily taxed jurisdictions in all of North America. Other factors that accounted for ADQ's popularity included the personal popularity of the ADQ leader, the widespread dissatisfaction with the incumbent PQ government, and the deepening political disaffection among Quebec's voters. Pinard showed that "voters who expressed their disaffection with politics constituted a majority and it is within this majority that the ADQ got its largest support" (Pinard 2003: 4). In another study comparing recent individual-level electoral survey data from Canada, Britain, and Australia, Bélanger provided a deeper analysis of the connections between feelings of disaffection and the rise of third parties. "The results showed that third parties benefit from specific antiparty sentiment, which meant disaffection towards established party alternatives. The rejection of party politics per se, in contrast, brings citizens to abstain, unless some third parties – such as the Reform Party in Canada and One Nation in Australia – electorally mobilize generalized antiparty feelings" (Bélanger 2004b:1054).

Applying Pinard's third-party thesis to the GPC, voters who felt dissatisfied with the stances on environmental issues of *all* the mainstream parties would likely gravitate towards the GPC. The GPC's popular vote in the riding of West Vancouver-Sunshine Coast-Sea to Sky Country (WVSCSSC), where the Woodfibre LNG plant would be located, increased in only one election by 13.55 percent, more than in any other riding on the mainland.

In 2017, opposition began to grow against an LNG plant being built in Squamish on the shoreline of Howe Sound when the National Energy Board issued a 40-year export license for the proposed project. The federal Liberal government, provincial NDP government, and the Squamish First Nation approved the project. LNG was publicized as a transition fuel to help lower global carbon emissions as countries in Asia could reduce their dependency on more polluting fuels like coal. Federal Liberal and provincial NDP governments touted the Woodfibre LNG project as a job creator. A local community group, My Sea to Sky, organized to oppose the construction of the LNG facility. They stressed that there were substantial safety concerns in transporting flammable gas through a heavily populated region and pointed to the risks that an accident could inflict on the southern BC Coast. The only parties opposed to the project were the GPC and the BC Green Party.

This project operated the same way as the Trans Mountain pipeline for some environmentally oriented voters who felt a grievance against traditional parties. The federal NDP candidate for the WVSCSSC riding, Judith Wilson, was asked about the Woodfibre LNG plant. She simply said, "it's a project underway, and it won't be stopped" (Eckford, 2019).

Some disaffected LPC and NDP voters probably decided to cast their ballot with the GPC in protest, feeling that the NDP was weak in opposition to the project.

When the NDP experienced ideological moderation in recent elections, the idea of “eliminating subsidies for the oil sector” was omitted from the 2015 platform and not discussed by Mulcair (McGrane 2019: 207). Initially, after Jagmeet Singh became leader, it was difficult for him to articulate a clear position on the controversial Trans Mountain pipeline expansion because he was “caught between former NDP premier Rachel Notley in Alberta who supported the project and Horgan in B.C. who opposed it. Ultimately, he came down on Horgan’s side” (Forrest, 2019). This ambivalence made some voters question the level of commitment the party had to issues like climate change. Singh faced a similar challenge in determining his party’s position on LNG, fracking, and the Coastal GasLink pipeline. Before Singh won his byelection in Burnaby South in February 2019, he was supportive of LNG Canada’s \$40-billion natural gas export facility in northern BC and the Coastal GasLink pipeline that would feed it. “There were good political reasons Singh wanted to avoid taking an unequivocal stand in this pipeline fight.... Environmentalists and defenders of indigenous rights would be incensed at his support for the project, while workers in the province’s liquefied natural gas sector and NDP Premier John Horgan might be disappointed if he were to call for construction to stop” (Ballingall, 2019). The GPC candidate for Vancouver Centre, Jesse Brown, is not surprised about the NDP’s lack of a firm position on LNG. He points out that GPC differed from other parties because the GPC is not beholden to unions or businesses (Brown, 2019).

Results from the author’s module support Paul Manly’s claim that “fracking was a wedge issue” that benefitted the GPC in the Nanaimo-Ladysmith by-election (Forrest, 2019). As Table 3 below illustrates, more GPC voters than voters of other parties *strongly disagreed* with the statement that “the federal government should do more to support liquefied natural gas projects” and fewer GPC voters somewhat agreed with the same statement. These results reflect a crucial characteristic of green parties: they tend to have more postmaterialists than materialists. Postmaterialists place more importance on postmaterialist goals, such as protecting nature, over membership showed that materialists made up only four percent of the members (Inglehart 1997). “Green party members, according to the survey, overwhelmingly support both the limits to growth and nature-has-an-intrinsic-value theses (95 and 97 percent respectively), indicating that most members’ beliefs extend beyond environmentalism to include ecologism” (Camcastle, 2007).

Table 3. Percentage of voters and support for more liquefied natural gas projects

Party	GPC	NDP	LPC	CPC	PPC
Strongly disagree	19	7	3	3	8
Somewhat disagree	11	12	11	1	8
Neither	29	24	30	15	47
Somewhat agree	16	26	32	35	8
Strongly agree	12	13	18	43	31
N	(94)	(145)	(217)	(231)	(13)

Source: author’s module

Survey question: The federal government should do more to support liquefied natural gas projects in British Columbia.

Dana Taylor decided to run as a GPC candidate after reading the proposal to build the Woodfibre LNG plant. “This seemed to counter the interests of the evolution of the sound, which has been more towards other types of industry, particularly around recreation, ecotourism possibly” (Bartlett, 2019). Taylor had been involved decades earlier with the Save Howe Sound Society and the clean-up of Howe Sound. “Copper is no longer being mined at the Britannia mine, and few are advocating we should subsidize that operation and reopen the mine” (Taylor, 2019). In the same way, Taylor believes that governments should move away from subsidizing, building, and expanding oil and gas projects and instead focus more on the green-energy sector. Such arguments would probably resonate with residents in some parts of the WVSCSSC riding more than others. The WVSCSSC GPC candidate in the 2006 federal election, Silvine Zimmermann, points out that there are different parts to this diverse riding. “If there were only islands, the Greens would have probably won this riding long ago, where much of the tourism industry is based, but the riding includes West Vancouver, where people are more supportive of LNG and fearful that environmental measures would negatively affect the economy and threaten their livelihood” (Zimmerman, 2021). The riding has experienced a transformation probably conducive to increased GPC support. Squamish, which used to be home to a pulp and paper mill, is now the center of BC’s thriving green tech sectors.

Data from the author’s module shown below in Table 4 indicate that more GPC voters than voters from other parties support more federal government spending to assist workers in transitioning out of the fossil fuel industry and into the renewable energy sector. They believe that there needs to be a transition to the new economy so that, for example, a welder working in the oil sands could find another job and support his family.

Table 4. Percentage of voters and level of support for assisting workers in making the transition

Party	GPC	NDP	LPC	CPC	PPC
Spend less	2	4	6	15	39
About the same	23	21	30	36	15
More	65	64	58	36	39
N	(94)	(145)	(217)	(231)	(13)

Survey Question: How much should the federal government spend on assisting workers to make the transition out of the fossil fuel industry into the renewable energy sector?

Source: author’s module

A week after the NDP lost the seat in the Nanaimo-Ladysmith by-election to the GPC, Singh stated that he does not support fracking and has concerns about a significant liquefied natural gas project in northern British Columbia. This about-face by Singh followed comments made by Svend Robinson on Twitter that the “NDP must take a clear stand opposing fracking and all new gas and oil infrastructure” (Forrest, 2019). Robinson felt that his leader’s indecision regarding LNG and pipelines cost the party a seat in the Nanaimo-Ladysmith by-election (Smythe, 2019). NDP unveiled a platform that called for “cutting subsidies to oil and gas companies to encourage a transition to renewable energy sources.” Singh promised to tax those individuals whose wealth was over \$20 million and use this tax revenue to finance

programs that would help oil and gas workers train and find new jobs (Canadian Press, 2019b).

When trying to explain why support for the ADQ receded after the 2008 Quebec election, Tanguay argued that one needs to examine the strategic responses of the two major parties to the electoral threat posed by the ADQ. “When the PQ and the governing Liberals moved towards the ADQ in partisan space after the 2007 election, eliminating the significant differences among the parties on the issue of accommodation of ethnic communities and the definition of the Quebec identity, they helped push down support for the ADQ” (Tanguay, 2013: 334). Similarly, when the NDP changed its position on LNG fracking, it was probably responding to the challenge posed by the GPC and manifested by the GPC’s win in a by-election. Tanguay draws upon research in Western European party politics by Bonnie Meguid. Meguid observed that the strategic policy responses of the mainstream competitors to the electoral threat posed by the new “niche” parties, which included green parties, are crucial to explaining their relative success.

The strategic policy responses of the mainstream parties to the electoral threat posed by a niche party can range from “accommodative,” in which a mainstream party adopts a similar policy to that of the niche party on the principal issue that drives its success (in the case of a green party, it could be the environment), to “dismissive,” in which a mainstream party communicates to voters that the issue championed by its niche competitor is trivial or irrelevant, to “adversarial,” in which a mainstream party adopts the opposite position (Meguid, 2008: 26-29). The NDP adopted an accommodative strategy to draw away voters from the niche party (GPC) when the niche party was becoming more popular. This way the GPC could no longer as easily claim ownership of the issue.

Until the campaign’s last week, it was unclear whether the NDP or the GPC would benefit the most from weakening LPC support. The SNC-Lavelin affair dogged the LPC. In the second week of the campaign, the Liberals took another hit when, on September 18, photos surfaced of Trudeau wearing blackface makeup. Pollsters wondered whether this might move some progressive and center-left voters to the NDP and the GPC. Jonathan Dickie, national campaign manager for the GPC, observed that the growth in support for the GPC at the beginning of the election campaign was tied to an abnormally weak NDP. The NDP’s financial situation was covered in the media and forced the leader “to stay close to Toronto and conserve money following years of poor fundraising results and debt from the 2015 election” (Berthiaume, 2019). Singh was asked by the media why his party was slow in nominating a full slate of candidates, and fewer candidates had been selected than other significant parties even after the writ had been dropped (Boyton, 2019). The strategy of the GPC was to try to attract as many disillusioned Liberals as possible and make the GPC the top alternative for progressive voters rather than the NDP. Historically, the LPC has been less well-organized, and support is weaker on Vancouver Island than in the Lower Mainland, making it easier for the GPC and the NDP to make inroads (Dickie, 2019).

The Abortion Controversy and The Rise of the NDP After the Leaders’ Debates

Three days into the election campaign, the GPC leader attended Dana Taylor’s campaign launch in the riding of WVSCSSC. May told the media that Taylor has “an excellent chance of winning” and notes “her displeasure with the approval of the Woodfibre LNG export facility in Squamish and the lack of exclusion zones around tankers, comparing the tankers to

floating bombs” (Beirsto, 2019). But this coverage was overshadowed by a controversy that was covered in the local newspaper (Beirsto, 2019).

Two days before parliament was dissolved, May had a lengthy interview with CBC journalist Vassy Kapelos as part of the CBC’s Power and Politics Program, a series of interviews with the leaders of the major political parties. May was asked whether she would prevent a Green MP from reopening the abortion debate. A report had surfaced that a GPC candidate in the Ontario riding of Chatham-Kent Leamington, Mark Vercoouteren, had made previous anti-abortion statements in two Campaign Life Coalition questionnaires. May answered, “I could talk to them. I could try to dissuade them. I could say it would be unfortunate... but I don’t have the power as leader of the Green Party to whip votes, nor do I have the power to silence an MP” (Haws and Kapelos, 2019). Her answer triggered an explosion of commentary on social media. An NDP spokesperson told the CBC that a candidate must be pro-choice to run for the NDP.

The day after this CBC interview, the GPC clarified the party’s position on abortion: “There is a zero chance an elected representative of our party will ever reopen the abortion debate. We vet potential candidates to ensure they agree with the Green Party’s core values. The Green Party’s position is that Canada’s abortion debate is closed. Any who disagree are not allowed to run” (Statement of the Green Party of Canada 2019). A political scientist who has studied party discipline in great depth, Alex Marland, agrees that it would be next to impossible for a GPC candidate or member of parliament to hold an anti-abortion position. The rigorous background check that occurs when Canadians express an interest in being an election candidate “screens out any aspiring candidates whose beliefs do not align with its [party] values, thus increasing cohesion before any votes are cast” (Marland 2020: 17). Manly explained that part of the confusion stems from the fact that the GPC is organized differently from other parties. The GPC leader does not have the power to whip votes, as leaders of other parties do, like the NDP. But the federal council elected by Green party members across the country could vote on whether an MP should be in caucus, and if 60 percent agree, they could require the MP to be removed from caucus. The Federal council would have to hold a hearing and allow the MP the opportunity to defend him or herself (Manly, 2019).

The gap between the NDP and the GPC grew after the English leaders’ debate. Singh criticized May for considering working with Scheer’s Conservatives if a Conservative minority government was formed. The controversy over May’s statements on abortion was raised again (Federal leaders’ debate, 2019). May accused the NDP of a smear campaign and ignored that she has always personally supported a woman’s right to choose.

The GPC was excluded from the leaders’ debates in 2015 and May thinks that this was a crucial reason that there was no breakthrough for the GPC in 2015 (May 2022). But in 2019, the GPC was in the debates and only the NDP had some momentum after them. “Singh was the clear winner of the English-language debate. Perhaps more significantly, Liberal partisans and unaligned voters were particularly impressed by him” (Proudfoot 2019). “The NDP jumped to 16.5 percent support as of the Oct. 13 update of the Poll Tracker, representing a gain of two percentage points since Oct. 7” (Grenier, Oct 14, 2019). “NDP support is up significantly among women aged 18-34, while GPC’s support among the same age cohort experienced a slight decline.” (Angus Reid 2019). Data from the author’s module supports the thesis that the decline in support for the GPC near the end of the campaign could be attributed to some voters switching their support from the GPC to the NDP. Table 5 below

shows that about 20 percent of respondents who were thinking of voting for the GPC decided, in the end, to vote for the NDP.

Table 5. Which party do you think you *will* vote for?

<i>Did vote</i>	GPC	NDP	LPC	CPC	PPC
% GPC	71	5	1	1	0
% NDP	18	79	1	0	0
% LPC	7	11	89	5	0
% CPC	4	5	2	91	0
% PPC	0	0	0	1	86
N	55	65	130	151	7

Source: CES 2019

Table 6 below shows that the GPC was the second choice for nearly half of respondents thinking of voting for the NDP. For almost as many GPC voters, the NDP is their second choice. These statistics coincide with results from a poll taken after the English leaders' debate which shows that half of the New Democrats and 30 percent of GPC voters would consider voting for their second choice if they felt it would defeat a less favorable candidate (Angus Reid 2019). Voters with weak party attachment can more easily be convinced to vote for another party, and many GPC supporters have only a soft attachment to the GPC. They can easily be persuaded to vote for another party if this party appears willing to adopt some green policies. For these voters, their primary goal is perhaps to get parties to take climate change more seriously, not necessarily to elect more GPC candidates.

Table 6. Voter's second choice by party

	GPC	NDP	LPC	CPC	PPC
Second choice					
% GPC	0	51	22	14	8
% NDP	46	0	47	15	15
% LPC	26	27	0	18	0
% CPC	5	8	13	0	54
% PPC	5	4	1	14	0
N	94	145	217	231	13

Source: CES 2019

In the last few days of the election campaign, the NDP released full-on attack ads against the GPC on radio, in newspapers, and on flyers distributed to households in ridings on Vancouver Island. May remarked, "the NDP lost seats in Ontario and Saskatchewan, but that did not matter to them. Jagmeet Singh spent a disproportionate time on Vancouver Island during the leader's tour. It seemed that the NDP focused on removing us from the map altogether, not just in our ridings" (May 2022). The NDP's probable aim was to reach swing voters who could determine whether the riding would remain NDP or elect a GPC candidate. The flyer associated the GPC with the Conservative Party in voters' minds by claiming that Green MPs would support cuts to social services and the absurd possibility that the GPC would infringe on a woman's right to abortion due to a lack of party discipline. The attack ad

exploits a fundamental divide in Canadian politics between the progressive parties, the LPC, the NDP, and the GPC, and the conservative parties, the CPC and the PPC.

Table 7. Feelings towards the Conservative Party by party you will vote for

Simple Histogram Mean of How do you feel about the federal political parties below? - Conservative Party by Which party do you think you will vote for? - Selected Choice

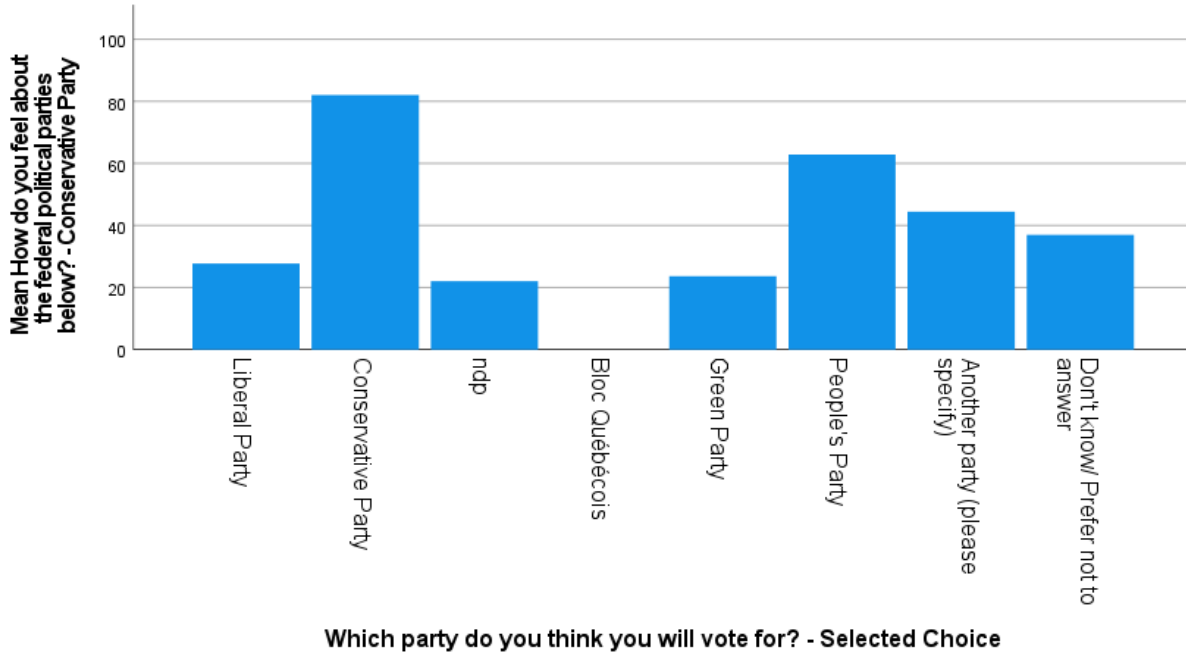


Table 7 is a simple histogram that plots a single variable (x-axis), in this case which party respondents think they will vote for, against the mean score (y-axis) of a feeling thermometer. Data is from CES 2019. The feeling thermometer measures how favorable voters view the Conservative Party with '0' as being the least favorable while '100' is the most favorable feeling that a voter could experience for the Conservative Party. This chart shows that supporters of progressive parties strongly dislike the CPC. The NDP was using the abortion controversy as a wedge issue. Portraying the GPC as fiscally and socially conservative, the NDP attempted to discourage progressive voters from shifting their vote to the GPC. The impact of the NDP attack was more damaging because it used quotations from the GPC leader herself when she was asked at the beginning of the election campaign about whether she would be able to stop a Green MP from reopening the abortion debate. It also quotes May saying, "of course, I could," when she said in a CTV interview that she should be prepared to work with a government of any political stripe willing to deal with climate change. But the flyer falsely alleges that she "would help Andrew Scheer and the Conservatives take power." Such claims play on the dislike for the CPC that progressive voters have. The NDP have said that they would not support a Tory government under any circumstance (Cosh, 2019).

The attack ad that associated the GPC with the CPC was perhaps also successful because it conflated the GPC leader Elizabeth May's political background and style with partisan support for the CPC. May had been a Senior Policy Advisor to the Minister of the Environment at a time when the CPC, under Brian Mulroney's leadership formed successive majority governments. Additionally, May had also been the director of a leading environmental

organization, the Sierra Club of Canada, before running for political office. But May then expressed dislike of the CPC under its then new leader, Stephen Harper. Indeed, May would never have gotten involved in politics if Harper had not succeeded in becoming prime minister (May, 2009). Other prime ministers not too concerned or committed to the climate, but Harper refused to express any concern for the environment. It was unbearable for May to see Harper undermine international talks on climate change and protesting on the outside was futile. May also recalled that before Harper there was a different approach to politics, including from members of a conservative party government. There was “a pan-partisan approach” (May, 2009: 13). Tom McMillan, a Progressive Conservative from PEI, would regularly send her to brief opposition environment critics. Major parties, including the new Conservative Party led by Stephen Harper, no longer operated in this fashion; they had forgotten how to work across party lines (May, 2009, 14).

The North Island-Powell River Green candidate, Mark De Bruijn, was quoted on the NDP flyer, “Conservatives have some perfect ideas. They are fiscally conservative, as are the Greens. We have a lot in common with conservatives at their ideological core.” The source of this quote is a commentary by de Bruijn in *The Peak* newspaper (Cosh, 2019). De Bruijn feels that this quote can be easily misunderstood when taken out of context. It had been only a part of what he said to the journalist. He had also said, “One of the six guiding principles shared by all Greens around the world is ecological wisdom, which is expressed by learning to live within the ecological and resource limits of the planet. In the same manner, fiscally, we should also live within our means” (De Bruijn, 2021). The GPC platform was costed out and approved by the parliamentary budget officer. It would run a deficit until 2025, when the budget would be balanced, but the flyer falsely claimed that the Greens advocated austerity and cuts to social programs, which they did not.

Next to these quotes on the flyer is a picture of a young woman with a worried look. At the bottom of the flyer it read, “you don’t have to choose between your values and fighting the climate crisis.” Arguably, this flyer was targeting young women. Survey data suggest that women made up two-thirds of respondents considering voting for the GPC, and even more women voted for the GPC (72%). Therefore, it was a clever strategy for the NDP to attack the GPC leader on a women’s issue like abortion. Table 8 measures the strength of the relationship between different demographic variables and the categorical variable of either voting for the GPC or not. Pearson’s correlation coefficients indicate that there is a strong positive correlation between being a woman and voting for the GPC. Green voters also tend to be younger, well-educated, non-religious, and not wealthy. In contrast to many of her supporters, May is a practicing Anglican and was planning to be ordained as an Anglican priest before she turned her attention to politics. When a CBC journalist asked May who her hero is, May responded candidly that it was Jesus Christ. However, she admitted it was not customary for Canadian politicians to speak publicly about their religious beliefs (Haws and Kapelos, 2019).

Table 8. Correlations between Demographic Variables and the GPC vote

Variable	Pearson’s Coefficient	Standard Error(2-tailed)	N
Gender (male)	.077*	0.14	1012
Age	-.026	.403	1012
University Degree	.038	.227	1012
Household income	-.021	.714	318
Religious	-.020	.599	663

*p<0.05. Data from CES 2019.

In that same CBC interview, May defended the GPC’s policy. She said the leader should not force caucus members to vote in a certain way because it is better for democracy “when constituents know that their MP works for them and not for the party leader” (Haws and Kapelos, 2019). Similarly, candidates interviewed for this study indicated that they felt they could better represent their local community in the GPC than in the more centralized, top-down NDP. The term “participatory/grassroots democracy” was mentioned by nearly all the candidates when they were asked why they preferred running as a GPC candidate than for another party.

The author’s module asked voters whether they supported the idea that “party discipline is too rigidly imposed by political party leaders.” Table 9 below shows a significant gender gap in the responses to this question. It is unclear why more men than women agreed with that statement. But perhaps women are more fearful that women’s rights, including the right to have an abortion, could be challenged if party discipline were relaxed.

Table 9. Party discipline is too rigidly imposed by Gender

	Men	Women
% Strongly Disagree	3	4
% Somewhat Disagree	11	10
% Neutral	28	37
% Somewhat Agree	30	22
% Strongly Agree	21	7
N	461	563

Survey question: Party discipline is too rigidly imposed by political party leaders. Source: author’s module

However, wanting to do politics differently can pose political risks. The idea that Green MPs would not be whipped by their leader made the GPC vulnerable to attacks by political opponents and that the position of the Party’s commitment to women’s rights might not be constant. The NDP flyer insinuated that the GPC could be anti-feminist. This is farthest from the truth. Besides their shared commitment to the environment, Green parties are for gender equality. Content analysis of green party platforms showed that almost all green parties mentioned gender, women, or feminism somewhere in their policy agendas and specific issues related to women, such as abortion rights (Bick, 2019, 804-5).

Such flyers are addressed to low information voters or undecided swing voters likely unaware of the green parties’ feminist values. The flyer claims that “the Green party has good ideas on the environment but shares many Conservative values.” Interestingly, the flyer accepts the GPC’s strength on the environment but challenges it in other policy domains.

Progressive voters believe they must make difficult choices between a party that “fights for the environment” and one that also stands up for their values, such as women’s rights. The GPC should have done better with political messaging to show how it differs from its closest rival, the NDP. The GPC could have created its own narrative rather than let its political adversaries define it. This is difficult for the GPC, which had fewer resources to engage in a flyer campaign.

Conclusion

More than any other party, nearly a quarter of GPC voters participated in the climate change rallies held in September 2019. For 15 percent of respondents in the CES 2019, the most critical issue was climate change, and 50 percent of these voters felt that the GPC would do the best job in addressing that issue. Forty percent of these voters said they would vote for the GPC. It seemed as if the 2019 election would be where the GPC would win more seats. All the elements of the theory of third-party success seemed to be present. Voters felt a specific grievance against the government, and traditional opposition parties had difficulty satisfying their demands.

However, the GPC could not capitalize on the growing frustration among the electorate. The GPC’s failure to win more seats had little to do with environmental policy positions. It involved misrepresenting the GPC on more controversial social issues, such as a women’s right to choose an abortion. Political opponents gave the false impression that GPC members were as socially and fiscally conservative as some members of the CPC. It played on some voters’ fears that the GPC had a hidden agenda and was much further to the right on the political spectrum than it is.

There are lessons to learn from this federal election for the GPC. Loosening party discipline sounded like a good idea, and in line with the GPC value of participatory democracy. Still, as the results from the author’s module suggest, the GPC would do well to emphasize other types of democratic reform, such as electoral reform, to avoid raising fears, particularly among women. Or, the GPC would have to do better with political messaging. Greens pride themselves on running positive campaigns and not engaging in ‘mudslinging,’ but perhaps the GPC has not responded strongly enough to smears and attacks. It takes financial resources and volunteers that a small party like the GPC has in short supply. The NDP tailored its message to specific microsegments of fickle voters. It planted seeds of doubt in the minds of young female voters who tended to be the ones more likely to consider voting Green. This could have made the difference for a riding to remain NDP, rather than swing to the GPC. For those researching the rise of new parties, this case study brings to light the importance of considering other players in the party system, especially their closest rivals.

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Correction

The original PDF version of this article published January 30, 2023, contained an error of historical fact concerning Elizabeth May's relationship with the Conservative Party of Canada. It originally stated that May was staffer with the party during the Mulroney years when in fact Elizabeth May was not a member of the party and had no such role. During the period in question Ms May was a senior Policy Advisor to the Minister of the Environment—a completely nonpartisan role. The published article was corrected March 8, 2023.

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