

Report

The 2021 Yukon election: vision free, with big spending commitments

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Abstract

The 2021 Yukon election took place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; pandemic management, housing, and spending promises all featured prominently in the campaign. The election ended with the Yukon Party and Liberal Party tied with eight seats, and the NDP had three. To stay in power, the Liberals formed a minority government supported by the NDP through a Confidence and Supply Agreement.

Résumé

L'élection de 2021 au Yukon s'est déroulée dans le contexte de la pandémie de COVID-19; gestion de la pandémie, logement et promesses de dépenses figuraient toutes dans la campagne. L'élection s'est terminée avec le Parti du Yukon et le Parti Libéral à égalité avec 8 sièges, et le NPD avec 3. Pour rester au pouvoir, les Libéraux ont formé un gouvernement minoritaire soutenu par le NPD par le biais d'un accord de confiance et de soutien.

Keywords: 2021 Yukon general territorial election, Yukon politics of smallness, Yukon 2021 minority government

Mots-clés: élections générales du Yukon en 2021, Yukon politiques de petitesse, 2021 gouvernement minoritaire du Yukon

Introduction

Yukon politics get little national and academic attention. The region's small size, significant Indigenous population, geographic location, and unique political development set it well outside the Canadian mainstream. National media pays little attention when territorial elections are held, and the underlying issues of northern politics are not part of the explanatory fabric of Canadian politics. The 2021 election provides reason for Canadians and Canadian political scientists to make a greater effort to incorporate the territory into their understanding of politics in Canada.

The Yukon territorial election occurred on April 12, 2021, the first spring election since 2000 (Elections Yukon, 2000). The incumbent Liberal government called the election early to take advantage of the Yukon's sound management of COVID-19, largely through the territory's high and early uptake of vaccinations (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2021) and rigid travel restrictions, knowing it would be difficult to keep those in place for a second summer. The writ was dropped on March 12, 2021. The campaign was short, uneventful, conceptually uninspiring, and marked by big promises of big spending by all parties.

The Yukon Legislative Assembly has 19 seats (see Table 1). At dissolution, the Liberals had ten seats, the Yukon Party had six, and the NDP two. There was one independent, a late departure from the Liberal Party. The Liberals and NDP began with full slates of candidates; the Yukon Party did not run a candidate in the riding of Vuntut Gwitchin. The Green Party,

which had dwindled in recent years, ceased to exist. There was one independent candidate. Two ridings did not have incumbent candidates, following former NDP leader Liz Hanson's retirement and Don Hutton's departure from the Liberal party shortly before the election call. The candidates were fairly evenly split between men and women, with three ridings only running women, and many First Nations candidates (CBC News, 2021a). The election showed reduced support for the Liberals and gains for the Yukon Party. The final result was eight seats for the Yukon Party and the Liberal Party, and two seats for the NDP - with a tie between the Liberal and NDP candidates in Vuntut Gwitchin, the smallest riding by a large margin. The tie was resolved, through a draw following judicial review, in favour of the NDP, leading to the final seat totals of eight, eight and three.

This was the first hung parliament elected in the Yukon since 1992 (Elections Yukon, 1993). As the incumbents, the Liberals moved first and were able to form government, with the support of the NDP through a Confidence and Supply Agreement (CASA) (Yukon Liberal Caucus, 2021). The NDP and Liberal platforms showed alignment on a number of issues, and the NDP in particular had limited finances to support a second quick election. Despite the exceptional promises of government spending, overall voter turnout dropped, as with most other pandemic elections in Canada.

Table 1. Election comparison, 2006-2021

	2006		2011		2016		2021	
# of Electoral districts	18		19		19		19	
# of Political Parties	4		5		4		3	
Total # of Candidates	58		62		63		57	
Candidates on ballot	58		62		63		56	
Liberal Party Candidates/Seats	18	5	19	2	19	11	19	8
Yukon Party Candidates/Seats	18	10	19	11	19	6	18	8
NDP Candidates/Seats	18	3	18	6	19	2	18	3
Yukon FN Party Candidates/Seats	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Yukon Green Party Candidates/Seats	0	0	2	0	5	0	0	0
Independent Candidates/Seats	4	0	2	0	1	0	1	0
Number of registered electors	18,681		20,730		24,688		29,112	
Electors who voted	13,611		15,906		18,840		19,102	
Turnout	72.86%		74.34%		76.40%		65.60%	

Source: Data compiled from Elections Yukon reports. 2006 data is from the *Report of the Chief Electoral Officer of Yukon on the 2006 General Election*, and 2011-2021 is from the *Report of the Chief Electoral Officer, the Administration of the 2021 Territorial General Election*.

In addition to the now prevailing reality that sympathetic approaches to First Nations issues have become mainstream in Yukon politics, the 2021 Yukon election is interesting for three reasons:

1) *Politics of smallness*

Yukon elections highlight the divide between urban and rural ridings, where votes in densely populated urban areas are worth “less” than those in sparsely populated rural ridings. The largest Yukon riding has twelve times as many registered electors as its smallest (Elections Yukon, 2022), one of the greatest gaps in Canadian politics.

2) *Spending promises*

The campaign promises made by all parties assume that federal transfers to the territories will remain generous indefinitely, which in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and ballooning federal debt seems incautious. None of the three parties presented a plan for building wealth outside of federal transfers.

3) *Minority outcome*

The real winner in this election was the 3rd party, the NDP. Formalizing support in a minority government situation with a CASA is somewhat unusual. The Yukon CASA influenced the trajectory of some policies, including rent controls, which had unintended consequences for the Yukon's already overly tight housing market.

This analysis provides an overview of the Yukon's political context, the campaign, the platforms, analysis of the vote, aftermath, and relevance to broader Canadian politics.

The political context in the Yukon: First nations' mobilization

The Yukon is Canada's second smallest jurisdiction by population (after Nunavut), with about 43,025 residents in 2021 (Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2021a). The population, as well as the electorate, have grown steadily over the last 15 years. In 2006, there were 18,681 registered voters, compared to 29,112 in 2021 (Elections Yukon, 2007, 2022). Although the Yukon's non-Indigenous population tends to be highly transient, the overall population grew by 12.1% between the 2016 census and the 2021 census – the highest rate in Canada (Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Most Yukoners (79%) live in the capital, Whitehorse; the city's population first exceeded that of the rest of the territory in 1971. Approximately 21% of the territory's population self-identifies as Indigenous. Just over half of the First Nation population lives in Whitehorse, making up 15% of the total population there, and many of the smaller towns and villages have a predominantly Indigenous population (Graham, Curran and Johnston, 2021).

The Yukon's political development includes several main components: a rapid "invasion" by stampedeers during the Klondike Gold Rush and post-Gold Rush collapse that saw the near disappearance of the Yukon government; long periods of federal neglect punctuated by brief, intense interest during and after World War II; an Indigenous movement for self-government and land claims that started in the 1960s; and a settler movement toward greater autonomy from the federal government that ran parallel to the First Nations' mobilization. These last two movements were often at odds with one another, and occurred over the same period, from the 1960s to the early 2000s.

Outside interest in the Yukon largely began in the years before the 1898 Gold Rush. The federal government, a reluctant player on Northern issues, was forced to pay attention to prevent American prospectors from taking over. The federal government separated the Yukon from the Northwest Territories as an administrative district and deployed the Northwest Mounted Police to the area in 1895. Constitutional changes came in 1898 with the *Yukon Territory Act*, which established administrative control by the federal government with an appointed commissioner (rather than lieutenant governor) and appointed council of other federal officials. The Yukon received representation in the House of Commons in 1902, and representative government by 1908 with a fully elected council (Coates, 1985). The gold rush was extremely disruptive for Yukon First Nations, and land claims were first discussed

during this period; Chief Jim Boss of the modern-day Ta'an Kwäch'än Council wrote to the federal government requesting a treaty in 1902, but was refused (Ta'an Kwäch'än Council, n.d.). The first reserves were established during the Gold Rush in an ad hoc manner.

The modern push for land claims came to a head in 1973, following the 1969 White Paper and years of racial discrimination and separation in Yukon society, with the Yukon Native Brotherhood's *Together Today for our Children Tomorrow* delegation to Ottawa. The reaction from non-Indigenous Yukoners was negative (Coates, 1991). This led to intense negotiations, and significant shift in settler-First Nations relations, culminating in the Umbrella Final Agreement signed in 1993. By 2005, 11 of 14 Yukon First Nations had signed individual final agreements (Government of Yukon, 2019). The Umbrella Final Agreement covers such matters as settlement lands, land use planning, compensation, self-government, economic development, and joint resource management. The Umbrella Final Agreement was the framework out of which individual First Nations negotiated their final claims with specific provisions. The final agreements fall under section 35 of the Constitution, although self-government agreements negotiated under chapter 24 do not. Implementation is still ongoing.

The Yukon is the only territory with party politics, and has had full responsible government since the Epp Letter of 1979, which recognized the authority of elected officials and Ottawa in areas of defined responsibility (Smyth, 1999). The movement toward self-government was a settler political movement in opposition to both the federal government and Yukon First Nations. Indigenous people have been under-represented in Yukon politics; the first Indigenous MLA was elected in 1978 (see Table 2), and none have been premier. There were clashes between the land claims movement and the responsible government movement in the 1970s; responsible government, by empowering the territorial authorities, actually proved to be a setback to land claims negotiations (Sabin, 2014). A Yukon First Nations Party was created for the 2011 election, but it only ran two candidates (see Table 4 below) and these were unsuccessful.

Table 2. Indigenous MLAs elected to the Yukon Legislative Assembly, 1978-2021

	Indigenous MLAs elected	Total Seats	% Indigenous MLAs
1978	1	16	6%
1982	3	16	19%
1985	3	16	19%
1989	3	16	19%
1992	3	17	18%
1996	4	17	24%
2000	4	17	24%
2002	2	18	11%
2006	2	18	11%
2011	2	19	11%
2016	3	19	16%
2021	4	19	21%

Source: Yukon Legislative Assembly. (2022). *First-Nations Persons Elected to Yukon Legislative Assembly*.

In 2003, after prolonged negotiations, the federal government devolved control for land and resource development to the territorial government, meaning that the Yukon now holds similar powers to the provinces (Dacks, 2004). Devolution, which required an extensive revision of the 1898 *Yukon Territory Act*, improved the responsiveness and effectiveness of land use and mining permitting processes (Alcantara, Cameron and Kennedy, 2012). The Yukon is highly dependent on federal transfer payments, and the largest employers are the territorial, First Nations and local governments. In October 2021, 45.4% of working Yukoners were employed by one of the four levels of government: municipal, territorial, federal or First Nations. Tourism and mining are important industries, and the territory is home to a number of entrepreneurs: 30.1% of private sector employees are self-employed (Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2021b), although most of these have government as their major clients.

Yukon politics reflect the small population, ethnic diversity, and government dependency that characterize Yukon public affairs. The Yukon is an unusual place, with the private sector struggling for attention and with the dominance of government employees in the electorate shaping politics in general and partisan politics specifically. The Yukon remains one of the most activist jurisdictions in the country, with a proliferation of government programs and agencies, the dominance of government spending, and the proximity of government officials to the average citizen. In the Yukon more than any jurisdiction, perhaps save Quebec, public policy is both a regular part of social gatherings and a territorial spectator sport.

What stood out in the Yukon election of 2021 is as much what was not said as what was said. Since the 1970s, Yukon politics had been dominated by rigorous, often hostile, debates over First Nations issues. By 2021, First Nations affairs had become so mainstream that they were simply not a source of controversy between parties and between politicians and the general public. The Yukon is perhaps the country's best example of unselfconscious Indigenous engagement and broader societal acceptance of Indigenous rights and First Nations empowerment. For all parties, First Nations policies were part of their platforms and working with Yukon First Nations was seen as a positive and crucial element in territorial affairs. In this regard, Yukon politics stood apart from the Canadian norm.

Recent political history

In the 2016 election, the Liberals, under Sandy Silver, went from the third party (with only Silver sitting in the Legislature) to a majority government of 11 seats. The Yukon Party had been in power since 2002, with majority governments elected in 2002, 2006 and 2011. In 2016, the Yukon Party became the Official Opposition with 6 seats, a drop from 11. The Liberals had gained at the expense of the NDP, who formed the third party with two seats, down from 6 (Tukker, 2016). Silver is the first Premier from Dawson City since the Epp letter, and the second Liberal premier after Pat Duncan (2000-2002). Otherwise, the Yukon has been governed by either Progressive Conservative/Yukon Party or NDP governments.

In 2016, the outcome of the Yukon election was likely influenced by the 2015 federal election, where the Trudeau Liberals won a healthy majority. Silver, a former teacher, campaigned on improving relationships with Yukon First Nations, which were strained under the Yukon Party, paving the Dawson City airport runway, electoral reform, economic development, and improving health care and education (Keevil, 2016).

In 2016, Silver was a relative newcomer to politics, having been first elected in 2011, and was the youngest of the three leaders at the time. Five years later, political leadership had changed. In 2021, both the NDP and Yukon Party had elected new, young leaders -- Kate White, first elected to Takhini-Kopper King in 2011, and most recently Currie Dixon, who was Minister of Environment under the Yukon Party from 2011-2016, before taking a break from politics.

The Campaign

The months leading up to the 2021 election, dominated by managing the pandemic, included a variety of other issues. The Yukon maintained the requirement to self-isolate for 14 days following travel into the territory and the public debated extensively about when this would be lifted. The Yukon managed the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic without any significant outbreaks; there were only 62 cases and 2 deaths prior to June 2021 (McPhee-Knowles, Hoffman and Kanary, 2022). Although this policy ensured that the Yukon's first year of the pandemic looked much different than elsewhere in Canada, it meant that the tourism industry suffered severely (Tobin, 2020). A contentious territorial issue was the Yukon First Nation Procurement Policy, unveiled in December 2020. This policy originated in the Umbrella Final Agreement, chapter 22; the policy's stated goal is to award 15% of all Yukon government procurement to Yukon First Nations' businesses. The Opposition criticized the lack of engagement with local businesses and a local contractor threatened a constitutional challenge (Connors, 2021). Immediately before the writ dropped, the government introduced a \$700 childcare subsidy for all licenced daycare spaces beginning April 1 and a wage supplement for staff. The Opposition critiqued the timing of the program as buying votes right before the election, although the government claimed this was to coincide with the new fiscal year (Ritchie, 2021).

By law, the election needed to be called by November 18, 2021. The Yukon has hosted vigorous territorial debates about electoral reform over the years and the 2021 election occurred in the middle of an extended review of the territorial electoral system, a commitment made in response to strong demands for a more representative system. A campaign promise from 2016 included fixed election dates. The Liberal government amended the *Elections Act* in 2020 to do so, but fixed election dates applied only beginning in 2025; this was criticized by the Opposition (CBC News, 2020). There was speculation that the election call would be early. When the election was called in March, the House was sitting and the budget had been tabled, but had not passed. This led to spending by special warrant and further criticism by Opposition politicians (Whitehorse Star, 2021b).

A debate was hosted by CBC Radio that all leaders attended (Tukker, 2021). This opened with questions on handling the pandemic and included common themes like mining royalties and the housing crisis. Overall, the debate was collegial and non-controversial. Indeed, it ended with all three leaders dancing to the outro music. There were a few other debates on specific issues, including one on business concerns that was attended by Deputy Premier Ranj Pillai, instead of leader Sandy Silver. This hinted at Silver winding down his leadership; he indicated he would step down as premier and not seek a fourth term as MLA the following year, in September 2022 (Hatherly, 2022).

Overall, the 2021 election was a civilized but boring campaign, potentially boding well for the level of cooperation required after the election. There were, as is now commonplace

thanks to social media, problems with candidate vetting, with one of the Watson Lake candidates dropped (Silva, 2021). The three parties had difficulty developing full rosters of candidates, leading to some individuals with limited qualifications and political experience stepping forward.

Issues and platforms

Overall, all three platforms were fairly progressive and involved large public expenditures, including many significant capital projects. Given that the Yukon's budget is primarily composed of transfer payments from the federal government, Yukon politics does not involve bribing electors with their own money, but rather with someone else's.

The NDP were the first out of the gate in releasing their lengthy platform. The first commitment was "everyone needs a family doctor," which has become a more extreme need since the election as the territory's only walk-in clinic closed in August 2021 (d'Entremont, 2021). There was an emphasis on community access to supports in the health and mental health sections, tackling addictions with safer consumption programs and on-the-land programming. Rent freezes for 2021 followed by ongoing caps, specific legislation to assist mobile home-owners (several mobile home parks are in leader Kate White's riding), supporting aging in place for seniors, and tuition-free continuing education for all Yukon residents at YukonU were featured in the platform (Yukon NDP, 2021).

Other promises included a minimum wage that is a living wage, a Basic Annual Income pilot program, promoting "buy local," paid sick leave and increasing Internet access. Environment and climate change promises included banning fracking and setting a 45% reduction in emissions over 2010 levels by 2030. Electoral reform was also mentioned. Interestingly, a number of these promises included elements that are outside of territorial jurisdiction, such as making public transit free in Whitehorse and bringing a federal immigration office back to the territory. There was a proposed 1% tax increase on those making over \$250,000 per year, along with a 2% tax on "fly in, fly out" workers who pay taxes in other jurisdictions (Yukon NDP, 2021).

The Yukon Liberal Party platform, with the unremarkable title "Let's Keep Going," was primarily a glossy accomplishments document that outlines everything the Liberals completed over their first term, with promises to continue along the same path (Yukon Liberal Party, 2021). The platform focused on supporting tourism, local food and mining. Some commitments included developing an athletics complex, establishing an Innovation Commission with a goal of attracting tech start-ups, supporting local food production through government procurement, and developing a "mining in municipalities" policy. The platform also mentioned consolidating climate change initiatives, improving the affordability of electric vehicles with subsidies and building more charging stations. This last component was interesting given the Yukon's long-standing reliance on diesel fuel for electricity production (Windeyer, 2020).

Health commitments included creating a health authority, hiring more nurse practitioners, and increasing access to specialist appointments via video call. Education promises included working with Yukon First Nations to create the Yukon First Nations Education Directorate and building more schools. There were references to improving community safety, safe supply and a wet shelter to address substance use -- an issue that was criticized by caucus member Don Hutton before he crossed the floor to become an

independent and announced that he would not seek re-election. The housing section was light and critical of the former Yukon Party government. The Liberals' "tripled ... investment in lot development in comparison to previous governments" (Yukon Liberal Party, 2021, p. 41) had not prevented an eye-popping increase in house prices (Whitehorse Star, 2021a). The proposed solutions, including developing and releasing 1000 new lots over five years, were unlikely to address the backlog let alone meet future demand.

The Yukon Party platform, entitled "Action for a Change," was light on promises and the shortest document put forward by the three parties. There was a focus on businesses in recovery from COVID-19, along with a red tape modernization action plan that includes a one-for-one rule on new regulations. Notably, one promise was to delay the Yukon First Nations Procurement Policy for more consultation with business owners. There was a predictable focus on traditional Yukon industries of mining and tourism, along with a section on agriculture, a growing industry since the 2016 Local Food Strategy for Yukon (Government of Yukon, 2016). Some aspects pointed to a shift leftward for the Yukon Party, including committing to the MMIWG strategy, a Yukon Pride Centre, and improving relationships with Yukon First Nations, which were left strained under former Yukon Party Premier Darrell Pasloski. There were also promises to exempt home heating fuel from carbon tax, as well as a shift to a Yukon Universal Child Benefit paid to parents rather than subsidizing daycare fees. Many commitments promised to reverse changes made by the Liberals since the Yukon Party last held power, and some contained phrases like "explore options" and "review the role of," hinting at reports to be tabled in the Legislature rather than actions.

Analysis of the vote

Overall voter turnout was 65.6%, down from 76.4% in 2016 (Elections Yukon, 2022). Although higher than some other pandemic elections -- turnout in Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and Newfoundland and Labrador had decreased to less than 55% (Harell and Stephenson, 2022, p. 11) -- this was a decrease from the previous three Yukon territorial elections (Elections Yukon, 2017, p. 5). Advance polls were held April 4th and 5th, and 22.8% of voters opted to vote at advance polls, a slight decrease from 2016 (Elections Yukon, 2022). In terms of share of the popular vote, the Yukon Party came out substantially ahead with 39.3% to the Liberals' 32.4% and the NDP's 28.2% (Elections Yukon, 2022). These numbers, along with the close result in seats, led to discussion of electoral reform following the election (CBC News, 2021b).

Most incumbents were re-elected, but margins would often be considered very close in other jurisdictions. The exceptions were that Liberal backbencher Ted Adel was defeated by Yukon Party leader Currie Dixon in Copperbelt North. The only other Liberal backbencher, Paolo Gallina, was unseated in Porter Creek Centre by the Yukon Party's Yvonne Clarke, a representative of the large and growing Filipino-Canadian community. Kate White won her Takhini-Kopper King riding by a large margin against two much weaker candidates from the other parties, and Sandy Silver held on in Klondike (Elections Yukon, 2021).

Table 3. Electoral districts decided by fewer than 100 votes

Electoral District	Yukon Party	Liberal	NDP	Independent
Mayo-Tatchun	186	238	208	N/A
Mount Lorne-Southern Lakes	406	446	292	N/A
Mountainview	268	402	356	26
Porter Creek Centre	704	646	334	N/A
Porter Creek South	262	309	84	N/A
Riverdale North	280	469	375	N/A
Riverdale South	307	415	334	N/A
Vuntut-Gwitchin	N/A	78	78	N/A
Watson Lake	313	237	N/A	N/A
Whitehorse West	376	398	229	N/A

Source: *The Report of the Chief Electoral Officer, the Administration of the 2021 Territorial General Election.*

Of 19 constituencies, 10 were decided by fewer than 100 votes (see Table 3), which in the Yukon is nonetheless a safe margin. These more narrowly decided ridings speak to the relative vote efficiency of the respective parties. Although the NDP received 28.2% of the popular vote, this translated to 1785 votes per seat (see Table 4) – in large part due to leader Kate White’s landslide victory in Takhini-Kopper King. Leader Currie Dixon, along with Scott Kent and Brad Cathers, two long term Yukon Party MLAs, won their seats by generally larger margins; this meant the Yukon Party needed 935 votes per seat. The Liberals were thus most efficient, with 769 votes per seat, owing to their incumbent candidates often holding on to their seats with a margin less than 100 votes. Liberal support went down; they seemed tired from trying to manage the pandemic, and offered little new vision for the territory in the platform.

The most interesting riding was also the smallest, Vuntut Gwitchin, which covers the small, fly-in only community of Old Crow. Both candidates were Indigenous women. This riding resulted in a tie, with 78 votes cast for both Annie Blake, the NDP candidate, and Pauline Frost, the incumbent Liberal candidate who was also the Minister of Health and Minister of Environment. There was no Yukon Party candidate in this riding. Because of the tie, there was an official recount before a judge as specified by the *Elections Act*; if the recount stands, there is a drawing of lots (CBC News, 2021d). This has happened twice before in the Yukon. Most recently, in the 2018 mayoral election in Faro, and territorially, there was a tie in 1996 in Vuntut Gwitchin, between NDP candidate Robert Bruce and Esau Schafer of the Yukon Party. Bruce won the draw and was elected Speaker (CBC News, 2021d). In the current case, Annie Blake of the NDP won the draw, leading to the final seat count of 8 for the Liberals, 3 for the NDP, and 8 for the Yukon Party. Frost challenged the draw on the basis that a ballot was cast by Christopher Schafer, who was incarcerated in Whitehorse and cast his vote from the correctional centre. Her legal team argued that his ballot should have been cast for a Whitehorse riding. In August 2021, the Yukon Supreme Court dismissed the case, as Chief Justice Suzanne Duncan ruled that it would deny Schafer’s right to vote to invalidate the election based on his inability to vote in the district of Vuntut Gwitchin (Giilck, 2021). Frost was later ordered to pay part of Blake’s legal fees (Elliot, 2021).

Table 4. Election results, 2006-2021

	Candidates	Elected	Votes Received	% of vote	Efficiency (votes/ seats)
2021					
Liberal	19	8	6,155	32.4%	769
Yukon Party	18	8	7,477	39.3%	935
NDP	18	3	5,356	28.2%	1785
Independent	1	0	26	0.1%	0
2016					
Liberal	19	11	7,404	39.4%	673
Yukon Party	19	6	6,272	33.4%	1045
NDP	19	2	4,928	26.2%	2464
Independent	1	0	38	0.2%	0
Green	5	0	145	0.8%	0
2011					
Liberal	19	2	4,008	25.3%	2004
Yukon Party	19	11	6,400	40.4%	582
NDP	18	6	5,154	32.6%	859
Independent	2	0	79	0.5%	0
Green	2	0	104	0.7%	0
Yukon First Nations Party	2	0	81	0.5%	0
2006					
Liberal	18	5	4,699	34.7%	940
Yukon Party	18	10	5,506	40.7%	551
NDP	18	3	3,197	23.6%	1066
Independent	4	0	143	1.06%	0

Source: Elections Yukon, *Report of the Chief Electoral Officer for the 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021 General Elections*.

Had the draw gone the other way – producing a Liberal victory – the Yukon would still have had a minority government and, potentially, a Liberal-NDP alliance agreement of some nature. The New Democratic Party would have been weaker in such a collation and likely would have extracted fewer concessions from the Liberals. In all likelihood, this slightly different electoral result would have destabilized Yukon politics and could have led to an election in relatively short order.

Why should Canada care about the Yukon election?

A significant factor in the Yukon election is the politics of smallness. Few votes can have a large impact on political outcomes. This is evident in the smaller ridings in communities outside of Whitehorse, which are very large geographically but sparsely populated, often encompassing more than one community. For example, Pelly-Nisutlin incorporates the

diverse communities of Teslin, Ross River, and Faro, where 713 votes were cast, compared to the largest riding in Whitehorse, Porter Creek Centre, where 1684 votes were cast but electors live in the neighbourhoods of Whistle Bend and part of Porter Creek. The needs of the electorate in the larger riding by population are likely to be much more homogeneous, but the weight of a vote in that riding is comparatively less. This is also an issue in other jurisdictions like Saskatchewan with large geographic ridings where few people live compared to more densely populated urban ridings.

A unique challenge in the Yukon is that governments at various levels are the largest employer. This adds a disincentive for many to enter politics as it can be difficult to then secure employment after being “branded” as loyal to a particular party if not elected. This likely reduces the overall quality of candidates willing to put their names forward for election. There is a small pool of potential candidates, particularly in smaller communities.

An elephant in the room, overall, is economic development. The Yukon’s economy is based largely on government spending. The platform promises advanced by all three parties assume that federal transfer payment largesse will continue indefinitely and increase over time. The parties offered few suggestions about how to encourage economic growth otherwise. On housing, a significant issue leading up to the election, none of the parties offered much in the way of solutions.

The divided election result produced the Liberal-NDP *Confidence and Supply Agreement* (CASA), in place until January 31, 2023 (Yukon Liberal Caucus, 2021). This agreement was necessary to keep the Liberals in power given their weakened minority position. The agreement shifted priorities to several NDP platform commitments. Some notable components included reducing emissions by 45% below 2010 emissions by 2030, rather than 30%; extending the paid sick leave program for reimbursing employers for up to 10 paid sick days per year; developing and implementing successor legislation for mining during the term of this agreement (a very ambitious timeline for legislative development); establishing a walk-in mental health clinic, implementing a territorial dental program; reinstating Individualized Education Plans (which had been recently cancelled); opening a supervised consumption site by August 31, 2021 and, capping rental increases at 1% effective May 15, 2021, based on the 2020 CPI for Whitehorse. Collectively, the CASA was largely NDP-inspired; the acquiescence of the Liberal Party and Premier Silver, who took the lead on the negotiations, gave the impression that they were desperate to stay in office.

The last component, rent controls, has been problematic. Inflation in 2021 was much higher; it is estimated at 4.1% for Whitehorse in November 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2021). There have been reports that the policy led to evictions, because landlords cannot increase rents to cover their increased costs without changing tenants, even if the tenant is willing to pay more to stay. The NDP stated that no-cause evictions are a loophole the Liberals could change to prevent this problem (Hong, 2021). Given the white-hot housing market in Whitehorse, some landlords are opting to sell their rental properties instead of continuing to rent them out, further constraining the market. Opposition leader Currie Dixon, with justification, called it a “masterclass in poor governance and bad policy-making” (CBC News, 2021c).¹

Conclusion

National coverage of the 2021 Yukon territorial election was exceptionally small, and no attempts were made to find Canada-wide meaning in the results. Following the re-elections of the Yukon Liberal Party and the federal Liberal Party, Premier Silver and Prime Minister Trudeau maintained strong connections. Already a 'favoured colony' in financial terms, the Yukon has benefitted from being one of the few sub-national Liberal governments in Canada. Northern political leaders enjoy access to federal counterparts, resulting in effective federal-territorial collaboration and continued program growth in the Yukon. Interestingly, the CASA agreement between the Yukon Liberals and the NDP foreshadowed the comparable 2022 federal agreement. In both cases, the NDP used their political power to press spending initiatives on the governing party. Like their federal counterparts, the Yukon Liberal Party came out of the 2021 election in a much weaker position and without a strong vision for the future.

¹ The Liberal-NDP CASA was renewed when it expired in January 2023 meaning it will potentially keep the Liberal minority government in power till early 2025.

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